**Panel: Higher Education and Equality**

**Chair:** Ellen Hazelkorn

**Panel members:** Vikki Boliver, Dung Doan, Rajani Naidoo, NUS (name TBC)

**Background**

The most disturbing part of the equity debate in higher education is that despite much analysis and action, over many decades, inequality remains stubbornly persistent. Education is a key indicator of future life chances and opportunities, yet national and international research indicates that educational achievement at age 8 can determine earnings at age 36. Participation in training by low-skilled adults is so low that there is little reason to believe this will change. Countries and universities have introduced widening access initiatives and targeted funding, but their impact has been relatively limited.

Beliefs as to why some individuals or groups are more successful than others varies depending on how much of the responsibility for success is placed on the individual learner vs. the social and structural arrangements, the impact of family and social background on educational outcomes, inadequate provision or other barriers to entry. Much of the discussion around equity has been concerned with participation rates and programme quality rather than on “access to what”, and issues around growing stratification and differentiated levels of learning and success.

Education systems can be a force for social mobility, but they also reproduce and reinforce existing social divides. Many of the promises promoted by/about higher education, most notably upward social and economic mobility, are proving to be untrue, or at least untrue for too many. However, rather than “owning” the problems of poor quality schooling or unsatisfactory health outcomes, as Nancy Zimpher former Chancellor of SUNY has said, HEIs and their faculty – having educated the teachers and the doctors – have walked away. In addition, too little attention has been placed on adult learners/LLL, in preference to concentrating on those students and research which bring reputational advantage.

This panel will explore these enduring issues which, as Piketty (2014, 485) acknowledges, confound every country: “To date, no country has come up with a truly satisfactory response”.

Some questions/issues the panel will discuss include:

* What do we know now about equity/inequity in higher education – that we didn’t know before?
* What are the outstanding big questions and issues that we need to resolve? What are the key policy challenges?
* Higher education may not be responsible but what are its responsibilities?
* Taking a systemic view of the educational pipeline, are there *realistic* models of “good practice” that have proven to work?

**Vikki Boliver** will discuss the fact thatsocial inequalities in access to higher education persist largely because prospective students are required to demonstrate the same level of ‘merit’ regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances. Drawing on Rawls’ distinction between formal and fair equality of opportunity, she will argue that genuinely fair access to higher education requires a contextualised assessment of applicant ‘merit’ which recognises the strong academic potential of disadvantaged applicants whose prior academic attainment is mediocre by national standards but excellent relative to those from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Rajani Naidoo** will look at the effects of the battle for ‘world class’ university status between the most elite universities in the most powerful countries. She will argue that in highly stratified systems few benefits trickle down to enhance the system as a whole and these developments lead to the combined and unequal development of higher education worldwide. She will also argue that global partnerships need to develop selection mechanisms contextualised to the specific circumstances of each country to break the link between access, social advantage and excellence – including better ways to measure academic potential.

**Dung Doan** will talk about HE and equality in the context of developing countries where growth in both demand for and enrolment in HE has been driven mainly by rapid economic growth and an expanding middle class. She will discuss the fact that improving equality in access to HE requires intervention both before and at the point of admission and argue that identifying the most critical drivers for each country/region within a country is essential. She will also focus on the impact of student loan schemes on improving equality.