

# Access and the Making of Mass Higher Education



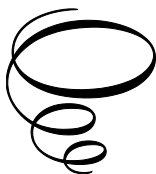
# Access and the Making of Mass Higher Education:

*From Workers to Students*

By

David Davies and James Nyland

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No disenfranchised people could be emancipated unless they created an autonomous intellectual life. Working people would have to develop their own ways of framing the world, their own political goals, their own strategies for achieving those goals.

***Jonathan Rose - The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class***

It is richer now, and its population is growing; it has the industry, the complexity and sophistication of metropolitan life; its self-assurance is increasing. Equality between human beings was at the centre of the Australian dream- the most noble of the aspirations that sprang from its early hardships. The problem today... is to make that dream become a reality.

***Norman MacKenzie- Women in Australia***

Despite widespread beliefs that higher education could be a driver of inclusion and egalitarianism in Australian society, we have ended up with a university system that reproduces and legitimises social stratification.

***Michael Wesley- Universities in Australian Life***

Optimism is an indulgence (albeit a helpful one at times) but hope is a discipline. While there is much to alarm us... there is always hope...The idea that whoever or wherever we are on earth, we are all born with shares in the planet, gives us the most enduring principle we have as a species.

***Jane R. Goodall- The Politics of the Common Good: Dispossession in Australia***

This book is dedicated to Emer and Joanne

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Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme

Higher Education Disability Support Programme

Indigenous, Regional and Low-SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF)

National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE)

**A community-further education Access Course Team, University of Liverpool 1986**



*The Vice-Chancellor (far right) with students on the 'Access' course and Linda Loy (second from left), one of the organisers, and the Chair of the course, David Davies (back row, right).*

On Friday 9 May, the Vice-Chancellor visited the 'Access' course at the Octagon Building in Grove Street and met teaching staff and students.

The 'Access' course is a new route into higher education for adults from the inner city, and it grew out of the belief that for many people, particularly black people, the education system has failed them. The aim of the course is to provide a positive educational opportunity for adults within the inner city who have little or no formal qualification, and it is designed for mature students over 21, particularly members of the black community, who wish to return to study to prepare for entry to a higher education course.

Access is a partnership between Old Swan Technical College and Mabel

Fletcher Technical College. This University is also interested and involved in the project, and Professor Noel Boaden and other staff of the Department of Continuing Education have participated in the course. Other establishments participating include Liverpool Polytechnic, Liverpool Institute of Higher Education, the Charles Wootton Centre and Elimu Wa Nane, an educational institute run by the Methodist Centre.

The elements of the Access course include study skills, English, mathematics, social studies, black studies and computer studies. An emphasis is placed on individual counselling and support throughout the course, and students will also be given the opportunity to gain practical experience in a chosen area of professional work.

## SETTING THE SCENE

# FUTURE IN HISTORY: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUITY

We can choose to understand Access as part of a historical and on-going debate about how learning and education can change lives and the societies in which we live. Equality and social justice objectives have long been part of the movement for the extension of access to higher education. This process has been a long one and it has been, as this volume shows, a contested one. There was always a tension between economic and egalitarian objectives and between individual benefits and social advance and a social result for education. Prosperity for everyone was always an objective of educational change and reform, though this has been remarkably difficult to achieve even though standards of living and lifestyles are immeasurably improved on those of our grandparents. We should never underestimate the weight and significance of history as it shapes all that we do. The history of the Access movement which is charted in this book reflects the growth of a platform for the development and delivery of higher education for a broad population, whether that is in the United Kingdom, Australia or the wider world in which the idea of mass higher education has become normative. It is the expectation of nearly everyone who must work in a burgeoning and increasingly internationalised economy and culture, and the future of the emerging generations will inevitably need to engage with the themes of this book

The word Access in this book spelled in higher case denotes special courses and their associated curriculums and pedagogies, whilst access- in lower case- refers to the more generic movement and desire for widening participation especially in higher education which has a world-wide impact but a special resonance in this book for Britain, Ireland and Australia.

There are relatively few of those who have worked within educational development for higher education who perceive learning to be only about creating human capital. There should be no limits to learning yet education is also selective and limits access to learning so that not everyone benefits from the opportunities in life it can offer. The problem lies in what kind of knowledge and learning is best provided and who gets access to it. This is

not a new problem, hence the importance of each successive generation in defining for itself what is really useful knowledge- a theme taken up in this volume. Higher education can operate as a powerful engine for growth but it creates inequality at the same time as it opens up opportunities for the selected groups and elites. But the argument that not everyone can succeed is not one that motivates educators. We have constantly striven to extend the boundaries which limit access to learning and opportunities. Our modern universities have been at the forefront of such change both in terms of the subjects we teach and the students we reach. This is why we have worked to ensure that access and participation impacts on as wide a population as possible and seeks to be inclusive rather than exclusive. We have struggled to develop our universities and colleges so that equality of access and equity (fairness) are not seen to be different spheres. If we have not yet achieved full equality of outcomes in higher education, then we are working towards that goal at national and international levels. The access university in the coming decade will be a distinctive teaching-intensive, research-informed university committed to a first-class higher education.

In this context, this book shows how rising popular expectations, demand and struggle for learning opportunities shaped the growth of mass higher education in an era of neoliberal economic policies and globalisation. Selection and meritocracy became the driving ideas legitimating growth and differentiation in higher education. These ideas were extensively supported and were just as intensively opposed. Access as a movement demonstrated that ability and talent were not simply 'natural' but were determined by social forces and what we call social formations. Its successes and outcomes showed that upward social mobility was still a widely shared social aspiration and could be achieved via education. Indeed for most people it was the only option.

Access education was originally powered by a sense of egregious injustice. Wealth empowers yet in itself it does not confer merit. What we do with our social wealth and especially within the public sphere, where we are custodians of public value, is an intensely educational matter. And these matters have taken an increasingly urgent turn in recent years. The social order cannot exist without education and this is the only way to address the unmet urgent needs of, for example, climate change, existential ecological breakdown, poverty and war. This book asserts the need for democratic societies to create political agency to redistribute resources and the need for their educational institutions to create fair, equitable and critical curriculums to address these wicked issues. Access is seen as a prism which reflects both the individual libertarian and the social 'commonality' of education traditions. Universities are locations which house competing values; they

sponsor individual achievement and encourage socially progressive enrolments (widening participation and Access). As such higher education will need to play a pivotal role in setting and evaluating the limits of equity and access as these new and challenging circumstances face us.

Knowledge is a catalyst for change, but knowledge alone is not enough to bring about desired change. We need to overcome the ideology of inevitable dominance and the ‘comfort of obedience’ in passing the responsibility for change to someone else. To address this, the book examines the idea of critical thinking in its Access context and what is called a ‘universal critical literacy’- including the need for concepts and ideas about the role of really useful knowledge. Aspects of lifelong learning, women in education and the problematical issues of race and ethnicity in higher education are explored as examples of what is called a ‘social theory approach’ to the specifically social significance of educational change. The implications for university engagement and the social purposes of a university education are brought into focus. The attempt to reform and transform Australian higher education via the Accord process is examined in this context.

Access is seen in this volume as part of a new settlement that is needed where the connections between individual freedom, equality and social solidarity are in better balance. The creation of one should not diminish the other. Access tests and extends the limits of unfair social selection and opportunity. Free market systems do not necessarily mean we must create poverty or deprivation for some and the enhancement of Access should mean a fairer and more socially just higher education system that serves all people in a nation. Access is in fact part of a long tradition of radical and transformative education which has gone beyond the boundaries of just national schooling and university systems. It asks questions about why some people are at the margins of acceptable social life and what learning might do to change this. This book on Access acknowledges the fact that tradition and authority can silence some narratives in the name of progress and that the untold stories and unchartered paths have their own validity and value if we can bring them into the learning process.

Those who believe that our history is important for our present and future will find in this book not only interpretive accounts of past achievements but some indicators of potential futures. These futures will be shaped by the fact that we are making our future history right now. The burning issues that are alluded to throughout the volume testify to the vitality of debate and concern within and beyond education that are impacting now and will do so ever more urgently. This means we must find the new access curriculum; one which does not conflate luck (either of birth

and circumstance) with talent and ability. This means we need learning which enables individuals to search and find what they can be good at so that with support they can be great at it. Mastery of what society affords as opportunity to succeed should be available to everyone and is a challenge for each young person. This is part of the new Access agenda; it is what a learning university is for.

Our industrially based society was built on the exploitation of technology and skills and many of our universities and colleges still relate strongly to this great tradition but expect the new technologies to provide democratic knowledge and to liberate us rather than live in what John Stuart Mill called a life of ‘drudgery and imprisonment’. However, it is increasingly clear that we cannot take the modern digital-technological world for granted. Many young people have their disposable income consumed by the impact of these technologies and only those with wealthy parents can afford to invest in a house or a degree. A new relationship with the workplace is needed, especially for those who are pre-disposed to being alienated from social networks and any collective sense of identity. This problem is part of what it means to pay attention to what is happening around us. We cannot live a stimulating life just through artificial intelligence or our communicative devices and apps. Our new Access learning must address this as we move forward so that each student gets an outstanding experience. New and meaningful links to employment and to engagement with communities is our new Access agenda and we necessarily look to the future.

We now inhabit a world where mass higher education is the norm. This is a democratic achievement of the highest calibre and it is one of the great success stories of modern times. Nevertheless, it is a narrative where a differentiated hierarchy of learning opportunities continues to exist which serves to stratify and separate out the levels of performance and success in modern western social democratic societies, and also in other systems which make different claims to those of the democratic nations. The question of how to legitimate and validate such systems continues to raise the question of Access across the national boundaries and systems of education. It does this in ever more challenging and sometimes in dire circumstances which threaten human futures in ways quite unanticipated in previous eras. Climate change, ecological disasters and human catastrophes throw their shadows over human progress. Engagement and Access in higher education can surely have no greater task than to help address this challenge.

# INTRODUCTION

The growth of mass higher education is one of the great stories of our time and it embraces the opening up of learning opportunities for literally masses of people *and* the re-centering of inequalities and injustice for those at the margins of prosperity- creating what we term the Access movement. In the period mainly covered in this book- the 1970s up to the 2020s- higher education had in fact brought about a revolution in attitudes towards education and higher qualifications and created a massively present industry and economic generator in most advanced industrial societies. The social meaning and significance of this involved an explosion of learning possibilities and is part of an ongoing debate about the meaning of change and the possibilities of democratic societies in general. In recognizing the wider and deeper meaning and special characteristics of this movement we use the higher case ‘Access’ and the lower case ‘access’ when referring to opportunity and widening participation within higher education more broadly.

This book describes what has become known as Access to higher education at a time when mass higher education in the United Kingdom and Australia and in many other countries became the norm. From being an exclusive club of elite institutions, closed to the public and sometimes immersed in medieval practices to being a visible and accessible presence across the land, universities have come to represent a possible and increasingly likely future for a majority of people. Among those people in both Australia and Britain are generations of ordinary, yet extraordinary people, who wanted to be educated in a university; they struggled often for a voice and a place where their lives and aspirations could be recognised through higher learning. Their experience had been of exclusion from this learning and from the opportunities it can offer. For themselves and their parents, access and participation had been beyond the boundary. The influential writer and critic C.L.R. James used this metaphor to explore the greater significance of cricket as a game that opened up perspectives on how we understand the wider world and Access, as part of the struggle for inclusion and participation we suggest, is a neglected aspect of our understanding of both mass higher education and of how it contributes to the social and common good. Access is coterminous with mass higher education but is not equivalent with it; it has a distinctive identity yet is within the margins whilst being beyond the boundary.

Access describes both a set of ideas about policies and educational practice designed to bring about greater equality- an idea taken to be central to many public and state education systems and often crucial to what universities take as their core missions. What is meant by 'equality' is, however, a complex and often controversial social and political issue which has reverberated down the generations and continues to divide opinion to this day. Access has developed mainly within the existing higher education systems of which it is a part and thus reflects to a degree the national outlook and values of its host communities, but at the same time it poses a question which challenges the existing system. Access to what and for whom? This double-barrelled question is now asked within a mass higher education system which itself can be divided into three parts: a high value, self-declared elite of universities which can afford to select their students on the supposed basis of their excellence and abilities ; mass universities where students are from middle-class and working-class aspiring families; and the excluded people who do not have qualifications and whose children do not attend higher education. In many advanced and developing nations this third category are in fact a minority. Those who are at the boundaries of inclusion are often referred to as 'equity groups' in the Australian context whilst in Britain the term the 'Access movement' is used. The concept of a movement refers to a wide variety of learning opportunities, ideas, curriculums, courses and people whose focus was the opening up of higher education to those who had been excluded. There was never a unitary or linear organisation at work in this field. No such organisation ever existed, nor could it, given the boundary-crossing intentions of those who subscribe to its philosophy. Access was anchored in a critique of the wider and deeper economic and social divisions that emerged as an intrinsic part of mass higher education.

The story of Access is less well known than it should be but it deserves recognition in the narrative of educational and social progress as its concerns continue to resonate with us in an age shadowed by public anxiety which go beyond even the mutability of inequality which has been with us since time out of mind. Inequality has taken on new dimensions in relation to the wicked issues and existential threats such as climate emergencies, geopolitical instability and the possibility of species extinction, all of which require critical thought and educational solutions. These will become increasingly the concerns of the mass of the people and the seismic instabilities of the western democracies will require a 'New Access' curriculum and a radically re-shaped framework for learning which we are convinced can draw lessons from the narratives in this book.

Since the authors of this volume have lived and worked in Britain and Australia and because of historical associations between the two nations, its contents reflect this connection and share some of the characteristics of a case study. However, this work is a descriptive and analytical account of educational growth and change which we hope has significance for higher education students and teachers beyond the two nations and the USA, which feature as its main empirical source. That higher education is now a global enterprise cannot be denied. An encounter with changing conceptions of education and the recent history of mass participation is unavoidable if we are to grasp what is happening now and where it takes us in the future. We intended to explore the past and ask questions about Access and opportunities and education which critique old perspectives and as a result open up new ones for the future and so our time frame is one that intentionally pivots between the foundational period of mass higher education in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reaches into the first third of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This book is a narrative account and an analysis of what we conceive to be a type of education and a set of ideas about access and widening participation in higher education. Its contemporary significance can be demonstrated by the recent debates and concerns of the Australian Accord which published in 2024 a series of recommendations that are far reaching in their implications for access and higher education as a whole in Australia. In looking to the future though, we are mindful that the past and tradition collectively exerts an influence which can praise one perspective and anathematize another. We are aware that for some the past is another country and that for others the past isn't even past. We acknowledge that history and the history of education is contested terrain and also that some things are not contested, such as the persistence of inequalities in modern societies that lie at the heart of concerns for educational opportunity.

The empirical basis for this book references Britain and Australia most explicitly and suggests that there are significant 'resonances' and connections between the two national entities which persist long after the colonial legacy has receded for both. Australians once had, in the words of the original 'Advance Australia Fair', a British soul, though we surely cannot ignore the Irish 'heart' that was profoundly influential in the evolution of Australia into a separate and distinctive nation. That during the colonial period and beyond the Indigenous peoples of Australia were written out of this history and their lives often brutally suppressed and cultures eradicated, serves notice to us today not merely not to repeat such crimes and wickedness, but rather to acknowledge both historical and contemporary injustices rooted in our culpability for racism and ethnic discrimination. These issues have not simply

disappeared with the arrival of modern sensibilities about the need for multiculturalist policies - and the need for tolerance of differences. The modern Access agenda will of necessity have to address and engage with the new forms of ethnic, racial and cultural difference but also of persistent social inequality and injustice.

Whatever the past sources of cultural nationalism and identity were, the shared realities of today are of multi-racialism and multiculturalism and a commitment at least in theory to the removal of barriers to inequality. Shared also is the notion that universal education is there to establish and safeguard a system of social selection where success is based on merit not on social origin. All of this is based on a formal commitment to liberal democratic norms of legal and citizenship equality whose origins and values were a shared though often contested endeavour between and within the relations of Australia and Britain. The shared histories and struggles are of course one perspective that sits also uneasily with relations of social class, characterised by socio-economic inequalities and relations of domination-subordination which also persist. These are very different now between the two nations but a shared preoccupation with social class, social inequality and the meanings of national identity owe much to shared ethnic origins in the British and Irish Isles. The differences between the two societies are palpable and obvious but there is also something less tangible but real in the notion that here are two very different cultures which somehow recognise each other. In the development of mass participation and access to higher education there were close parallels in the methods chosen to fund and support political and educational policies but also in respect of the way neoliberal economic views on the creation of a mass consumer market for services was created, including education. The implications of this for both Australia and Britain were far-reaching and the details diverged, but the similarities are striking.

The analytical focus of this volume is on the ideas and conceptions which drove and continue to develop education as a socially progressive and transformative aspect of modern society. Its empirical focus is on the policies and practices of access and widening participation rather than on specific courses or programmes of learning. Our focus is thematic, concentrating on what was an 'Access movement' but it was a movement without a leader, without a centre, without an organisational structure and without a single philosophical or sociological theory. As part of this movement there were many inspirational educational leaders, many centres of innovation and creativity, many critical and transformative approaches to knowledge, and many progressive teaching methods and learning strategies. This movement was, in brief summary, a re-imagining of what higher

education can be and what it could do. It describes a historical process through which the dispossessed and marginalised can define their own interests and can for themselves express their own view of what really useful knowledge might be. Access allowed for the expression of feelings and experience which was shared and inherited from the collective past and which imagined a different and fairer future for individuals and for communities. If we can think of education as being one aspect of the way in which working people actually create their own histories and their own consciousness and create themselves as active agents in their own lives, then Access was not merely a programme of learning or instruction. It was rather a means of creating power and agency and of shaping the future.

Widening participation and the creation of a near-universal, mass higher education reality was the defining context for the development of Access and as such is a framework of national differences and diversity, yet displaying common features. But the content of the Access movement was in fact the attempt to validate aspirations and desire to achieve what we understand as the common good through education. This was entirely commensurate with individual aspirations which were valid for individual experience at a time when the individual self-became prominent in public discourse as well as social theory. The valorisation of self was also one of the great stories of our time and this found an echo in the world of learning. The story of Access is, however, one of achievements at both the macro-societal level but also of frustrated ambitions and contested outcomes at the social group level where individuals lived their lives as part of communities. The history of educational entitlement is one of struggle and agitation for educational resources in which growing expectations fed on each other. The roll call of the 'left behind' and marginalised people became notorious as wider social, economic and geopolitical events made their impact on national and domestic economies. In some senses and in both Britain and Australia there seemed to be a perpetual crisis in education as the forces of globalising change rolled on, admitting no resistance.

The purpose of this book is to critically assess what this growth and change actually means for higher education itself and for the wider society which has bought into the belief that universities and all that they offer are essential to our future well-being. In this book the prism or lens through which this transformation occurred is that of access and widening higher education participation and nested within that is the distinctive set of practices, learning and teaching programmes and ideas about the importance of knowledge which affords and supports social progress and challenge to inequality through education- and is commonly called Access.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century in its third decade is entering an era of grave problems and challenges and for which only a critical and engaged education can offer hope for the future. The failures in globalism, the existential issues of climate change and global warming, the persistently embedded racism and social inequalities and injustices in our communities, the move to the digital world of communication and control, the presence of devastating global health pandemics and the threat of war and nuclear destruction all challenge us to find a better way of knowing and an improved curriculum; one that is capable of comprehending and overcoming the ‘wicked issues’ which will destroy our civilisation if left unchallenged. This is the evolving context of the contemporary ‘learning society’ though it does not shape the knowledge economy which focusses instead on profitability at the expense of social need and purpose. We need an education system and culture which is fit for purpose to meet the challenge of change. In other words, we are confronted with the dire need to find an education and curriculum to meet this overwhelming sense of systemic change and its threats to our sheer existence. There are dire warnings that we literally face extermination of human species events within our lifetimes and these wicked issues are surely a manifesto for change. This agenda can no longer be implicit, however, since the existential issues facing humankind demand a more radical, conscious and transformative response. If this book stimulates some debate and concern about these matters and can draw some lessons from the recent development of our knowledge base in the ‘exploding’ world of higher education then it will have been a worthwhile effort.

Chapters 1 and 2 of Part 1 explore themes and issues around the growth of mass participation and access in higher education with particular reference to Australia and the United Kingdom. In Part 2, chapters 3 and 4 develop the themes in respect of the two nations, suggesting that across the very forms of access and participation there was something recognisable as a movement for change and renewal that was more than individuals seeking personal advantage from learning. Chapters 5 and 6 in Part 3 engage with mass participation as change in the wider society generated what we term as an *Access movement*. Part 4 of the book deals with the making of privilege in higher education under the impact of neoliberalism as a social philosophy, and the unresolved question of educational opportunity and meritocracy. Part 5 outlines three aspects of Access which we believe illuminate the empirical variety and conceptual richness of Access provision, especially in what are contested areas of social analysis- women and education and race/ethnicity. Part 6 of the book returns to questions of how critical knowledge is formed and can yield insights for how we can create and use frameworks for the educational challenges facing us. We re-

visit the crucial question of the future purposes of a university in an age of uncertainty, which is concurrently a crisis of higher education and the greatest challenge to learning in modern times.

Our book is about an aspect of modernity- the growth of mass higher education and Access- and therefore is about what society might expect from an account of education as a mass phenomenon. But it is also as a focussed reckoning with Access and widening participation and equality of opportunity which is its hinterland and context. Our focus in time is on the period from 1970 to the mid-2020s, some half century of change and disruption on a global basis by any estimation. This means in our view that there must be some accounting of how theories of society and modernity are understood at this point in time. Which raises the immediate question of whether Access and the engagement with educational disadvantage is a minor narrative in a larger story of social and educational transformation?

Our answer to this question is that the undeniably ‘great issues’ and themes of our time have education embedded but often unrecognised at their heart. The economic crises of 2008-09, the climate change and ecological crisis and the sense of what some have seen as a crisis of knowledge or epistemological and ontological uncertainty and the increasing concern with the intensification of social inequality, have shaped our views of the ‘big issues’. All of this requires us to be critical of ourselves and of our understanding of what is happening in this wider world and this requires some attempt at ‘theorisation’, meaning that our concern with social inequality and education is in fact no minor narrative but is one of the crucial linkages between the practical, everyday matters of learning and teaching and developing education and our understanding of the bigger picture.

The actual and practical realities of distinctive, empirical Access courses and initiatives are the meat and drink of the Access movement and are vitally important for those experiencing them. Our concern was on some of the *social* developments that shaped our time which is why we have touched upon globalisation, modernity, the consequences of digitalisation, economic transformations and stressed the need for social analysis and critical thinking. It is also why we have engaged with the issue of the public management and accountability of universities which has led us down the path of uniformity of missions, has diminished diversity of provision and funding, and produced a stratified and highly unequal HE system which perpetuates social divisions and inequalities whilst claiming to offer opportunities and equity on behalf of society.

We argue that by acknowledging and offering a critical view of the social purposes of universities and by re-asserting the validity of Access concerns, we can go beyond resistance to much needed change and help build

alternatives within the existing system. The question of how radical a re-imagined university curriculum and higher education system might be is not yet determined and there are many who are yet to speak. We believe one thing is clear, however, it cannot be done without theory-based analysis and cultural critique in relation to learning. New ways of knowing and new points of departure are required and we hope that our understanding and narrative on Access *and* access can contribute to this endeavour.



# **PART 1**

## **SITUATING ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY**

# CHAPTER 1

## THREADS THROUGH TIME

In Britain, student numbers almost doubled between 1997 and 2010- the period of the Labour Government whose mantra was ‘education, education, education’ - when almost half of school-leavers were bound for university. By 2023 the total number of higher education students in the United Kingdom was approaching 3 million (HESA 2023). Over 160 UK universities existed by the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the proportion of students on higher education courses at other providers of higher education such as local further education colleges declining to around 6 per cent of the total. Peter Scott (2021) has asserted that UK higher education, in effect in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a university monoculture as diverse colleges closed or were amalgamated with the larger universities. A similar trend is observable in Australia: driven by competition in pushing to broaden access to universities over the past seventy years, along the way variations between different types and missions of universities have been erased or suppressed (Marginson 2016: 263-4; Wesley 2023: 22). In Australia in 1974 there were 18 universities and a wide range of diverse higher education colleges across the Commonwealth and by 2023 this had become 42 universities including two private institutions. In 1964 there were 76,188 people studying at university in Australia and by 2001 the total had reached 842,183. In 2012 it was 1,257,722 and by 2021 it topped 1.6 million, including significant cohorts of overseas/international students (AGDE 2023).

Access and widening participation in higher education is not a single, coherent and unilinear narrative of progress from small to large and from diverse institutions to a monoculture, though both of these trends were true. It is rather a story of contested and competing perspectives with complex and sometimes contradictory outcomes and it is a story belonging to many different nations and cultures. It is an international and global phenomenon which impacts on much of the developed and developing world. This book argues that this requires greater understanding and exploration and it suggests that some of this might be available in the following pages which have as their reference points the British and Australian Access and higher education experiences which though profoundly distinctive and different,

share important common origins, values and even hopes and desires for social change through education.

The current condition of higher education resonates with the language of crisis, which has been the case over an extended period (Barnett 1990; Barnett and Griffin 1997; Ashwin 2020; Scott 2021; Wesley 2023; Featherstone 2023). One key aspect of this is that many people are facing a loss of the future in that they believe their children may have less successful futures than they had themselves. Until recently it was a commonsense understanding that each successive generation would improve on the past. The post-Second World War period had seen the emergence of a more democratic and humane order in Britain and Australia (McIntyre 2015: 272-273) and in the United States an explosion of consumer driven growth was about to demonstrate the power of the American productive economy. Simon Marginson in his extensive analysis and theorisation of higher education argued that... ‘The larger significance of the New Deal programs in the United States, and the postwar reconstruction in all three countries, was the common premise that the capitalist economy and its erstwhile political order had failed, that these had been unable to provide for either the basic conditions of life or the greater aspirations opened up after the war’ (Marginson 2016: 57). Large scale state planning and interventions, including for the extension of the education franchise became the order of the day. Keynesian economic management was allied to beliefs in the value of home ownership, better and fairer schooling and the possibility of higher education for the children of the masses. Aspirations for education and social progress became identified with ideas of making social progress through personal merit. In the industrialised nations the decades that followed the Second World War were infused with the belief and the reality that educational achievement and work were the routes to the glittering prizes in life rather than inherited wealth, the traditional method of elevation to the top so clearly shown in the influential work of Thomas Piketty (2014: 241).

### **Situating the Access movement**

We believe it is possible to re-assert the democratising and emancipatory features of the expansion of education in the post 2<sup>nd</sup> World War period in the era of modernity in which we find ourselves. To do so necessitates a re-evaluation of the current demand for access to HE in the light of developments which emerged fully in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and have evolved in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One significant but under-valued part of this development is what we term the *Access movement*. In this viewpoint universities are sites of contestation over access, policy and the

production of knowledge. Access courses and provision, we suggest, are a signal that alternatives are available and that emergent possibilities exist. In outlining such possibilities we are both connecting with a long past of struggles for learning and education and to a future of democratic inclusiveness. Wherever we look in the economically advanced world mass higher education systems have developed or are in the process of developing. Many of the outcomes of these systems are *unequal and unjust*. The continuing thread of growth and development is challenged and sometimes disrupted by those who experience the unequal outcomes of education directly themselves. When people believe that education is not a fair or even neutral enterprise in terms of its economic and social outcomes there have always been dissenting voices and attempts to invent alternatives. An important aspect of this finds expression in the notion of Access, which asserts the contested nature of education and learning and asks for an alternative rooted in the people's own social experience and agendas.

Access with a capital A, as described in this book, denotes the existence of special courses and programmes of learning, usually set up for designated communities or targeted groups. In Britain and Northern Ireland such courses began to emerge in the 1980s at a point in time when expansion and sometimes contraction or limitation of university places was highly contested and politicised. At that time and since, there has been in existence what can be loosely called an Access movement which embraced special courses and HE provision for what in Australia are understood as equity groups and in Britain even more loosely as the Access agenda. The borders and demarcations between 'Access', 'access' and 'widening participation' were never strictly policed, though it would be fair to assert that the most elitist of universities were less focussed on equity concerns or defined these matters in ways which supported their own distinctive and discriminatory selection practices. The general growth in higher education, which became later known as widening participation and was part of the growth of mass higher education, is also referred to as 'access' but in the lower case. Both meanings of the word refer to deeply held values and principles of learning and connect with debates and competing interests around the meanings of social justice. Access, however, as a *movement* is about learning and a curriculum which has this concern at its heart and is the subject of this book.

As universities adapted and developed in response to the demands for mass higher education the questions of who would be entitled to its benefits and what costs would be involved and for whom, came into greater public awareness. Those who had been educationally disadvantaged and excluded sought alternative ways into the educational system and educators and people of goodwill within the system itself sought ways to open up access