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EDITORIAL

An inter/national strategy for developing more equitable policies and practices in higher education

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It is our pleasure to introduce the papers included in this Special Issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation*, which are about issues in widening participation (WP) and access initiatives across Australia. The papers were developed by participants of an international writing program, which developed out of ongoing conversations between Professor Jacqueline Stevenson, Sheffield Hallam University, Ms. Rae Tooth, *Office for Fair Access* (OFFA), now the *Office for Students* (OfS) and Professor Penny Jane Burke, the *Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education* (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle, Australia, a collaborative seminar series and a previous successful institutional program, ‘Write a Paper in a Year’, run by Professor Carol Taylor and Professor Jacqueline Stevenson at Sheffield Hallam University. The Australian strand of the program was facilitated through CEEHE, directed by Professor Penny Jane Burke, convened by Dr. Anna Bennett and supported by Ms. Belinda Munn. In the UK, Professor Jacqueline Stevenson facilitated the program in partnership with Ms. Rae Tooth. The international program aims to support the development of communities of researchers, practitioners, educators and professionals to provide rigorous understandings and recognitive opportunities, resources and representations in working for equity in higher education (Burke, et al., 2017; Fraser, 1997). Such an approach enables people to develop their research and writing for publication, and for established researchers to widen their understanding of practice. The Australian strand is now supported by the *Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia* (EPHEA) organisation.

The inaugural 2017 Australian program involved 15 participants, each mentored by researchers with PhDs and who publish in the field. All of the authors in this Special Issue approach their research with an emphasis on the importance of collaboration, something which underpins the program and is intended to challenge the dominant competitive performative approach to education. The program aims to challenge those performative approaches that operate to reproduce discriminatory discourses of the ‘best and brightest’ through its limiting definitions of capability and what is valued as knowledge (Cull, Cai, Heemi & Dokmanovic, in this Issue, p. 26; see also Bennett et al., 2017; Burke & Whitty, 2018). Continuing in 2018 with a new cohort, the Australian strand aims to:

- draw on literature that challenges limiting taken-for-granted assumptions and practices in higher education;

- encourage reflexive approaches through utilising principles captured in the ‘autobiography of the question’ (Miller, 1997) and ‘writing as a method of inquiry’ (Richardson, 2000) to deepen our engagement with equity praxis (Burke, 2012);
- embed in education, research and evaluation processes, ethics of responsibility and care for representing and developing the field and its participants;
- engage with principles as captured in the concept of praxis that connects the research/theory/practice nexus;
- learn with and from others through building networks with colleagues across a diversity of areas in WP practice and research;
- facilitate rigorous and creative conversations and approaches, methodologies and pedagogies;
- produce a poster mapping a project’s focus and approach; and
- produce a draft of a journal article, developed through various ongoing activities focussed on the iterative process of writing.

In the opening ‘Invited Contribution’ to this Special Issue entitled *Re-imagining widening participation: A praxis-based framework*, Penny Jane Burke provides a discussion of the context and conceptual foundations of the writing program, arguing that as a major developer of powerful forms of knowledge (Burke & Whitty, 2018; Young, 2013), it is important for higher education to be engaged with, and informed by, all groups in society, so that issues affecting all of us can be re/cognised and addressed through parity of participation. This is crucial but challenging because the structure of Australian higher education, first introduced in 1850 and based on the UK system, is one which was described as “homogenous in the extreme” up until the Second World War (Meek, 1991, p. 465). At that time, the system only included a majority of privileged white males, with the University of Melbourne the first institution to open enrolments to women in 1880 (Smith, 2008). The first recorded Aboriginal student graduated from the same institution with a Diploma in 1959, and the first Aboriginal to graduate with a Bachelor degree was in 1966 from the University of Sydney. This achievement was only 50 years ago and although over this relatively short amount of time, women and Indigenous Australians have become important higher education participants-contributors, the original elite groups remain dominant in both symbolic and geographic terms within the highest status and most wealthy of the institutions (Gale, 2011; Parker, 2016; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009) and, as Whitney and Purchase explain in their paper about study-to-work transitions in Australia in this Special Issue, students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds tend to be concentrated in more vocationally focussed, less prestigious discipline areas. Although universities have become much more inclusive in the past half century, only 10% of Australians from the lowest socioeconomic status decile have degrees, compared to 58% from the highest socioeconomic status decile (Harvey, 2017).

This statistic is why more needs to be done through providing care-full programs and approaches to the education of students and to the development of staff, and to researching the experiences and challenges arising from taken-for-granted institutionalised presumptions and practices. As Cull, Cai, Heemi and Dokmanovic argue in their contribution to this Issue about conventional professional development in education, with a particular focus on schools, the neoliberal ‘value free’ professional “devalues the broader purposes of education to prepare students to live relational lives as independent and caring people in society” (p. 23). They write: “Empathising with students ... informs pedagogical decision-making processes and assists teachers to act in their students’ best interests” (p. 23). Support for teachers requires the kinds of pedagogical methodologies for professional development that they applied (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017) which challenges deeply entrenched judgements and assumptions that reproduce inequalities.

Burke highlights in her paper framing this Special Issue that we need to disrupt the meritocratic myth that anyone who works hard can make it through the system without challenges, because this ignores the depth of structural inequalities. Through a reflexive commitment to research-informed approaches (captured by the concept of praxis), we can collectively bring “assumptions and things taken for granted again into question, to shake habits, ways of acting and thinking, to dispel the familiarity of the accepted, to take the measure of rules and institutions ...” (Foucault, quoted in Gordon, 2000, p. xxxiv) and conventional approaches to (e)valuation to task for misrecognising and devaluing the student populations they are “ostensibly offered to serve” (Freire, 2000 [1968], p. 93; see also Burke & Lumb, 2018). Another higher education fallacy that requires debunking is that students who do not access non-elite universities directly from school are different. It is important to recognise that in many institutions, mature age and vocational pathways are often the dominant routes into university. The idealised school student-subject (Southgate & Bennett, 2014) is a misrepresentation, a historical habit of the past (Thompson & Cook, 2014) that has become co-opted by neoliberal middle class projections (Apple, 2013). This empty ideal continues to mask inequalities through normalising discriminatory judgements (that are often inadvertent). We need to reframe our approaches so that they are contextually attuned and relevant to diverse groups of students in order to serve them well. As Cull, Cai, Heemi and Dokmanovic argue in their paper, this is especially important for students in disadvantaged areas. Drawing on literature, they state that teachers’ knowledges are devalued and delegitimised through conventional forms of professional development in schools, where it has become a techno-rational event, not an insight-oriented process, the effect of which produces a situation where “teachers are reporting feeling increasingly apathetic toward participating” (p. 25). Ironically, this leads to many teachers becoming disengaged. Critically, they argue, teachers struggle “to exert political power and influence ... even though as practitioners they are experts in teaching in learning”, which has an adverse effect because “teachers have a unique effect on students and their engagement with education” (p. 22).

In the Australian strand of the program, we are committed to challenging inter/national habits of marginalising, which Burke explains (see pp. 15-16), keeps equity and inclusion work on the margins of institutions and serves to prevent the development of a more inclusive system and production of knowledge. Instead, a commitment to equity needs to be institutionally embedded, something which requires investment of time and resourcing. Rather than reproducing research based on objectification and description of existing structures, we need to move closer to the subjective experiences of the people involved – to what matters to them (Sayer, 2011), so that we can understand different experiences and needs, and uncover what could be different. As Whitney and Purchase show in their paper surveying research documenting students moving into work after graduation in this Issue, quantitative surveys dominate and although they identify “broad trends ... this type of data is limited in helping us to understand the student experience, including barriers and enablers” (p. 80). They conclude that “a more diverse methodological umbrella, including more qualitative accounts of the lived experience of graduates ... would add richness ... and deepen our understandings” (p. 89).

Macqueen argues in this Issue that it is important to recognise the capitals that non-traditional students bring to university “in order to avoid a deficit view” (p. 37). Reporting on her longitudinal study committed to the “recognition of difference”, Macqueen explores the capitals these students “bring to HE as a direct result of their backgrounds and prior experiences” (p. 39), and the invaluable types of support provided by their families and partners with no prior experiences of higher education, as well as their skills in creating peer friendships to navigate their way through unfamiliar terrains of new knowledge and values. Drawing on Yosso’s (2005) work, she reframes the concepts of cultural, family and social capital to explore the strengths of non-traditional

students' backgrounds, providing a range of insights enabled by her longitudinal methodological approach.

In Fuller's autoethnographic account of supporting care leavers in higher education included in this Issue, she explains that an autoethnographic approach to research encourages acknowledgement of positionality and valuing of the subjective experiences (of self and other) through a process of reflexive engagement which looks carefully, both outwards and inwards, to understand the effects that we have on others in our relatively powerful professional positions. In reflecting on the relational dynamics between herself and her students and how they relate to others within the university, Fuller cautions about stereotypes that can form from individuals being typecast as belonging to a specific group, and how stigmatisation can inadvertently creep into these categorisations, something she has observed care leaver students feel "some level of discomfort" about (p. 59).

Lamaro Haintz, Goldingay, Heckman, Ward, Afrouz and George argue in their contribution to this Special Issue that experiences of equity initiatives in relation to concepts such as habitus and intersectionality are required in order to understand more deeply how engagement with multiple initiatives and their cumulative effects impact on students' lives. Their institutional evaluation project sought to understand student experiences within the context of broader dynamics and social environments, rather than as individuals. Utilising a socio-ecological approach, they sought to reflect the "values of diversity and inclusivity" in their evaluation (p. 97). They discuss the importance of supporting such evaluation at all levels, so as to "enable time for collaborative project and evaluation planning, as well as ... willingness to be open to collaboration and considering new ways of working effectively and equitably together" (p. 102).

Indeed, in different ways, all papers in the Special Issue emphasise the importance of collaborative approaches to research, education, support and study, for both students and staff, through drawing on each other's knowledges and differences. Another example of this is Scobie and Picard's paper on student mental wellbeing included in this Issue which describes a 'team approach' that they argue is important because it "breaks down barriers between academics, counselling and professional staff [and] is most likely to be beneficial, as supportive pedagogies and materials can be integrated into the mainstream curriculum" (p. 74). Scobie and Picard conducted an 'integrative' literature and desktop review of web-based university resources, arguing that as with academic literacies, support for mental health and wellbeing works well when embedded in discipline based curricula. Along with being beneficial for students struggling with significant mental health issues, embedded collaborative approaches that draw on a variety of expertises enables broader reach to benefit all students, especially those with undisclosed problems.

Despite the intense performative culture of academia and associated time pressures, the research mentors involved in the writing program supported participants in negotiating their ways through the complex processes of developing a project, drafting a poster to map out their approach, and writing a research article. As the mentors and mentees acknowledged early on, this is no easy feat, for writing and publishing take time. Initially, this challenge caused a lot of concern for participants, and they opened up about their sense of 'guilt' (as also expressed by Cull et al., in this Issue, p. 30) for taking the necessary time to read, understand, reflect and write, although this feeling diminished as they increasingly recognised that this was important work, that research takes time and is difficult for everyone. They came to recognise that research and writing includes creativity, wonder, and pride (Sword, 2017), but also involves frustration in conforming to different knowledges and journal conventions, as well as reviewers' individual preferences. There is too much to mention here about working one's way through the differential territory of writing,

writing conventions and journals, for this is the purpose of the program in helping participants to explore the myriad of experiences, decisions and complexities, a process facilitated by the mentors many of whom are also editors and on the editorial boards of major journals in the field.

The mentors expressed pleasure in the process of guiding the participants and were impressed by their commitment, depth of knowledge and passion for the field, and of the pace and rigour of their development as researchers. However, this is not to argue that such collaborations were entirely smooth and consistent across all the relationships, spaces and times. Instead, as many of the papers reveal in this Special Issue, collaborative approaches are subject to many of the same relational complexities and power dynamics that characterise intra/inter-personal relationality and institutional spaces. Collaborative approaches are always already caught up in webs of power and knowledge but, importantly, when a collaborative methodology (Burke, 2002) is developed that is able to recognise this complexity, discriminatory assumptions and practices can be interrogated and inequalities challenged.

As Burke explains in her paper (p. 17), the concept of pedagogical methodology (Burke et al., 2017) has framed the approach to developing the Australian stream, which is committed to research being pedagogical in creating space and time for critical reflexivity. This provides the opportunity “to reflect critically on the complexities of pedagogical [and research] relations, experiences and practices, with a particular focus on its relation to equity” (Burke et al., 2017, p. 49). As Burke et al. (2017) explain, “it is as much about generating spaces for critical reflexivity and praxis and new ways of knowing and understanding that otherwise might be unavailable and/or closed down” (p. 53). This highlights the importance of iterative reflexivity to draw attention to how the material and structural are “deeply entwined with the discursive, affective and symbolic, so that inequalities are lived, felt and embodied, often in subtle ways, within pedagogical spaces” (p. 53). Although many of us ‘sense’ this (Webb & Gulson, 2013), without spaces and opportunities that help us to analyse our assumptions and practices, we do not fully engage with this problem.

So rather than continuing forms of research and (e)valuation that serve the middle and highest deciles in society, we are seeking to develop it in the field with those practitioner/educator-experts. We draw on a broad range of expertise from research about equity in higher education to consider and question our own approaches, practices and judgements that might inadvertently creep into our work because we are socio-politically implicated, sentient beings (Sayer, 2011), all with our own experiences and assumptions. It is important to be reflexive in order to think through the effects of the taken-for-granted, of language, and of our views. Our capabilities are relationally produced. As Appadurai (2004) argues, the very capacity for us to aspire is developed in socio-cultural contexts and in our relationships with others. Without recognition from others, it is almost impossible to sustain our aspirations; without others who take the time to recognise and encourage us, it is very difficult to feel capable and to flourish (Fraser, 1997). For ‘we can’t be what we can’t see’ (Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes & Thomas, 2014) and *in order to be, we must be seen*. It is through relationships that capabilities emerge (Bennett & Burke, 2017; Burke, Bennett, Burgess & Gray, 2015) and possibilities are co-created (May, 2003).

The writing program reflects our commitment to widening the kinds of outcomes valued in higher education. As a case in point, as Fuller explains in her paper about a program for care leavers, the majority of program participants who did not continue their study in higher education “did so after choosing to explore other options for career or study ... [and] all expressed that they felt able to make this decision after having the support to experience university and to decide what was best for them” (p. 52). Drawing on research about study-to-work transitions for students from low

socioeconomic backgrounds, Whitney and Purchase also argue in this Issue that the ‘value’ of higher education should not be reduced to narrow outcomes and timeframes (also see Bennett & Burke, 2017; Bunn, Bennett & Burke, 2018). They argue that “the relevance of an undergraduate degree to employment percolate over time, undermining the ability of an early post-graduation survey to effectively evaluate the perceived labour market benefit of a tertiary qualification” (p. 86). Citing Richardson et al. (2016), Whitney and Purchase argue that existing graduate survey categories are ‘out of date’ and “do not reflect the diversity of employment opportunity graduates engage in, including working multiple part-time roles” (pp. 86-87). Reducing the value of higher education to narrow decontextualised outcomes, as they are defined in many of the quantitative forms of measurement that currently dominate the field, is a strange paradox of the current marketised university and its ‘academic capitalism’ (Bunn et al., 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Of the 2017 Australian writing program group, all but two participants produced a [poster](#) (with two participants collaborating on the same project/poster) and, as would be expected regarding the investment of time and focus required, and the differences in time and developments involved for journal reviews and processes, some of the participants are yet to have their papers published. Six have chosen to publish in this Special Issue, four have been delayed because of work or personal developments, one has their paper under review for another journal, two more have published papers in other journals (one of them based on a similar project with another team but not the specific approach developed in the writing program), and one project approach has been utilised to redesign approaches across an institution and featured for its importance in national media. As anyone involved in publishing journal articles knows, they take time and the processes are highly variable depending on the project, journal, reviews, and individual contexts.

In the UK, over sixty people attended a one day launch event in London in September 2016 and, following a competitive application process in November 2016, 21 participants started the one year program (representing 14 universities and three organisations supporting widening participation to, or success in, higher education). The participants were supported throughout the year by 14 academic mentors. Seventeen [posters](#) were presented at a one day event in March 2018, hosted by Sheffield Hallam University. A final dissemination event in September 2017 included 16 seminar papers presented by the programmes' mentees as well as five workshops delivered by the mentors. These workshops covered writing the next paper, disseminating widening participation research, and getting published. The event was opened by Sir Les Ebdon the former Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, OFFA, and attracted over 100 delegates. Five papers are included in a special edition of the *Journal of Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, published by the UK's Open University. Further papers have been published in other journals with the remaining papers in the process of submission. Many of the mentees had rarely been afforded the opportunity to explore how they thought about themselves as widening participation practitioners, or as evaluators, or of the times in which these identities may be in conflict.

A particular concern for participants was how to reconcile strongly held commitments to social justice within the context of the neoliberal politics and practices which surround what they do as practitioners or as evaluators (Wilkins & Burke, 2015). This opportunity for reflexive conversation also helped to shape the group's identities as writers. After all, “Writing is deeply tied to identity. Writing is a matter in which concerns about who we are, and how we matter to others, are entangled with what we write about. In other words, the ‘content’ of our writing is bound up with our perceptions and experiences of what we mean to ourselves and what we think we mean to others” (Taylor & Stevenson, 2017, p. 101). As they began to develop their writing identities, the group adopted the term ‘pracademic’ which they used to describe their evolving sense of occupying the

space between being practitioners and academics. In short, as Gino Graziani, one of the mentees recently wrote: “The real strength of the programme was that it treated practitioners with respect, and the importance of our tacit knowledge was recognised and even celebrated by academics. This felt like a properly balanced meeting of these two threads of widening participation work and created a space for important experiences to be captured and articulated.”

It is important that educators, practitioners, researchers and policymakers understand that educational and research conventions in higher education, as well as the assumptions and judgments we often make, unwittingly reproduce inequalities (Burke, 2012). Thus, people must be supported with opportunities to participate in research-informed reflexive forms of development to avoid reproducing inadvertent misrecognitions and to develop practices/research that enable inclusive development for all people. Iteratively (re)developing our capability for improving future possibilities and experiences for more people can be enabled through a more contextually attuned, relationally engaged and respectful approach across all areas of higher education.

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