INTRO:

Hi everyone, welcome to the ADCET Podcast – supporting you – supporting students. We would like to acknowledge the aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which this recording is taking place and pay our respects to the elder’s past, present and emerging. In this podcast, our host Matt Brett chats equity with Dr Lin Martin. As always make sure you check out our show notes for relevant links. Enjoy.

MATT: Hi. I’m Matt Brett and you’re listening to another edition of a series of podcast conversations hosted by ADCET, the Australian Disability Clearinghouse for Education and Training and also supported by NCSEHE, the National Centre for Student Equity and Higher Education.

I’m on the advisory group for ADCET, also an Adjunct Fellow with the National Centre. Amongst other things I’m the Director of Academic Governance and Standards at Deakin University and a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne.

Today it is my honour and privilege to be discussing equity with someone who has exerted considerable influence on student equity in Australian higher education. While she may push back about what I’m about to say, she has in my opinion influenced student equity in ways that exceed that of almost anyone in the history of the sector. Dr Lin Martin (AO), welcome to this ADCET podcast.

LIN: Thanks very much, Matt, for the opportunity to participate in this.

MATT: In preparing for this podcast, Lin, I’ve tried to piece together some elements of your career. You’ve had leadership roles at Flinders University, University of South Australia, University of New South Wales, Higher Education Council, University of Melbourne, Deakin University RMIT and TEQSA. I hope I’ve not left any important institutions off the list there.

Given such an illustrious career in higher ed. I’m interested in your sort of starting point, you launchpad into the sector. I’m keen to hear of your first job and whether that was the starting point of a carefully nurtured ambition or was it more of an evolving happenstance that you went on to all those great roles beyond that time.

LIN: Certainly as one of my old bosses used to say if you wanted to get to Philadelphia you wouldn’t start from here. My first job was as a tutor in Applied Maths at the University of Adelaide while I undertook a research grant in fluid mechanics. That’s not the most obvious background for a later career in academic administration.

My first job was an academic job, low level academic job. In the early seventies these jobs were a limited term and the expectation was that incumbents would make a good start on a PhD while doing that tutoring job while I got some experience in teaching and obviously doing the research for their degrees, so after about three years the intention was that you’d finish off a large part of the PhD and then finish it up either by getting about in the general community or as a casual feature in the university.

My original career hopes were to get an academic appointment in maths. That was all I’d ever thought about. I loved maths and that was it. Time has changed and it’s a long time ago now but there were changes in the way academic staff were appointed in the universities between 1971 and 1974. The availability of such positions, academic positions, was significantly reduced over that period which was when I was looking for a job.

I was working on a PhD at that time so my timing wasn’t very good to achieve this goal that I had. I also made some other life decisions which damaged my potential to achieve that goal.

After three years I wrote up my research for a Masters Degree and I left to take up a job as a trainee actuary with National Mutual Life Association. This is the thing that mathematicians often did. There weren’t a lot of jobs around for mathematicians.

That was quite an eye-opening experience for me partly because they’d never had a female trainee actuary before at that company. There was an expectation because I was female I would make the tea for everybody. I had never experienced anything like that in my working career up to that time.

Anyway, I didn’t like that job much and I moved on and I got a job, my first administrator job at the University of Adelaide as a faculty registrar, so there went the ambition to be an academic having written up a Masters degree.

I did need to find work. My husband was writing up his PhD and he was on a Commonwealth scholarship. He was in the same field as I was so we both were involved in fluid mechanics, researching fluid mechanics and the supervisor of both of us said, “Well, you’re both not going to get a job in mathematics in Australia.”, and of course the woman gave up the academic career. I suppose these are things that influenced my interest in equity and social justice my own experiences there.

Anyway, I started this administrative career and I really didn’t enjoy it very much. I suppose my feeling was that – I mean I had a good quality research degree in applied maths and successful and got a deg

Administrators were treated sort of very differently to the rest of the academic community and so administrators were basically expected to be seen and not heard, so it was a very different sort of administrative life to what we see in universities these days.

I did learn something from this experience. I thought well there’s no point in complaining about I don’t like the job much. I applied for it and I had to do something. I sort of morphed the job into something with more interest to me and my interest of course was (inaudible) and so I did things like writing reports on student demand and enrolments in the faculty. The faculty had never had anything like that and it was the faculty of science and maths sciences, so they were very interested in this quantitative stuff. I started to enjoy the job more and the faculty members started engaging more.

I suppose what I learnt is you’ve obviously got to do the job according to the position but try and pick the bits of the job that you think might address your interest and get more enjoyment out of it that way. That was a good lesson for me.

This first job led indeed to a lifelong career in higher education. I certainly got there by happenstance. I had to accept that I was probably never going to be the academic I dreamed to be.

MATT: I’m glad that you gave away a caree r as an actuary and chose the path of higher education, but that point in time in many respects is such a kind of pivotal moment in the history of higher ed. We have in that period, ’72 to ’74, Whitlam came in, fees were abolished. All the shock and stagnation of the seventies meant that the sector didn’t really grow quite as much or the university part of the sector didn’t grow quite so much. It’s just amazing just how much things have changed since that time to today where we’ve got a mass universal system, not without challenges, but your career has expanded in some ways that elite model at the time of the (inaudible) system to now, a mass model with a unified system.

Are there things about that change that are good and things about that change that are bad in some ways in your reflections on the decades in between?

LIN: I mean it was a terribly interesting time really to be working in higher education. By that time I’d moved on to a different sort of administrative job and that was with a tertiary coordinating authority in South Australia.

That was the first job where I had an involvement with policy issues and of course there was a lot of controversy in the sector. Dawkins once said at a meeting that I was at he was astounded at how the sector just lay down and died effectively in the face of his reforms. He expected sort of well argued responses. He said it was amazingly easy to get the change through compared with all of the rhetoric that was going around but no real action from the sector.

I’m not as opposed as a lot of people would have been in the sector at that time to the changes made and I think the Dawkins’ reforms have stood the test of time.

It was the first time that there was a real discussion about higher education contributing to the national economic framework of a nation and Dawkins brought to that debate this sort of concept that a well-educated workforce would improve productivity of the nation, and an acceptance that unless changes were made and the sector grown in many years of cutting, as you quite rightly said Matt, the view that Dawkins had that Australia needed to be more competitive in the international environment of education I think was sort of underpinned and cemented by these initiatives.

They were controversial things and, as you will know, like the introduction of HECS, student demonstrations in the campuses and so forth, but I think what all those changes did, even though they were very disruptive in lots of ways, was that it formed a decent financial base and a sector of critical mass that did allow Australia to start competing internationally.

I think back to the days before that and that just wasn’t there in the sector and if you could see where we are now you might not think it’s the best place in the world just at the moment, but I do think that that formed the basis of a really sustained environmental education sector that’s changing.

I think the shift to – well, it was mass at that point, mass higher education were necessary changes and I think the best success has been the way the sector has developed and its profile raised internationally with Australian institutions (inaudible), international makings and so forth.

I think they were very positive things really. I think the other things that, and of course I enjoyed this aspect of it, it suited my skills but there was much more focus on planning, institutional planning and clarification of funding approach to higher education.

It’s hard to imagine it now but in the days before Dawkins the funding at particular universities was very idiosyncratic. You know, these discussions, the discussions with various councils of the tertiary sector, the university council, the Advanced Education Council and State Council, there wasn’t much discussion that lists the institutions themselves about what their education profiles were, so you never really knew whether university A and university B were funded on the same sort of rationale and basis. So, the relative funding model that was developed was a significant development and it was a thing that was negotiated at great length.

Of course, Dawkins’ reforms were what brought the equity agenda really importantly I think into the planning approach and, you know, relative to these days a small amount of quarantined funding, but it was very much at the margins, money at the margins.

That was sort of the move from elite to mass education, higher education, and by the time the Bradley Review was undertaken in 2008, Australia had reached almost universal participation and that again shows I think the success of the foundations laid by (inaudible). It was very significant that Denise Bradley was chosen to lead the Bradley Review because of her very great interest in equity and social justice.

She was concerned that in spite of all of the efforts, of money set aside, planning required in relation to it but there was still relatively little progress in improving the situation of designated equity. Some had prospered but the old ones that were difficult to move were low SES, rural and Indigenous student groups.

Then we come on to the Bradley reforms and I think the (inaudible) system was really quite inspired as a way of not having to justify equity publicly by saying there are caps on enrolments. You know, there was an excuse not to enrol students from these groups if you didn’t really want them.

I think the use of the demand driven system was a way to free up funding in the sector which is what it did but also to remove caps on enrolments and allow – encourage institutions to get access to this funding by enrolling more students from this group. I just think that was a game changer really and I think that’s an enormous positive.

Even though there’s still perhaps the movement in student numbers from those groups it’s still not as great as some of us would have liked, it did free things up and I think that was a marvellous contribution to the future of higher education in Australia.

In terms of some negatives, I mean this all sounds very rosy and there were great initiatives that took place both in Dawkins and Bradley as a result of the Bradley Review. The ones that I feel where the government really didn’t take the opportunity of the change in policy framework, the relative funding model provided the opportunity to fund the newer universities, the ones that used to be the old colleges of advanced education, there was an opportunity there to really balance the funding across the sector better than the way it had developed over the years.

In the end the government decided it wasn’t going to shift that money around as much as we’d expected and what the relative funding model was showing. This is the teaching in relation to needing to be pragmatic in what you wanted to achieve because you would have thought while it was there that they wanted to rebalance the funding in the sector but in fact, in spite of all of the work that went into the relative funding model, in the end notice was taken of the objections from the older universities and so they never really achieved the sort of absolute equality funding that the model suggested. That was a disappointment, I think.

The same thing happened a bit later in about 1999 when they introduced a change to the research funding mechanisms. That was a performance based approach and again in all of the quantitative analyses and the policy analysis that went on suggested that there was a need to move money around but again the government couldn’t quite bring itself to do that. You can understand why but I guess it’s one of the things I’ve learnt over my years, and particularly my time working at the Higher Education Council it doesn’t matter how good your policy analysis is and the work that you’re putting forward for policy change proposals, in the end the politics are really going to influence what you can achieve.

That was a hard learning curve for me and I suppose one of the things that having worked all this time at the Higher Education Council on the analysis of a Fair Chance for All five years on, that report that I drafted hit the government offices for approval just at the time of the change of government in 1996 and, having worked under Labor Ministers such as Beazley and Crean, suddenly we were working at the Higher Education Council until Amanda Vanstone who came in with an agenda that funds had to be cut and a government that wasn’t particularly interested.

It doesn’t matter how well you do the preparation, in the end that report didn’t ever really go anywhere very far and yet I think it was a very good report for five years.

MATT: I think that report from memory sort of lists its benefit is equity, equality and excellence, is that correct?

LIN: Yes.

MATT: It’s well worth reading. We’ll put a link to that up on the website. That sort of growth in Australia’s productivity and growth in participation, it seems that the only thing that’s put a damper on that is the global pandemic. We’ve had a remarkable kind of ride over the last 30 years of prosperity as a nation and I think the education and higher education reforms have played a really important role in that in my view.

Across that time frame you’ve alluded to a few kind of highlights along the way, but is there something that really stands out for you, Lin? Was it indicated, was it Bradley, was it the early days of the university, is there a career highlight that you kind of look back on really fondly?

LIN: Yes, I think so. I must say personally that the time, the three months I spent working with Denise Bradley and the expert panel on the Bradley Review was of the most interesting and rewarding of my time, but that’s not the example I name.

For me it was quite early in my career really. I accepted the job at the old South Australian Institute of Technology as head of planning in information systems. I’d in the meantime done a graduate diploma in computing science and so I was sort of interested in getting data out of systems and so on and understanding the technical aspects of that.

The thing was that I made this move to the South Australian Institute in, I think it was about 1987, so it was just at the start of the Green Paper changes, the Dawkins’ changes and of course the South Australian Institute was very interested in becoming a university. Curtin was the first one of what would now be called the ATN group to get university status in Western Australia and of course all the other States that had those technological institutes wanted to do the same.

Anyway, the time was absolutely right to sort of move into this planning and information systems era and that allowed me really to use the studies and gave me a quantitative job that I’d hankered after, but I suppose also the other thing that was happening was when the Dawkins’ White Paper was finally accepted in 1988. Dawkins started reorganising a sector by encouraging in the South Australian case quite brutally forcing some merges, but it was the time that the amalgamations were going on and the University of South Australia was formed from the old South Australian Institute and quite a significant proportion of what was known as the South Australian College in Advanced Education.

I mean it was a terribly exciting time combining a career in quantitative – to me combining a career in quantitative analysis development and management and managing of admin computer systems and then when the new university was mooted, the University of South Australia it became, I worked with Denise Bradley who had come from the South Australian College side and we worked together on the first strategic plan for the university and the policy framework for the university.

All that work went on before the formal formation of the new university and that’s terribly interesting to be able to be working on those critical documents and critical policy positions for a new university, new organisation.

It was a wonderful experience for me in working on the establishment of the organisation, but for me because it was my first – I’d known Denise for some time because she’d been a senior staff member at the previous South Australian College but this was a critical thing for my career.

Denise was a wonderful supervisor and, as you’re probably aware, she was a fairly feisty woman so she’d give you quite significant insights into the way to get what you wanted in terms of policy issues through an organisation that in the early days was fairly driven, you know, in the sense that the old South Australian Institute was a traditional technological institute, very male dominated.

The South Australian College was largely a teachers’ college, an organisation that had been formed by the merger of a number of teachers’ colleges. It was soft in the sense of not the hard sciences that were the centre of the institute, so it was a real challenge to get agreement for these proposals that she and I worked on together.

Denise was a terrific mentor to me. She was at that time a member of the TAFE council of CTEC, Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission. She was very experienced in understanding how you got policy through and she was very generous with that information. It was great fun as well because she’s a woman who is not afraid of saying what she thinks, well she was. She recently died and that’s a terrible blow to the sector really, but anyway. I think that was the most significant period and it was really exciting to work that way. I guess also, and which is more relevant to this, this was the period that I actually got involved with the project that ultimately became the Indicators project.

I think it’s worthwhile noting at this point the difference between when I started my career which was in 1974 as an administrator, by sort of, well I suppose it’s 20 years, 15 years, working in that environment as an administrator but being appreciated for the contributions you could make to the new organisation. It was just such a different environment to what the administrative environment was at the University of Adelaide when I started there.

I think that was a really good thing and being supported in – I actually did have something to offer that I could when I decided I wanted to put in a bid for some money in terms of this evaluation and investigations program at this time, what was a real good change. I mean I was being respected as a person who had something to give to the sector.

I’ve ben extremely lucky when after the White Paper was accepted Dawkins set up a thing called Performance Indicators Research Group and that was done in 1989.

Another great mentor of mine, Russell Lenke who was one of the premier policy analysts at the time in higher education, Russell was my boss at my job at the Tertiary Coordinating Authority in South Australia. He recommended me to go on this Performance Indicators Research Group. I was the only administrator on that group and I was the most junior member probably by about 20 years I think. My fellow committee members were mostly Deputy Vice Chancellors. There was one Vice Chancellor on it and they were all people who were actively involved in higher education policy analysis and decision making in the sector.

Dawkins charged that group with identifying some equity indicators as part of the suite of performance indicators he wanted to have developed. Obviously, I gained confidence over this period because I argued quite strongly that I didn’t think in the end the report of the research group paid enough attention to equity.

This was at about the time Fair Chance for All was being evolved, but all that the group would come up with and would agree to do was to have two indicators, one which was about the proportion of female staff in the sector and the other one was about the percentage of students, female students, so nothing about any of the other groups, yet the other groups were being talked about at that time we started the discussions that led up to Fair Chance for All.

I argued and said that I didn’t think that was good enough and that we should do a bit more and Russell Lenke who was chairing the group said, “Well, it’s not going to happen and if you want it to happen you’d better do some work on it on your own and come up with some proposals. It’s not going to be part of this major report.”

That sort of encouraged me and I got a bee in my bonnet about that so that’s what led me to put in the application as well as my views about it. Ultimately, I was successful in getting that grant.

Again this was unusual. It was unusual for those grants to go to administrative staff. It’s not the case now. Well, it doesn’t happen now because the program was dismantled after many successful years but it became more common for good administrators to be able to win those grants, but at the time that would have been one of the first that went to an administrator rather than academic staff.

I guess that period which involved doing core administrative and planning work for a new organisation and the opportunity to do this other work that was right at the centre of what was going on on the policy side at that time was terrific and lingers long in my memory as being very exciting.

I did have issues with my career in that I’d go to interviews for sort of standard administrative jobs and I would be asked things like, “Why are you wasting your time sort of chopping between administrative jobs and these”, that was always said, “these equity jobs.” They were never equity jobs. They were equity policy as part of the overall (inaudible). It wasn’t regarded as the most sensible thing to do which I think is bizarre now given the way my career ended up, still flip flopping at the end between the two.

MATT: There were aspects of that performance indicator work that if you can just elaborate on a little bit more Lin because I know that there was some dispute around what indicators should be in place or how they should be framed. I think there’s a sort of teachable moment here in that experience for people who are wanting to pursue a progressive or inclusion agenda in higher education today. Can you maybe take us through and with a bit more detail the cut and thrust of that equity indicator work and project?

LIN: I did the work on the indicators while I was employed as academic registrar at Flinders Uni because by that time I’d left the University of South Australia by the time that was granted, the money was granted, and I’d moved on to what I thought, about the age of 40 I thought I have to somehow get a real career position here. I got this job as academic registrar at Flinders.

I suppose not because of the equity work but I became quite well known because of that equity work. It was a great surprise to me really that the government was so interested in this. I thought I was doing this job because it was something that interested me rather than what the nation needed, but I discovered once I applied for that evaluations and investigations program grant and got it that I did realise that the government was actually quite serious about trying to get a solution to some of these things.

The report was published and accepted. One of the more controversial things was the issue of indicators and definitions related to students with disabilities.

For some reason a lot of the universities were not at all happy with what I’d come up with in terms of definition and the indicators. In those days there used to be a statistics committee, I think there still is one actually but it’s not quite the same, statistics committee and the problem was there was no collection of data about students with disabilities at all.

There were questions on enrolment forms about Indigenous students that were self identification, so it wasn’t that as much but there just seemed to be a resistance to collecting any information on students with disabilities.

Anyway, at the time I was working as the counsellor or the senior advisor to the Higher Education Council and I was representing the council on this statistics committee and what was needed was this extra piece of information that wasn’t collected by the Commonwealth. It was quite fortuitous really that I was representing council when this issue of whether a new data element ought to be created and collection of information and these indicators for students with disabilities to be treated in a similar way as other equities.

Well, there was great opposition from the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee as it was known in those days, now the Universities Australia. It sort of became almost quite personalised actually. I could never really understand why there was such opposition but there was and what probably disappointed the AVCC as it was known was that I was in a position to defend what I’d proposed and so there were these lengthy arguments of these various statistic committees about whether or not this should be done.

In the end people from the department would have been called, the actual (inaudible) or one of its many names around that time and they backed me, but I often think that if there just hadn’t been that fortuitous coincidence of me being on that statistical committee to argue we probably wouldn’t have had the indicators, they would have knocked it back.

The very sad thing for me was that some people right to the end of their careers that I’d been engaged with in this discussion would never really forgive me for winning that battle.

MATT: I think many ADCET listeners would be enduringly grateful for your efforts. Was there a little bit of Denise’s feistiness or policy lessons on how to get things done that came out in you through that time, Lin?

LIN: Well, I think so. I wasn’t very proud of the definition I’d come up with. I thought it wasn’t a very good job but I did feel that it would have been a great disappointment not to have included that group when it was part of a Fair Chance for All. It was clearly there in the policy framework and while it might not have been the best thing I thought it was really important there was some data collected and this comes back to my emphasis always on data, so any progress that was going to be made, even against a fairly flawed definition, would be able to be there and measured. That to me was what was most important.

I think, you know, that’s been proved not just due to the indicators or anything but the fact that it was on the same footing as Indigenous students. There were students with NES, non English speaking background students, so there were other groups that didn’t raise the same objections.

I still don’t really understand except that I have observed at times when I’ve been dealing with student complaints in various organisations that there still is a bit of a sort of pervading thing that somehow if you make adjustments to students with disabilities is somehow compromising academic excellence. I just can’t understand why people think that. I mean the most inspiring students that I’ve dealt with in my career are people who have overcome enormous issues.

Right at the start of my career I sat on a committee when I worked in South Australia that was to award scholarships to students with disabilities. I mean the most inspiring stories of achievement have been among students with disabilities. That was what at risk really. I just still don’t really understand the objections.

I think you’re right, I think if I hadn’t worked with Denise, if I hadn’t got favour by working with Denise and I hung in there on fingernails really to argue with the people from the AVCC because they didn’t expect the opposition they ended up getting and I think they misjudged the extent to which the government was really interested in implementing this.

MATT: There may be some Lin who never forgave you for that.

LIN: That’s right.

MATT: Important advocacy but it didn’t hold you back and not long after that work you ended up with the Higher Education Council which is one way in which the government can set up coordinating or engagement with the sector. Later on in your career you were a TEQSA Commissioner at a different form of engagement with the sector. Do you have any reflections on No. 1 that transition from university administration and kind of policy projects within the equity slant to being part of that government interface with the sector as a whole which has obviously evolved across time from HEC to TEQSA?

LIN: I mean I think the HEC was an incredibly interesting organisation. Dawkins had set it up as a very significant part of his advisory mechanisms. The traditional model is that the Commonwealth department provides policy advice to the Minister. There was a feeling, and you have to remember that this was in the transition from CTEC to the administrators in government in higher education becoming part of the sort of mainstream government.

Dawkins decided he wasn’t going to put up with CTEC any more so he set up this structure with the Higher Education Council and the HEC was one of many councils (inaudible). His view was that he was going to populate these councils in the case of the HEC with academics primarily, senior academics who had an interest in policy but were going to provide a perspective to him on what the sector wanted rather than what the department wanted or bureaucracy wanted. He used that very effectively. He put good people on the Higher Education Council and he consulted it regularly I understand in the early days.

By the time I joined the Higher Education Council in 1994 I think it wasn’t working as well. I’m not sure that subsequent Ministers, even though that was in the Labor party, really understood the nuances of what he was trying to set up in that structure and so there was a constant tug of war between the department and the Higher Education Council. We did work together and I have still good relationships with a number of people. David Phillips I worked with at that time he was from the (inaudible).

It was always a battle and the Higher Education Council used to have quite a lot of difficulty getting access to the Minister by the time I was working as a counsellor, so I don’t think in the end it was a very effective mechanism. It was interesting as a place to work because council had the right to identify issues for the Minister’s consideration. Probably it was an unusual structure and there hasn’t ever been anything quite like it since.

Working at TEQSA - I was a higher education counsellor, had no formal decision making powers. On the other hand at TEQSA there was an Act that gave TEQSA a lot of power and of course TEQSA arose out of the recommendations of the Bradley Review (inaudible) to think about quality assurance in the sector but the TEQSA legislation went a lot further and gave TEQSA a lot of powers including punitive powers if providers didn’t (inaudible) certain things.

I feel that TEQSA, and I worked there for five years at the end of my career as a commissioner, and I think the only issue there is that there’s sort of a slight conflict between TEQSA being a regulator with punitive powers and trying to encourage quality assurance mechanisms in the sector. There was a bit of tension in that.

I think it’s very difficult to compare the effectiveness of those different approaches but I think TEQSA has actually been very successful in the first five years of its existence and that’s largely due to good leadership by the Chief Commissioner, Nick Saunders, he used to be Vice Chancellor at the University of Newcastle, and Anthony McClaren who came from overseas with experience in quality assurance in the UK.

TEQSA has been successful in building an international profile and also getting – there’s been adoption by a number of quality assurance agencies overseas of the approach which is a standards driven system and being an organisation with strong regulatory powers.

I’d have to say that having worked in both places that I think the approach with TEQSA was far more effective in the sector but it’s difficult to say one or other was the better because they were quite different intents.

MATT: Whether it be a Fair Chance for All era or the Higher Education Council or TEQSA, at various points in your career you’ve been involved in either running the projects or supporting the projects or selecting the projects and even with TEQSA you were leading the analysis on student retention and success etc.

On that sort of higher education project side of things can you give a sense as to what makes for a good project and your indicator of fund work activity has well and truly been integrated as part of the fabric of the sector for 30 years, and not all projects get that kind of legacy, so I’m just wondering if you’ve got any wisdom to share with listeners as to how to be thinking about engaging in investigations and research that has a better prospect of getting funded or a better prospect of having a positive impact?

LIN: As I’ve said in earlier comments that the time was right for the Equity Indicators Project because I was naïve with that. I hadn’t sort of thought that the government was likely to be so strongly behind what I did in the project. I think that was a major contributor to why it was readily adopted by the government, and except for the small battle about disability indicators, it was very acceptable.

I think the issues and when you’re sitting there on a panel that’s selecting successful applicants for these grants, I mean at the time these grants were expected to be – the evaluations and investigations projects and also there was another group called the National Priority Reserve Fund money, the government expected these to be very practical projects. So, when they’re sitting selecting you find that again and again there are projects that appear of great interest to the individual that’s putting it forward but often it’s not clear how that’s going to benefit government and they’re not successful in that sort of environment that’s very different from an ARC grant or a pure research grant.

One of the things Denise taught me because she’d been selecting these sorts of projects in the past she said you’ve got to make it clear how this is going to benefit the government. You’ve got to make it clear how this particular methodology you’re proposing or the approach that you’re proposing is going to deliver those results.

You’d be surprised at how many, you know, quite experienced researchers who had put in applications for these would not actually address those two forms. The tip that I would advocate for is that it’s very important that if you’re trying to get government money for things then you have to be able to demonstrate quite clearly how this is going to benefit the government and it was partly because – I was working for Denise at the time. I put in the year. She had a good go at it when I did the draft and shaped it more, showed me how to do that and that’s why she was such a terrific mentor. It’s not often you get a certain boss who’s had that experience.

MATT: You and Denise joined forces again as you said earlier for the Bradley Review of higher education and perhaps led to demand driven funding. When thinking about something with kind of policy impact that’s going to lead to changes it certainly changed the funding for equity and certainly changed funding for asset expansion in the sector, so great lessons there around policy process that led to that. Can you maybe reflect on what you think the long term enduring legacy of those reforms will be? We’ve had caps in place for a couple of years, so demand driven funding deserves in some ways a blip rather than a permanent sort of change to the system. There’s still a legacy there that will endure irregardless?

LIN: Yes, I think so. Also we have to put this in context because if we look back over the history of the endless reviews of higher education that have taken place not many of them have much longevity. I mean the Dawkins’ ones are an extreme one end of the spectrum where there’s still basically the system until Bradley. That was the way things worked in Australian higher education and really the Bradley – I mean it was 2008 and 2009 when the government accepted the recommendations. Really, as you say, it’s been in the last couple of years, so they lasted about 10 years really which in the scheme of things in Australian higher education is a reasonable run.

I mean I think the innovation of the demand driven funding system, the understanding that something had to be done through the regulatory arrangements, I mean there had been odd decisions made in Australian higher education policy, for example, to allow higher education providers that were not universities to receive some government funding in some particular circumstances for particular fields and also to give them access to Commonwealth funds in the terms of loans, student loans.

There were real areas of incoherence in the policy of the time of Bradley and I think that was all sorted out through the TEQSA arrangements. I think the regulatory arrangements will go on. I mean I do think that people through the demand driven system and the fact that there was a real focus with equity targets and things, even if those targets don’t exist now things have been learnt through that and now people talk much more about equity as a mainstream thing than they ever did before Bradley even though that was one of the aims of Dawkins to get equity as a mainstream thing.

I think, and I’m biased obviously because I worked on it with them, I think there were lots of good things and one thing I learned about this was again from Denise. She determined that a lot of effort had to be put into the way the report of the expert panel was to be formulated. What she said was we have to put this together in a way so that it’s a coherent story. What’s the narrative she used to ask at meetings, so what, the question so what. So, you can do all this analysis but so what, what is the policy implication and what do we want to achieve here.

It was formulated in a quite different way to the way I would have first gone about writing a report and what it meant was that these policy initiatives were all sort of linked together so you couldn’t just pick out the one about greater support for students, financial support for students for example, without thinking what that was doing about participation and so forth.

It made it extremely difficult for the recommendations of the report to be cherry picked and so forth and I think that’s one of the reasons why the vast majority of the recommendations (inaudible), “Oh, well, we’re going to knock out the equity bit” because it was presented as a significant argument for what was needed to make better use of the resources in Australia to improve the economic outcome.

So, it was a different sort of report. I think, you know, it was because of her drive to do that that a lot of the recommendations were accepted.

MATT: Personally, I think there are many people including myself that have been able to refine and build their careers on the basis of that, legitimacy of equity that the Bradley reforms introduced and have got me to a position where I'm having a fantastic conversation with you today so I’m enormously grateful on so many levels.

I do want to pivot here a little bit because a lot of the conversation so far has been around national challenges of coordination and policy and how do we get the sector as a whole to approach various things with some coherence, but you’ve also been on the other side of the fence. You have been there as part of the executive of universities, including Deakin, where I currently work, University of Melbourne, where I have previously worked as well.

Universities in my experience are pretty complex beasts. They're complex organisations. Maybe if you can share with listeners, Lin, what some of the challenges might be in thriving in that kind of environment of operating at an executive level where you are dealing with that great complexity at an institutional level.

LIN: Well, I think always if you want to bring about reform or you're working for an organisation that’s interested in doing things differently, so, you’re not a time serving administrator, you’ve got a reform agenda. I think both at Melbourne and Deakin, my senior roles there, Vice Chancellor was in both of those places were very interested in making their organisations different, at least trying to make them stand out in a way.

I think that, to me, as a person who wanted to bring about change and quite honestly to raise the profile of administrators in the decision-making process, I think the things you need – this is just ordinary management speak really about having a vision, the need to have a vision for what you’re trying to achieve to bring the people that are working with you really with you on trying to achieve that vision.

I think that those things which sound rather trite are very important because I feel that when I’ve been on the other side, if my boss hasn’t been able to articulate what the purpose of what group is trying to do then they lose the (inaudible).

So, I think you can’t put too much emphasis on that need for – I guess it’s leadership in a way, it’s a need for developing a vision but gaining commitment of the people you’re working with.

I think sometimes, and I see it, you know, in senior administrators that I've dealt with from the perspective of being a commissioner and talking to people in institutions about things, you have got to be not too removed from staff. I mean, I see it a lot of senior administrators these days that seem to want to just say, “Well, I can’t answer any questions about that, that’s the business,”Now there a fine line between delegation, which has to be done and is absolutely necessary, and I have to say that I wasn’t always the best at that, but that is really important to be able to do that.

Keep enough knowledge, not to be all over things but to keep enough knowledge to be able to defend a position in various committees and things. This again is the challenge because in a lot of universities even the senior administrators are not often part of some of these groups like if you take an academic board, for example. I always had a position on that as academic registrar.

In a lot of institutions that’s not the case, you know, it’s the academic community. So, for the administrators to have a real effect there, you know, you need to have enough knowledge to be able to answer questions and to stop the inevitable madness that occurs on occasions in those organisations.

It’s not a very clear answer to your question. The other thing that I think I would say is one reason that I've been a successful senior administrator is that I have been interested, even though I love the policy discussion, I've been interested in looking at really practical, implementable solutions to things.

An administrator that’s able to lead a good implementation of a policy change is generally a fairly rare beast. They're either good at devising esoteric policy or being very down in the weeds implementing. I think you’ve got to get that balance and you’re most valuable if you can get that balance.

MATT: It seems like things have moved on an enormous amount from ‘74 as an administrator or as an actuary sort of being asked to make the tea and coffee and what not. I think there's some great advice there for budding future leaders in the sector that might be listening to this conversation.

From an equity perspective, it sort of opens the question around how they might be able to position themselves to have a degree of impact and a degree of success.

Is it, as you say, sort of thinking about the purpose and the esoteric sort of ideas and basically getting things done or is it a question of them being able to persuade people like you in the executive that they need more resources or that they need some sort of policy change that they need to persuade you and get you over the line in amongst 75 other people asking for similar things for their own special interests?

It’s a sort of long-winded way of just sort of asking whether you have any thoughts around how people might be able to get more attention for the things they care about in higher education?

LIN: Yes, well, I think one of the things is that, and I suppose I touched on it slightly earlier, you have to have a really good knowledge of what you’re wanting to propose and you have to have thought of the arguments. You need to anticipate the arguments that are going to come up in one of these environments.

I think that the real challenge is to make sure that what you're proposing is not sort of so esoteric or framed in administrative speak or equity speak or whatever. It doesn’t mean you ignore the arguments in that but you’ve got to stop the eyes glazing over if you’re trying to convince someone.

So, when you frame whatever you want to get through, it has to be through a committee of an administrative nature. You’ve got to frame it in a such a way that the people who are making the decision can relate to.

It’s a bit like the applications for grants and things, it’s about putting it in language and in context that isn’t so drowned. For example, if we looked at equity, sure, it’s really important that people that are making those decisions on an equity subject understand the equity framework, understand the philosophy behind equity and equality but they can’t be drowned in what you might call the “bleeding heart” stuff. It’s got to be framed in a way that they can relate to it and see it as worthwhile.

Often, young administrators I think make the mistake of thinking it’s such a valuable argument and it’s such an important thing that they sort of get lost in that rather than in the practical aspects that are going to be of interest to the particular audience.

MATT: So, Lin, focusing on disability specifically here, universities are a complex context and disability can have some complexities associated with that as well, you mentioned before being greatly inspired by some of the things that you had been exposed to early in your career, but is there something that jumps out as particularly important or notable achievement when it comes to disability in higher education, even the flipside of that, a particular challenge that you think we really need to address as a sector?

LIN: I don’t sort of feel as if I have led policy about improvements to disability greatly. One thing that I did do when I worked at the University of New South Wales, I worked with the equity unit people including Jude Stoddart, who I thought was a very good equity officer, a few years back.

We really worked on trying to get to grips with the lack of money that was available. I’m a bit out of touch with that now but my feeling from the complaints work that I've done is there's still some issues about how the resource that are provided within an institution are allocated for students with disabilities. You know very well that the supports that are needed differ very much in costs for types of disabilities.

There's still some sort of desire to be able to prioritise one against another and how that provides a pretty big challenge if you’re trying to support as many people as you can yourself.

It still surprises me, and this comes in some of the work I've done on complaints, there's still a slight view that was almost back there in the original days of the arguments about whether there should be an indicator about disability that somehow students with disabilities get free kicks academically by being given some sort of adjustments, either the time they have to submit work or to do examinations or whatever. That really surprises me in this day and age but I think it still is there a little bit. that’s a major issue to overcome.

I mean I think in my time students with disabilities the participation has improved and some of the more, you know, really disabled conditions that students have, those students have shown – it’s inspirational, I mean some horrendously disabling conditions and students have still managed to achieve with these adjustments.

Some quarters in universities are still not understanding that this just sort of redresses sort of systemic disadvantage. It’s not about letting someone off lightly. That disturbs me and I don’t know what can be done about that. I mean people that you're working with are the experts. It sort of disappoints me.

MATT: Yes. This is part of the reason why ADCET exists to try and find ways of systemically raising awareness and building capability to support a more inclusive university system. It’s a long, hard road in some ways but I’m very, very confident in saying that things are way, way better now than what they would have been back in ‘74. There’s still a long way to go.

Sorry to keep referring back to that ’74, but I think it’s just a nice little conceptual anchor to say that things have changed in the sector itself, gender roles, all sorts of things have changed a lot, and the status of the administrator in universities has changed enormously as well.

Even with the positive contributions you have made, my observation, Lin, is that quite often you have been happy to sort of take a bit of back step and support the administration of good policy, good strategy etc. and let the VCs and DVCs take centre stage.

Is that something that we need to fight against or is that just part and parcel of being an administrator of a university that it’s quite legitimate that the academics are the ones in the spotlight?

LIN: Well, I think that is true and I think you see, and certainly in my career, it’s waxed and waned a bit, the role that administrators have played on committees and things.

I would have to say that the new universities tend to be more flexible about – this is in my experience. They're more willing to see administrators as people (inaudible).

I mean, probably because I’m very old now, I do remember pre-1974 days, but I still think that the administrators should be enablers in the broader sense of the sort of academic purpose of the organisation. I always wanted to be an academic and I do still revere those people in a sense not just because of positions they’ve got and not that I think they're necessarily any better than the bright administrators or anything, but I do feel that if you’re not there as an administrator trying to advance the academic objectives of the organisation and the academic achievements of the students in particular, then you’re there for your own purposes rather than for the benefit of the institution. I do feel that it’s really important that as administrators we don’t lose sight of that.

I do think that it’s still part, even though a lot of administrators are now equally well qualified as people on the academic side, I do think that there is a sort of slightly subservient role still there, not anything like it was in the days where you would sit there as the faculty registrar taking notes at meetings. You’d be sitting there silently raging that all this is just an absolute mad decision or something and not being able to say anything to that effect. You would never have been allowed to speak at a faculty meeting.

The world has changed enormously in that time, but I do think there's still a view that administrators are somehow not quite the same. Not all of the animals in the farm yard are quite equal yet.

MATT: One thing your name is synonymous with is the Martin Indicators and we’ve spoken about that at length. Another thing that your name is now given to is the Lin Martin Melbourne Global Scholarship at Melbourne University. Can you maybe just tell listeners a little bit about that scholarship and how it came about?

LIN: Yes. I can’t take credit for the establishment of this. That credit is to be given to Professor Richard Jones who was heavily involved with equity policy nationally, by working on various projects related to equity but also he led the University of Melbourne in developing its equity strategies for a number of years.

I was forced to retire in 2011 because I had period of very bad health and I couldn’t continue with my workso I decided I was retiring which actually doesn’t seem to have come to pass yet.

Richard wanted to recognise my contribution to equity in the sector and so he suggested and asked me would I be willing to put my name to this scholarship.

The scholarship was to provide so-called disadvantaged students or students from equity groups with an opportunity to go overseas and study for a semester under sort of like a study abroad arrangement but the scholarship was to fund their living expenses. These might have been higher than any other student because of the particular issue.

There were students with disabilities that won these scholarships. Some were students who came from low socioeconomic status families and so forth.

It was, I thought, a wonderful suggestion because students from equity groups were generally not doing this with some of the more well-heeled and well off students that were part of the University of Melbourne profile thought nothing of this, that their parents would support them while they were off on a study abroad session in a country of their choice.

It was quite a different approach to equity and you might say it was at the high end in one sense but I was engaged for a number of years attending the award giving ceremonies of this and the students who had won the scholarships in the previous year would come back and talk about some of the things they’d achieved.

Again, it was just so rewarding to see how some of these students developed. I remember in particular a blind student who wanted to go the US and his mother came to the award ceremony and she was so worried about how he was going to manage in the US. He was a very shy man.

I thought to myself, “My God, I don’t know how he’s going to manage either,” but 12 months later he came back and his confidence level had just grown so significantly.

He’d managed, he’d coped with, you know, considerable challenges in this six month period that he had taken. He was just waiting to go overseas again. His mother was just delighted because she said, “I never thought he’d develop like that in that short period of time of having to do things for himself.”

So, it was a very rewarding thing and I'm very grateful to Richard for suggesting it and to the university because it funded it. It found the money and the amounts the students got were reasonable so they could live reasonably comfortably for that six month period overseas, so a very interesting approach to really enhancing the lives of these people who won the scholarship.

MATT: A bit of a reminder that whilst we might think about the sector in terms of the hundreds of thousands of students that participate, at some point it does really get down to an individual level of transformation and benefit from higher education which is certainly what’s kept me engaged with the sector for the times that I've been part of it.

Richard was your PhD supervisor as I understand it, so you eventually did get that PhD under your belt?

LIN: I did.

MATT: The PhD process in some ways is a bit of a mentoring journey and like Denise and maybe Russell at other points of your career I wonder how Richard sort of stacks up to that.

I was just going to ask, how has that shaped your personal approach to mentoring? How have you learnt from Denise and others and how has that shaped your approach to mentoring of your mentees across your career?

LIN: Well, I think Russell and Denise, both unfortunately are no longer with us, were very idiosyncratic people in a way. Russell certainly liked people to challenge him. If you said something he’d say, “I don’t want to hear that, you know, I don’t want to hear a suggestion. I want the answer to how the trains run on time.” He’d be quite direct.

I suppose I picked some of that up myself. I’ve always tried to – I feel as if I’ve tried to mentor people that have worked for me and to give them opportunities. Russell gave me opportunities. Denise gave me opportunities. I’d like to think I've done that in my own carriage of my responsibilities with people.

I think Denise taught me about, as I've already said, on how to get policy through, but one of the things she also mentored me about and I suppose I’ve carried that on because it made such an impression on me, was that she taught me a lot about being extremely efficient in the way you carry out your duties.

Simple things like we’d be having a meeting about something and I would be taking notes and she would say to me, “You shouldn’t have to rewrite this, you should be taking notes in a way that helps you frame the paper that’s going to come out of this that’s got to go the council or the academic board.”, whatever.

I've tried to do that in my own career and tried to encourage that in people who have worked with me on more core administrative duties.

I hope I've recognised talent in people. I hope I did that with you, Matt, because I always – you know, you were responsible as much as I was for the first inclusion of equity issues in the University of Melbourne Strategic Plan. Now, that is a magnificent achievement and I wouldn't have done it on my own.

I don’t know that that had anything to do with mentoring but I hope it meant that I was willing to accept what you proposed and carried that forward to the Vice Chancellor.

That’s the sort of philosophy that I've tried to use. I'd like to think I've been a good mentor. I have mentored people formally, you know, being appointed in various mentoring schemes at different universities. Mostly, that’s about being a critical friend, I think, on the administrative side.

MATT: Given the generosity of your time today, Lin, it kind of speaks volumes of your willingness to give to others. I’m enormously appreciative of everything you’ve done for the sector and everything you’ve done for me and everything you’ve done to support student equity overall.

One thing that I usually ask at the start of these discussions in conversations is sort of a question along the lines of what equity means to the person sitting in the empty chair and how that might have shaped their career, but I'm going to pose that at the end of the today’s conversation.

I'm just going to bring up a quote from your PhD thesis because I think it’s so well framed and so eloquently put that I think it just needs to be repeated.

It says, “Finally, I wish to dedicate this thesis to my father, David Martin, who believed in the transforming power of education when he had little himself.”

As you get into the quiet years of an outstanding and brilliant career, do you still believe as your father did in the transformative power of education?

LIN: The short answer is yes, I definitely do, but I’ll just give a little bit of background.

My father, he left school at the age of 13. He was born in South Australia in Port Adelaide which, in a Melbourne context, it’s the equivalent of Collingwood.

His family were working class. His father worked in an iron foundry, a Scottish immigrant. He had no formal education to speak of. He left school at 13 and he worked as a telegram deliverer until he joined the services in the Second World War.

He certainly had, as I've said in the quote, he had little education himself but he valued education sort of almost like this talisman for a better life. In fact, this was the sort of environment I was brought up in.

When I retired due to ill health in 2011, I decided to do a PhD. I said to him, “I’m going to do a PhD,” and he was outraged. My father was quite a dogmatic person and had very strong views about what everyone should do and he said to me, “I demand to know how you think doing this will be of benefit to your career at this stage of your life.” I mean, I was 60.

So, I had to sort of explain to him about the benefits of doing things and you don’t always do them for career benefit. Of course, I had this long held ambition and disappointment that I hadn’t done that back in 1974. I hadn’t finished that, I’d written it up, maths.

It’s interesting because my father and my whole family none of them had been to university. He really had no idea what going to university entailed. When I was in grade 6 at primary school a teacher had written in one of my school reports that the school hoped I would go on to university.

This was a totally foreign concept to me at that time but my father took this to heart and really from that day forth that was his aim for me, I had to go to university. Everything that he then did for me in terms of providing opportunities for me was focused on that.

He had no real idea what that was going to mean. I certainly am eternally grateful for my own education and the opportunities my father gave me up to the point I wanted to do a PhD.

So, I really feel that it totally changed my life (inaudible) and I really do feel – I sort of can’t imagine what my life would have been like if I hadn’t been given that opportunity and (inaudible). This life of parental pressure was not always easy with the expectations of what had to be achieved, but I am indeed still a true believer in the power of education from my own experience and from what I’ve seen it do for other people.

In answer to your question, yes, I do believe very strongly in the transformative power of higher education.

MATT: As I said at the start of this, Lin, I think there are few people in the history of higher ed that have had as much influence as you in terms of making that transformative power available to so many more people. On behalf of so many other people I just want to say thank you. It’s been a delight to be able to talk with you today.

I think that’s where we’ll leave it. I wish we could talk for many more hours but I'm sure listeners will agree that you’re the most worthy recipient of the Officer of the Order of Australia, maybe perplexed as to why it wasn’t maybe bestowed a little bit earlier in your career but I think last year it was awarded.

Again, thank you for your time today, Lin, it has been an absolute delight.

LIN: Thanks very much. It’s given me an opportunity to remember old times. I hope that’s not too boring for you listeners.

MATT: It’s been brilliant, Lin, fantastic.

OUTRO:

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