

# Transcript

## The future of equity and higher ed with Professor Shamit Saggar

**SONAL SINGH:** We will now move over to Shamit Saggar. Professor Shamit is the Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success at Curtin University. He was also formally the inaugural director of the Public Policy Institute and professor of public's policy at the University of Western Australia.

**PROFESSOR SHAMIT SAGGAR:** And thank you for the invitation to speak to this huge cast you have managed to get together, so well done to the organisers, I am delighted to be here.

I am conscious time is running against us, so I will try to limit myself to that side there. My comments come in 2 or 3 parts. I think they are straightforward, I hope, let's see how they go.

In a sense Barney and Sally had on the heavy lifting. Barney is painted a broad picture, Sally went into some granular detail. There is not much I can add or take away from that, in a sense. I agree with 98 or 99% of whatever they were saying.

But I want to start zooming in. Just for the benefit of the audience, specifically asked to put my mind to the important part of the whole exercise, which is the Australian Tertiary Education Commission. I will do that in a 2nd, but I wanted to build in some points to start with in order to get that.

It is a direction of travel. Sally just said it's a marathon, we have used words like momentum, it is all interchangeable. This is intergenerational, but we have to get cracking. In some sense we are already behind, given that this was going on in 2008.

And there is lots of reasons to get ourselves, policy makers, researchers, government, practitioners to all put their shoulders and be entirely supportive of that.

When I look at it, or when we look at the accord, yes we agree with Barney's overall position. I want to reinforce this to the audience. That out of the 47 recommendations, as boiled down, guess what? All 47 have something to do with equity. Either directly or indirectly.

And oftentimes, number 13 is affecting number 17, which has a cumulative effect on number 23. It tends to skew things in favour of either disadvantaged students, or some groups of disadvantaged students.

We need to really keep an eye on the whole damn thing. That's hard, so why not just focus for the time being on what I call the equity levers that will be in the foreground. I constructed what I call a 6 legged stool--6 legged stool, it's a weird metaphor I met up. It's better than 3 legs, because if you take one leg away it will fall



over. It with my 6 legged stool, you can take one leg away and it still stands up hopefully. That is a metaphor for the accord.

To recap needs-based funding, alongside the regime Barney was talking about, it is a big part of getting equity resolved, getting it moving. Every Vice Chancellor tells you that they need a resource to do some of this stuff, and the NBF will be good the good part of that, I think.

But also the larger funding regime I think is going to be important. If we were just doing needs-based funding, and the larger funding regime was out of bounds, this becomes harder. It's actually made easier by the fact that all of the drains on funding and the students are being pulled up at the same time, and I really welcome that. It means there is a really good opportunity to reset this.

Secondly there is the actual dedicated equity programs we have at universities. We have the lion's share of people today as equity practitioners. They are often overlooked in the discussion, because we have talked about highfalutin policy and funding ratings, and closing on this. All important.

But actually as we speak, in all 39 universities there is an army of equity practitioners, who are getting along with this. And I just want to - I guess I'm just shouting out the fact that we would be a lot worse off everyone for the fact that they are doing what they are doing. But we want to make sure that they can do more, and some of you will know the centre itself is building up, or helping to build up, the capacity and the skills and so on and so forth throughout evaluation programs.

That is an important part of the exercise if we didn't have them we would be trying to retrieve-- recruit practitioners from scratch, thank goodness we are not. Thirdly there is money. The HELP regime will receive some relief, you got some detail I don't want to dwell on. But guess what? Money for students, and how they paid back, and the way in which it is presented, and how they think about it, is important.

It's good that we have that within the scope. I would be a bit worried if they are lost between February and May. And the larger point, and this is really I think where the equity starts to bite, or equitable outcomes do. It is what is known as moderated growth targets.

Remember that Jason wants a doubling of the size of the sector, we can go into why and the effects of that. But because that vote, as it were, is rising. The key thing is to make sure that the equity part of it, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is locked in. You don't want to create this, where that is writing and this is falling further behind.

I will stop waving my arms around, you see the point I'm making. Moderated growth targets have been very very pointed, through the government, through the commission, saying we will actually have the final say as to how universities and given institutions will grow raised on a variety of factors which we will go into.

But an important part of that will be your equity track record and potential. Why would you leave it out? It seems crazy. I really welcome this big agenda to grow, which has an equity lever sort of built-in.

And lastly ATEC. Let me switch to what I was really going to focus on. I would go as far to say to the audience, if there is no ATEC, there is no reform. I want to make the point that building ATEC from scratch should not be underestimated. It is not a walk in the park. It has all of the complicated things that Barney was going on about and all the numerous things that Sally was taking us through and keep in mind all the different doors at the same time, this is not a walk in the park. It has got to be done in a considerate way, but also in a timely way. And I'm going to focus on what I think needs to be happening in this area.

It may be helpful for us to think about that. All roads lead as I said to the construction, what I call the ATEC build exercise, it is a bureaucracy at the end of the day, it has been constructed as a buffer. There is a larger point that future educators in Australia, do not necessarily run a higher education system, there is no higher education system from our point of view. There are seven state and territory systems, which is loosely stitched together by the Commonwealth supported places scheme and other things. It clearly isn't how mature democracies go about managing the higher education system, let alone equity. And that is important.

The second thing is, I think it needs a flexible approach to getting its capabilities and skills sorted out, and the jargon that it is a network, a capability network. And absolutely the disposal of that exercise and getting the expertise in a single place.

Governance I will skip over because it is a complicated thing, but you already had Sally take you through the proposed governance and I certainly have views on that, but I will come back to it later in the questions possibly. And the last thing, if you are going to go through the trouble of building ATEC and achieving the Accord vision on the back of that, frankly, the executive people, the people for work for it, and also the commissioners, governments and everyone else around in my view needs to have as broad an equity lens as possible. I am always suspicious and nervous about equity being a slice of what a big body does.

You can entrench the issues and become over specialised and miss the big policy levers, such as funding, research, or manage growth. So through a broad equity lens, there is a way of acquiring them. If you stop doing that, there is a capacity for ATEC in due course to be very smart and proactive around intersectionality, but also what I would call the life chances model, the future drivers of inequity that exists in 2030 and 2040, should be aware of them now. And the last point is ATEC doesn't have to do it by itself. There is a large army of regulators, commissioners, think tanks, universities, practitioners who try to look at the same questions but not in higher education. They look at it in transport, housing, healthcare, in financial services and so on and so forth.

There is a shared community that ATEC can become a part of as long as it has a big broad agenda and ambition.