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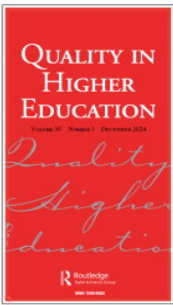
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Citation:

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To cite this article: Su-ming Khoo, Owen Harney, Michael Hogan, Paul Prinsloo, Anne Algers, Dina Belluigi, Chris Brink, Lucy-Anne Buckley, Ronelle Carolissen, Ming Cheng, Catherine Cronin, Laura Czerniewicz & Sharon Stein (18 Oct 2024): Connecting the challenges of quality and equality in higher education using the collective intelligence approach: findings from an international expert panel, *Quality in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/13538322.2024.2357866](https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2024.2357866)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2024.2357866>



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Published online: 18 Oct 2024.



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Connecting the challenges of quality and equality in higher education using the collective intelligence approach: findings from an international expert panel

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of phase one of the B-CAUSE project, an international project designed to connect equity and quality in higher education. Expert stakeholders worked together using collective intelligence methods to develop a shared understanding of (1) key features of equity-focused quality higher education, (2) barriers to equity-focused quality higher education and (3) options for overcoming these barriers. Results highlight the potential transformative dimension to equity-focused, quality higher education, including responsiveness to students, participatory design, pluralism and openness and the educational imperative to promote equity in practice. The barriers and options generated by experts focused on institutional resources and supports, excellence-equity tensions, systemic norms and pressures, reflective complexity, awareness and empathy and student supports. The collective intelligence of experts provides the basis for ongoing research, strategy and pedagogical or curricular innovation as part of the B-CAUSE project and other international efforts to foster equity-focused, quality higher education.

KEYWORDS

Quality education; equality; equity; collective intelligence; reduced inequalities

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Introduction

As higher education institutions trend towards status competition and improving international rankings, excellence and quality are key goals driving organisational activity. Indeed, quality is a defining aspect of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, *Quality Education* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2022). At the same time, systemic inequalities are widespread in higher education. In recent years, higher education has been rocked by civic action challenging systemic inequalities, most visibly the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements in South Africa (Booyesen, 2016), and Black Lives Matter and decolonising higher education initiatives (Jansen & Achebe, 2019; Bhambra *et al.*, 2018). These campaigns are connected to longstanding agendas to promote the rights of minoritised people, counter gender discrimination and improve accessibility and outcomes in, and through, higher education. Widespread protests reflect deeper epistemic crises of knowledge and authority within higher education and across society (Richardson, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). South Africa has been at the epicentre of contestation, as post-apartheid transformation demands inclusive, rights-based development and citizenship. Despite widening access and participation, inequalities remain. Curriculum contestation and demands to redress inequalities are issues of high national concern, with implications for the entire Sub-Saharan region and the wider global context (Khoo, 2017). Sustaining higher education as a global public good remains challenging in the context of defunding, instrumentalisation and narrowing of educational purposes, marketisation and internationalisation (OECD, 2007). These challenges have been further exacerbated by the recent global pandemic, economic stagnation, inflation and climate crisis (Belluigi *et al.*, 2022). Instrumentalisation concerns the treatment of education purely as means. It is connected with the narrowing of educational purposes as it focuses on specific, often economic and individualistic objectives, neglecting or excluding critical questions about broader purposes or ends, especially collective, ethical and public goals.

Concepts of quality are contested in higher education (Tam, 2001; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Unterhalter, 2019) and ongoing collective reflective engagement by higher education institutions is necessary to coordinate salient goals and sustain efforts to deliver quality education. This article presents phase one of an international project that seeks to connect equality and quality in higher education, *Building Collaborative Approaches to University Strategies against Exclusion in Ireland and Africa* (B-CAUSE). The project seeks to substantiate SDG 4, *Quality Education*, by bringing equality (and equity) into the conceptualisation and practice of quality in higher education, thus orienting quality in higher education towards SDG 10, *Reduced Inequalities*. Here, equality and equity are jointly used as starting points orienting reflective

engagement and design thinking: recognising the equal standing and dignity of persons as foundational (equality), while enacting fair treatment and resource distribution, given that individuals and groups are differently positioned, requiring diverse accommodations to enjoy substantive equality (equity). Three main dimensions of equality are employed, equality of opportunity, equality for all and equality on average across social groups (Espinoza, 2007, p. 345–349), in relation to available resources, access, survival, output and outcome.

B-CAUSE begins by asking how a system of equality-based and equity-focused quality might be fostered in higher education. Equity-focused quality is frequently discussed in relation to curriculum and pedagogy (Harvey & Williams, 2010) but discussions of quality should not be limited to discussions of equitable good practice in teaching and learning (Felten, 2013). Broader national and international equality agendas concern the protection, promotion and fulfilment of people's fundamental equality and rights (Martin, 2009). This project's scope thus extends to broader questions about why and how normative equality and equitable practices matter to quality education, beyond quality understood through the lenses of performance management and accountability, taking in questions of values, ethics and the public good (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2018), as this article reflects on options for the design of equity-focused, quality higher education.

Advancing dialogue on equity-focused quality

Researchers, practitioners and policymakers tend to hold different perspectives on quality (Tam, 2001; Harvey & Williams, 2010). Common conceptualisations include quality as: excellence; value for money; fitness for purpose and transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993). In the South African context, 'transformation' holds specific (but broadening) meaning which different institutions interpret differently. However, addressing racism and sexism are two important objectives within broad interpretations of South African university transformation (Luescher *et al.*, 2023). Higher education quality is institutionalised through quality assurance systems focused on output, productivity, standards, metrics and standardised assessment. Reviews of relevant research highlight uncertainties regarding the impact of quality assurance systems on quality enhancement (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Williams, 2016) and it has been argued that ongoing dialogue is needed on what quality means, including how quality relates to equity and equality (Martin, 2010).

Conceptualisations of quality in higher education often focus on excellence, typically measured using competitive and contested indicators of performance, for example, the Times Higher Education and QS rankings (Brankovic, 2021). Instead of 'Is this good?', scholars have argued that 'Is this better than others?' is the question induced by ranking systems, reflecting

élitism and exclusiveness (Morrison, 1998). Commercial ranking systems have become widespread (Brankovic, 2021) as higher education has become more media-driven (Stack, 2015), despite critiques of their questionable methodologies, inappropriateness and inaccuracy of indicators, and the commercial motives of the rankings industry (Harvey, 2008; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017; Brankovic, 2021).

In the search for quality, the preoccupation with excellence may result in a narrowing of teaching and learning (Skelton, 2005) and can have negative consequences when applied to research. Over-focus on research productivity and output has led to institutions being criticised for producing too little or too much research, or for 'gaming the system' (for example, maximising 'credit in the eyes of research assessors, while downplaying other research goals' (SAHRC, nd), potentially compromising quality). Research assessment systems are questioned for devaluing other desired outcomes such as social impact and collective, transdisciplinary efforts to address important issues such as public health, climate change or poverty (SAHRC, nd).

Excellence might alternatively be interpreted using moral or ethical values and goals. For example, by ameliorating economic, social or cultural inequalities, enhancing individual or collective wellbeing or flourishing, or enhancing environmental, social or economic sustainability (Nixon, 2013; Wood & Su, 2017), or alternatively associated with education and research for the public good (Walker & McLean, 2013; Walker, 2018; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2018). While performative excellence (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2018; Brankovic, 2021) is enthusiastically standardised and assessed, there are significant risks of over-simplification, missing opportunities to excel in diverse strengths, effectively and helpfully assess wider performance and providing accountability for valuable work that is done.

It is a challenge to combine the goals of performance accountability and equitable transformation. For example, the goal of *maintaining standards* may stand in tension with the goal of *widening participation*. There may be a tension between 'transformation' as an individual, personal journey through learning (which may achieve excellent results) and broader social transformation. The idea of quality as transformation can be related to broader learning for transformation, that comes from broadening inclusion to include staff and students with diverse characteristics. However, broadening inclusion may bring about fears that 'standards may fall' if entry requirements are reduced, or if alternative pathways for admission are enabled for some target groups (Brink, 2010; Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2023). Such fears may engender resistance to inclusive and equitable programmes or policies when such programmes are seen as threats to quality (Meyer *et al.*, 2013). There are concerns about increasing numbers of less-prepared students; however, differentiated levels of preparedness do not in themselves affect academic standards (Whiteford *et al.*, 2013). When interpreted too narrowly, the excellence focus

may crowd out broader dimensions of equity and fairness (Brink, 2018) and neglect fundamentals of purpose, inclusion, critical independence and creativity, all of which are crucial to scientific, cultural and public value (Khoo, 2023). These tensions become more challenging in complex, 'post-normal' scientific contexts, where facts are uncertain, values are in dispute, stakes are high and decisions are urgent (Funtowicz, 2021).

Advancing dialogue and understanding about equity-focused, quality higher education implies integrating views from diverse stakeholders. To understand and synthesise these perspectives, this project began by using a collective intelligence (CI) methodology to engage a group of expert stakeholders in various subfields of higher education, and across international contexts, to develop a shared understanding of (1) key features of equity-focused quality higher education, (2) barriers to equity-focused quality higher education and (3) options for overcoming these barriers. The CI work reported in this article became a starting point for a second phase of institution-level dialogues on equity-focused quality in two higher education institutions in Ireland and South Africa, which in turn led to the development of a series of small projects informed by local CI work in each institution.

Methodology

Participants

An international panel of experts consisting of 12 members (9 female, 3 male) was recruited, representing key domains in higher education, including quality in higher education, development education, equality studies, decolonial pedagogies, global curriculum design, open educational practice, quality assurance, philosophy and practice of higher education. The research team identified, and extended email invitations to, experts based in Ireland, United Kingdom, Sweden, South Africa and Canada.

Design

This study used a CI design methodology to engage expert stakeholders. Based on Warfield's (1994) science of generic design, the CI process of systematic facilitation and problem solving helps groups integrate contributions from individuals with diverse views, backgrounds and perspectives, with outcomes in mind. CI has been used in diverse projects, including the development of a national well-being index (Hogan *et al.*, 2015), societal mobilisation for marine sustainability (Domegan *et al.*, 2016) and community peacebuilding (Broome, 2002). CI was selected as an appropriate approach due to the strong epistemological contestation and plurality characterising higher education studies (Tam, 2001; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Unterhalter, 2019). In the context of COVID-19 travel restrictions, the CI process was adapted for

delivery online (Hogan *et al.*, 2022) to facilitate international engagement from the panel.

Stages in the CI process

The CI process had three stages (A–C). The first stage (A) involved gathering advance input from the panel of experts to clarify key elements of equity-focused, quality higher education from their perspective and to identify barriers to equity-focused, quality higher education. This advance input provided the basis for a two-day online CI session, which involved (B) developing a structural model describing relations between barriers and (C) generating options for overcoming barriers to equity-focused quality higher education.

A. Advance input: key elements of equity-focused, quality higher education and barriers to equity-focused, quality higher education

The experts were contacted in advance of the session by email (see [Appendix 1](#)) with a request to generate five ideas in response to the following trigger question:

What are key elements in the design of equity-focused, quality higher education?

The panel members identified 45 elements, which were submitted by email. These were arranged into 11 categories by the facilitation team using the paired comparison method (Warfield & Cárdenas, 1994; [Figure 1](#)). Through a second email submission, 2 weeks later, experts were asked to consider each of the 11 categories and associated elements before responding to a second trigger question:

What are barriers to the design of equity-focused, quality higher education?

Panel members were asked to generate five barrier statements in response to this question. Submitted barriers were collated and categorised by the facilitation team, resulting in six categories, containing 44 barriers. The categorised barriers were circulated to panel members, who were asked to identify seven barriers that they believed to be most critical. In advance of an online CI session, the selected barriers were rank-ordered by the facilitation team based on collective voting by the experts.

B. Online CI (Day 1): developing a structural model of relations between barriers

The online CI session opened with a presentation of the categorised key elements in the design of equity-focused, quality higher education ([Figure 1](#)) and the categorised barriers to the design of equity-focused, quality higher education ([Figure 2](#)). Panel members were each invited to elaborate on barriers they had highlighted as critical.

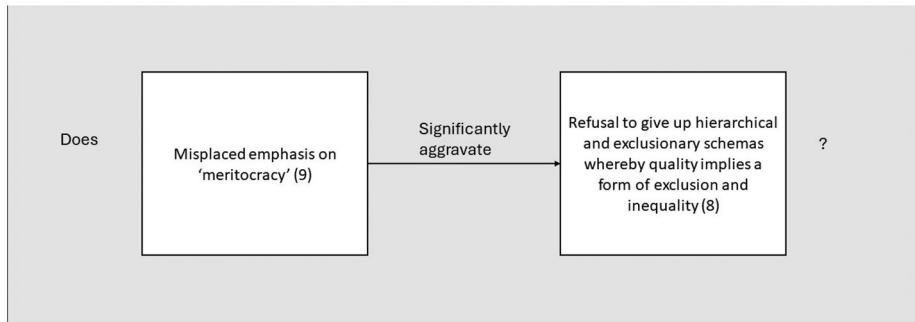


Figure 1. Sample relational question as displayed on screen during the interpretive structural modelling stage of the process.

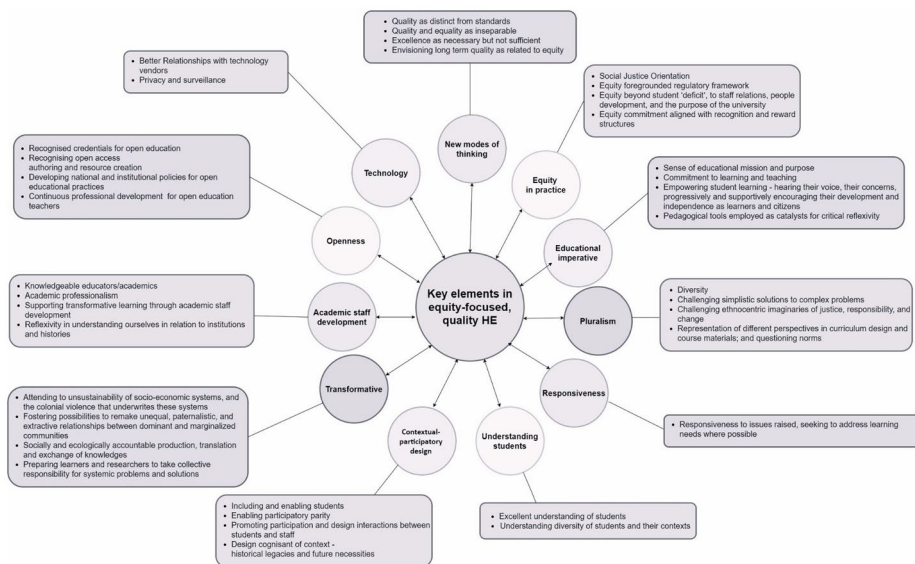


Figure 2. Key elements in equity-focused, quality higher education (HE).

Next, came the structuring of interdependencies between the top-ranked barriers, using interpretive structural modelling (ISM) (Warfield, 1976), a computer-assisted methodology that helps a group identify relationships among ideas and develop a structural model derived from a matrix mapping of all relations (Warfield, 1976).

In developing a structural model, a series of relational questions are generated by the ISM software. The relational questions were presented via Zoom screen sharing, so all panel members could view and deliberate on each relation. The questions took the following form (Figure 1):

In the context of understanding barriers to the design of equity-focused, quality higher education: ‘Does barrier A significantly aggravate barrier B?’

Using the ISM methodology, the group engaged in discussion about each relational question in turn and a vote was taken to determine the group's judgement about each relationship. A 'yes' vote is entered in the ISM software by a member of the facilitation team if a majority of the participants see a significant relationship between the pair of ideas; otherwise, 'no' is entered. All deliberations were recorded for further analysis to support interpretation of the structural model generated.

C. Online CI (Day 2): options for overcoming barriers

Day 2 of the CI work focused on idea generation and discussion in relation to options for overcoming barriers. The panel of experts was divided into three sub-groups, each of which focused on generating options in response to specific categories of barriers.

To facilitate idea generation, a modified version of the 'ideawriting' technique (Warfield & Cárdenas, 1994) was adapted for use online. Each sub-group was given access to a shared online spreadsheet, containing barrier statements and the categories to which they were assigned. Panel members engaged in silent idea generation, each typing their own options for overcoming the barriers, without yet discussing options with others in the sub-group. Panel members were instructed to read and consider all options drafted on the shared spreadsheet, while also adding their own. This process allows for a reduction in duplicate ideas, while also avoiding blocks associated with oral brainstorming techniques. After 15–20 minutes of idea generation, each sub-group was asked to review the full set of options generated for their category, and engage in discussion and clarification of options, with the aim of identifying three-to-five high-impact options. This process was then repeated with a second set of categories, such that all categories had been addressed across the full group.

Results

Based on the three stages of the CI process (A–C) described in the method section, a summary overview of the results is presented below. Key findings are further elaborated and contextualised in the Elements, barriers and options section below.

A. Advance input

A1. Key elements in the design of equity-focused, quality higher education

Experts identified 45 elements in the design of equity-focused, quality higher education. [Figure 2](#) provides a sample of key elements across 11 categories (see [Appendix 1](#) for the full set of elements).

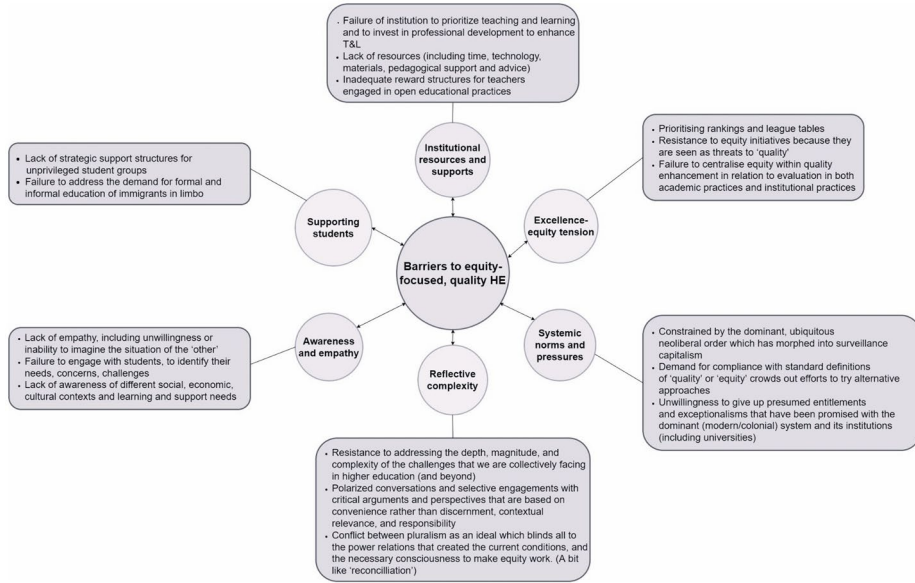


Figure 3. Barriers to equity-focused, quality higher education (HE).

A2. Barriers to the design of equity-focused, quality higher education

Experts generated 44 barriers to the design of equity-focused, quality higher education. These barriers were organised into six categories: (A) institutional resources and supports, (B) excellence-equity tension, (C) systemic norms and pressures, (D) reflective complexity, (E) awareness and empathy and (F) supporting students. Figure 3 presents a sample of barriers from each category (see Appendix 1 for the full set).

B. Interpretive structural modelling structuring

The ISM structure is presented in Figure 4. The structure should be read from left to right, with arrows indicating that barriers in the box to the left significantly aggravate barriers in the box to the right. When two or more barriers appear together in a box, these barriers are operating in a cycle (they significantly aggravate each other).

To the left of the model, at stage 1, there is one barrier, 'Prioritising rankings and league tables'. Based on the deliberation and voting of the panel of experts, this barrier is seen to significantly aggravate all other barriers in the structure. For example, when the question was posed during structuring, 'Does *Prioritising rankings and league tables* significantly aggravate *Lack of empathy, including unwillingness or inability to imagine the situation of the other?*', Panel members argued that, at the institutional level, moving up the league tables is generally considered to be of greater importance than equity-focused goals and, thus, the lack of empathy and inability to imagine the situation of others is exacerbated. The fact that issues around the

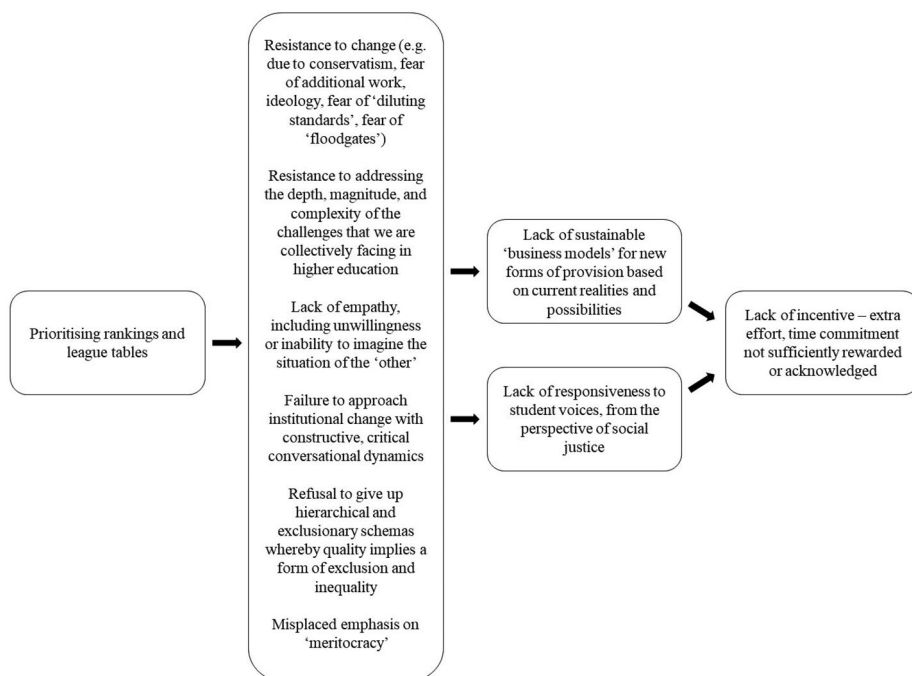


Figure 4. Interpretive structural modelling structure. Note: The figure is to be read from left to write. Arrows signify paths of significant aggravation.

prioritisation of rankings and league tables emerged as the primary driver in the structural model generated by the panel of experts is consistent with the view that such rankings have become inescapable (Brankovic, 2021), even as excellence is criticised for being too narrowly defined in the ranking measurement systems (Skelton, 2005). Additional arguments generated during ISM structuring are presented in the Elements, barriers and options section below.

C. Options for overcoming barriers

Figure 5 presents a sample of options generated and the barriers they are linked to. The full set of options can be found in Appendix 1 and are further elaborated in the discussion section below.

Elements, barriers and options for equity-focused, quality higher education

While quality education is internationally accepted as a fundamental goal of sustainable development, systemic inequalities are widespread and the concept of quality is increasingly contested in the context of ongoing higher education challenges and transformation (Tam, 2001; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Khoo, 2017). Using a CI methodology, the current project gathered

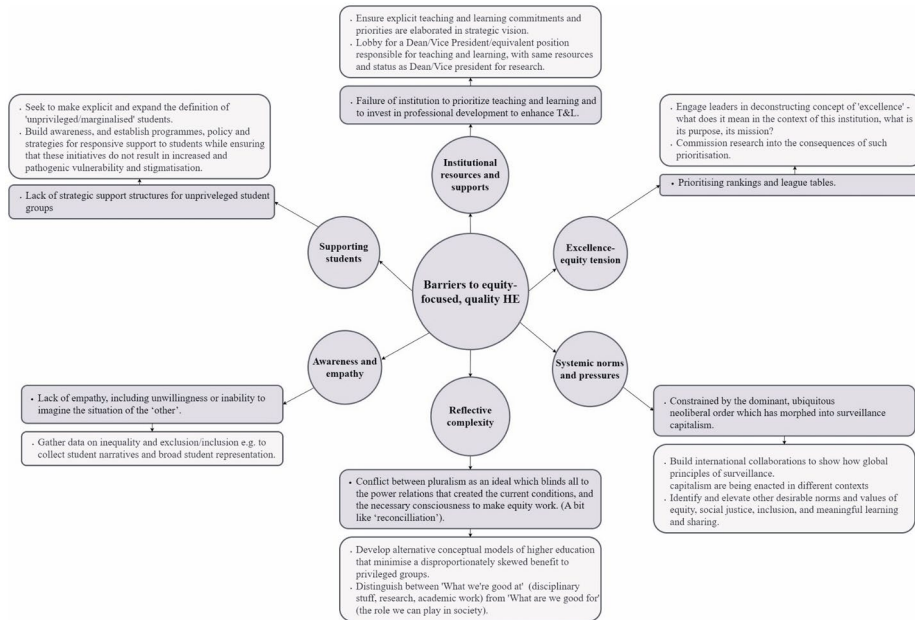


Figure 5. Barriers (darker shade) to equity-focused, quality higher education (HE), and options (lighter shade) for overcoming barriers.

inputs from a panel of experts to identify (a) elements in the design of equity-focused, quality higher education, (b) barriers to the design of equity-focused, quality higher education and (c) options for overcoming barriers.

Moving beyond quality as excellence

The experts identified 45 key elements in the design of equity-focused, quality higher education, across 11 categories. Consistent with recent scholarship noting that definitions of quality in higher education need to escape the problematic chasing of ‘world class excellence’ (Hazelkorn, 2014, 2015; Stack, 2015; Brankovic, 2021), panel members highlighted the importance of new modes of thinking and a transformative dimension to equity-focused, quality higher education. Key elements of equity-focused, quality higher education also included responsiveness and understanding students, along with the value of contextual-participatory design, elements that are further complemented by focus on pluralism and openness. Panel members emphasised the critical educational imperative associated with equity-focused, quality higher education, along with the need for a focus on equity in practice and requisite academic staff development and transformation in the use of technology. Overall, the panel of experts’ account of equity-focused, quality higher education provides a valuable perspective that supports an expanded view beyond narrow models of quality as excellence.

Barriers to equity-focused quality

After reflecting on the key elements of equity-focused, quality higher education, panel members worked to identify barriers to the design of equity-focused, quality higher education. A total of 44 barriers emerged across 6 categories: (A) institutional resources and supports, (B) excellence-equity tension, (C) systemic norms and pressures, (D) reflective complexity, (E) awareness and empathy and (F) supporting students. Using a collective voting and ranking procedure, a total of 10 barriers were selected for ISM structuring, allowing panel members to deliberate and further understand interdependencies between barriers. As noted above in the results section, 'Prioritising rankings and league tables' was argued by panel members to significantly aggravate all other barriers in the structure. This is consistent with a growing body of literature noting potential negative consequences of higher education ranking systems (Vidal & Ferreira, 2020).

At the second stage of the ISM structure, six barriers were seen by panel members to operate in a cyclical relationship. For example, in response to the question, '*Does Refusal to give up hierarchical and exclusionary schemas whereby quality implies a form of exclusion and inequality significantly aggravate Misplaced emphasis on meritocracy?*', it was argued that if an institution has a culture of hierarchical and exclusionary schemas, then this would reinforce a view of meritocracy where 'better' students are viewed as more deserving. Panel members argued that this aggravating relationship operates in the reverse direction also, noting that the emphasis on meritocracy gives licence to hierarchical and exclusionary schemas, and thus serves to maintain the *status quo*.

Another example of a cyclical relationship at stage 2 of the model is that between '*Failure to approach institutional change with constructive, critical conversational dynamics*' and '*Refusal to give up hierarchical and exclusionary schemas whereby quality implies a form of exclusion and inequality*'. It was argued that, if one does not engage with conversations in a constructive manner, it amounts to a continuous decision not to move beyond the *status quo* of hierarchical and exclusionary schemas. In the reverse direction, it was argued that such refusal to give up hierarchical and exclusionary schemas does significantly aggravates failure to approach institutional change with constructive, critical conversational dynamics. Such refusal weakens attempts to have constructive, critical conversations at the institutional level.

Elements at stage 2 in the ISM structure in turn significantly aggravate two barriers at stage 3. For example, panel members argued that '*Lack of empathy, including unwillingness or inability to imagine the situation of the "other"*' (stage 2 barrier) significantly aggravates '*Lack of sustainable "business models" for new forms of provision based on current realities and possibilities*' (stage 3 barrier). It was noted that, in the absence of a clear understanding of

people's experiences and needs, it is unlikely that needs for new forms of provision (new business models) would be recognised.

The final stage of the model contains one element '*Lack of incentive – extra effort, time commitment not sufficiently rewarded or acknowledged*'. This barrier is aggravated by all the other barriers to the left. For example, '*lack of responsiveness to student voices, from the perspective of social justice*' was seen to aggravate '*lack of incentive*'. It was argued that, if the higher education institution is not listening to student voices, to recognise their needs, then incentives or even opportunities are unlikely to be provided for staff to design initiatives, procedures or programmes responsive to student voices.

Options for overcoming barriers

Panel members generated a range of options for overcoming barriers. These options were generated in response to the six categories of barriers.

A. Institutional resources and supports

Barriers in the institutional resources and supports category included lack of time allocated to the design and development of equity-focused curricular material, as well as inadequacies in staff training, supports and incentives to develop such materials and content. Panel members generated options in response to these barriers (see [Appendix 1](#)), which were organised around three themes: (i) recognition and enablement, (ii) research and (iii) leadership.

Recognition and enablement

Recognition and enablement of equity-focused, quality higher education that addresses institutional resource and support barriers requires policies, programmes and resources devoted to sustained investment in equity-focused quality. This includes a focus on collaborative professional development, open educational practices, secure hiring practices and dedicated teaching and learning supports within universities.

Research: advocacy and strategic focus

Panel members argued for more research with an advocacy and strategic focus that seeks to enhance equity-focused, quality higher education. This requires activity that is supported at the institutional level by principles of equity-focused and decolonised professional development, as well as policies that directly support open educational practices. Panel members also highlighted co-created academic professional development with ongoing engagement and feedback from students. These activities are seen as central to the ongoing research and data gathering to assess the impact and influence of professional development activities.

Leadership

The third theme focused on leadership and reiterated the importance of elevating excellent role models. Panel members noted the need to lobby for a dean and vice-president equivalent position responsible for teaching and learning, with similar resources and status to the dean and vice-president for research.

Together, this emphasis on an enabling and supportive framework, an evidence-based approach to advocacy and strategy, and the importance of institutional leadership in driving equity-focused initiatives is consistent with previous research on diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions (Claeys-Kulik *et al.*, 2019), as well as South African higher education institutions. The Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation at Nelson Mandela University and the Higher Education and Human Development Research Group at University of the Free State, are two such examples of strategic posts created to influence transformation of higher education at the whole-institution level through such institutional resources and supports, including structures for enablement and recognition, a focus on research and advocacy and on leadership.

B. Excellence-equity tension

The excellence-equity tension category includes barriers relating to conceptualisations of quality as excellence and the implications of these conceptualisations for equity. Barriers include prioritising higher education rankings and league tables (Harvey, 2008), problematic assumptions about meritocracy (Sobuwa & McKenna, 2019), fear-driven excellence-focus, for example, including the fear of falling standards (Brink, 2010) and the failure to centrally situate equity within quality enhancement initiatives (Pretorius, 2003).

When working to generate options and address the excellence-quality tensions, panel members endorsed a questioning approach, asking '*How does it play out?*'. What informs the tension? Who has a vested interest in systems remaining the same? How is the tension experienced?

Specific options focused on the need to (a) research, (b) influence and (c) educate. Panel members proposed institutional, national and international research into the social and higher education imaginary surrounding meritocracy, standards, excellence and quality, in an effort to understand vested interests and confront them with an equity lens. In relation to influence, panel members argued for the development of comprehensive and responsive frameworks (including policies, toolkits and resources), along with organisational structures and processes for evaluation of quality as equity. In efforts to educate, panel members called for the creation of an educational campaign to address constructed or imagined tensions between excellence and equity.

Notably, examples of these types of options and initiatives in action can be seen at European and African higher education institutions. At the University of Galway, for example, an initiative has been put in place to decolonise the curriculum as part of the university's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy and programme 2022–2027. An example at a national level is the Transformation Barometer developed for Universities South Africa (Keet & Swartz, 2015).

C. Systemic norms and pressures

Barriers in this category include underfunding of public education, concerns about surveillance capitalism and placing all the responsibility for equity initiatives on academics, while institutional barriers are not addressed. Other barriers focus on how resistance, conflict and unwillingness to change play out at the systemic level.

Options generated by the panel of experts highlighted the need for collaboration, open dialogue, questioning and incentivised debate concerning the complex systemic barriers addressed in this category, as well as a focus on accountability, transparency and appropriate resourcing of and compliance with regulatory bodies. Panel members also highlighted the need to promote an equity-focused mindset, involving greater discussion of, and education around, equity issues; the desire and capacity to challenge current conceptualisations of quality and equity and openness to new models, including identifying and elevating norms of equity, social justice, inclusion and meaningful learning and sharing. Panel members also noted that promoting an equity-focused mindset involves establishing a dialogue with professional accreditation bodies regarding course content and new directions in professional disciplines. This call for open dialogue and discussion of equity is consistent with other approaches to using departmental dialogues (Holmes *et al.*, 2016) and pedagogical partnerships (Cook-Sather, 2020) to create environments to challenge and rebuild through positive interactions.

D. Reflective complexity

The reflective complexity category consists of barriers related to how equity in higher education is considered, discussed and addressed (or not). It includes the challenge of problematic or unproductive conversational dynamics, which are not conducive to meaning-making, consensus-building or addressing the depth, magnitude and complexity of higher education challenges.

Options determined by the panel of experts for overcoming barriers included the collection of solid data to highlight the seriousness of these issues to leadership. This allows the inadequacy of simplistic solutions to be

highlighted against the backdrop of solid data. Panel members also proposed fostering a culture of open conversation where contrary opinions can be voiced.

E. Awareness and empathy

The awareness and empathy category includes barriers that stem from lack of awareness, empathy, responsiveness, disregard or unwillingness to engage with key equity issues.

Panel members described options across a multi-stage process, which begins at the modular level, with a gathering of data on inequality and exclusion or inclusion. This involves engaging with students and staff regarding their impressions of teaching and learning: gathering data that helps to understand student's life context, background and challenges. This data supports a situation analysis and the subsequent production of a conceptual framework that informs reflection and planning. Both data-gathering and processes of reflection and planning are critical here. As outlined by Ward (2022), it is imperative that inequalities and inequitable practices in higher education are critically examined, which includes educators and higher education institution systems examining their role in creating or maintaining inequalities and inequities.

The second stage, involves reflection on existing approaches to teaching and learning, based on data gathering and analysis. This reflection provides a space for the consideration of alternative, better ways of conducting the work of higher education and articulating higher education's goals and ways of working. Once the higher education community is reasonably sure that they have a valid, locally-generated narrative about its core purposes, the next step to engage is strategic planning: setting out a mission, a vision, objectives and goals. Panel members emphasised the need to avoid treating strategic planning as a formulaic, mechanistic process but rather focus on rethinking institutional mission, including the educational, research, engagement and other work that is required of higher education, relating planning and implementation to the roles and values of the institution.

The third phase involves finding a champion to support and promote the strategic plan. During this stage, units for academic development collaborate with deans to identify champions, for example, champions of teaching and learning methods and approaches appropriate for a diverse student body. The final phase involves a process of continually evaluating the new approach with awareness and empathy and making adaptations as necessary.

F. Supporting students

The supporting students category highlights the failure to address demands for formal and informal education among immigrants in limbo, as well as a

lack of strategic support for unprivileged students once they have entered higher education.

Options responding to barriers included more research focusing on broadening and expanding the definitions of unprivileged and marginalised, as well as research on horizontal and vertical inequalities, privileges and forms of oppression. Strategic and policy-oriented options and initiatives to reduce vulnerability and stigmatisation were suggested, explicitly linking education for persons not covered by national law to institutional definitions and missions for equity and quality. These options echo prior research that has called for more research into the experiences of unprivileged students (Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010), as well as initiatives aimed at reducing vulnerability and tackling stigmatisation (Ngabaza *et al.*, 2018).

Conclusion

This article presents the first phase of an international project designed to connect equality and quality in higher education. Central to the B-CAUSE project is an effort to coordinate and substantiate SGD 4, *Quality Education*, and SDG 10, *Reduced Inequalities*. The panel of experts highlighted key elements of equity-focused quality higher education and recognised the complex set of interdependent barriers that need to be overcome to move higher education beyond the pursuit of inequitable rankings-based excellence and towards equity-focused quality. Using a collective intelligence approach, the B-CAUSE panel of experts generated a valuable set of options that help to frame ongoing dialogue and project work in equitable, quality higher education. International efforts to advance equity-focused, quality higher education will require project work that incorporates organisational culture and infrastructure initiatives. Grounded in sustainable system activities and complemented by effort to build national and international research collaborations, the international panel of experts represents a network that can work to enhance an international understanding of higher education challenges, address tensions and inform strategies. Strategic and research activities will be complemented by a focus on pedagogical training, co-creation of new programmes and supporting and rewarding excellent equity-focused teaching. Together, these activity domains converge on the provision of responsive support to students and ongoing evaluation and adaptation of higher education systems and activities to make them equitable.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project is funded by the Irish Research Council, grant 2019/COALESCE/88.

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Appendix 1: Supplementary materials

Full set of categorised barriers and options

A. Institutional resources and supports

A1. Failure of institution to prioritise teaching and learning and to invest in professional development to enhance T&L

- Lobby for a Dean/Vice-President/equivalent position responsible for teaching and learning, with same resources and status as Dean/Vice President for Research.
- Ensure explicit T&L commitments and priorities are elaborated in strategic vision.
- Lobby for more resources and posts to support academic professional development.
- Prevent deterioration of academic and professional technical staffing, advocate for permanent non-precarious academic and technical support posts.
- Develop a model for regular student engagement on educational equity issues: NB not just more student feedback on existing courses (also A4).

A2. Inadequate academic/instructor time (and other resources needed) to adequately do curriculum design and improvement

- Recognise curriculum development in workload allocation process.
- Ensure the workload model allocates time and credit to curriculum design and improvement.

A3. Lack of resources (including time, technology, materials, pedagogical support and advice)

- At every administrative level ensure time and resources are allocated for curriculum development and improvement and academic professional development.
- Elevate the contribution of excellent role models and mentors who provide pedagogical support and advice.
- Establish a dedicated support unit for staff training and development in teaching and learning and ensure that staff training and development is factored into workload (also A4).

A4. Lack of knowledge and training—as an educator, how do I even know how to begin to address this issue effectively, or where to start?

- Introduce Teaching Fellowships equivalent in status to Research and Study Leave
- Include teaching-related professional development activities in acceptable Research and Study leave plans.
- Ensure that pedagogical training programmes/certification include modules on educational equity as standard.

A5. Demand for teacher training in how to engage in norm critique

- Prioritise teaching development at a strategic level, with required CPD (also A4, A8)
- Focus on subject-based knowledge (also A4).

A6. Lack of incentive—extra effort, time commitment not sufficiently rewarded or acknowledged

- Put in place measurable criteria/indicators as part of the career progression process which validate excellent and innovative teaching (in a broad sense).
- Introduce a Distinguished Teacher Award with all the bells, whistles and fanfare. Ensure that this award includes criteria regarding equity.
- Recognise equity-related initiatives in workload, promotional plans, access to leave and other supports, and institutional award schemes (also A7).

A7. Inadequate reward structures for teachers engaged in open educational practices

- Insert support for open educational practices into as many existing institutional policies as possible (e.g. Intellectual Property policies, eLearning policies, quality assurance policies, etc.).
- Develop a recognised track within research and teaching pathways for recognising and rewarding creation of open resources and teaching, particularly equity and justice focused activities.

A8. Limitations of current ‘academic development’ as professional socialisation to dominant norms of quality

- Ensure commitment to critical and reflexive academic/professional development within professional development and support.
- Prioritise teaching development at a strategic level, with required CPD (also A4, A5).

A9. Lack of incentives to internationalise curriculum for better quality of teaching and learning

No options generated

Category as a whole

- Dedicated permanent academic roles at a senior level to develop teaching & learning generally & support staff development, but also to focus on equity.
 - Invest in research and data gathering regarding the impact, influence and consequence of professional development.
 - Insert mechanisms for student feedback and student co-creation of academic professional development programmes.
 - Develop an institutional position paper on the principles of equity-focused and/or decolonised professional development.
 - At national level, prioritise, resource and reward collaborative professional development programmes.
-

B. Excellence-equity tension

B1. Fetishising 'excellence'

- Interrogate and change incentive schemes that are currently focused on and sustaining the fetishisation of excellence - whether with regard to research, teaching or whatever. The purpose of this is to not create alternative prizes and incentives but rather to change the core of the incentives that sustain and perpetuate the fetishisation of excellence - or the cult of excellence.
- Conduct an institutional and possibly a cross-institutional (national) investigation of all the instances where 'excellence', 'quality' and 'equity' are used, the discourses surrounding these with the purpose of understanding the depth and implications of the fetishisation of 'excellence'.
- Engage leaders in deconstructing concept of 'excellence'—what does it mean in context of this institution, its purpose, its mission? (also B2).

B2. Prioritising rankings and league tables

- Conduct an institutional and possibly a cross-institutional (national) investigation into national and institutional responses pertaining to the prioritisation of rankings and league tables—the imaginaries that inform these, the ideologies that sustain and perpetuate them and institutional and national alternatives.
- Commission research into the consequences of such prioritisation.
- Conduct research on whether the 'new' league tables for 'impact' and SDGs are having an effect on equity at a substantive level.

B3. Misplaced emphasis on 'meritocracy'

- Create an educational campaign for policy-developers, leadership, academic developers (i.e. those who 'implement' change and are the ones to 'place emphasis') about problems with meritocracy and better understanding of equity.
- Organise and research the social and higher education imaginary surrounding meritocracy, standards, excellence and quality (including evolution of these concepts) with the purpose to understand the vested interests and strategies to confront these with an equity lens.
- Through research—expose the 'ugly truths' of meritocracy in equality projects around the world in HE.

B4. Resistance to equity initiatives because they are seen as threats to 'quality'

- Ensure the urgency of this moment is not reduced to moving teaching & exams online but about ensuring both quality and equity, highlighting their interrelationship (also B5).
- Use/re-use/promote examples of open education that demonstrate achieving goals of both equity and quality (also B5).
- Develop the capacity within individuals and at institutional level to stay assured in the face of the uncertainty of changes in quality (also B5).

B5. Fear that standards will drop

- Conduct research into the history of notions of disciplinary excellence and specifically standards, e.g. Engineering and Accounting accreditation, professional bodies have prescribed standards.
- Conduct institutional, cross-institutional and possibly (inter)national research/conversations into perceptions pertaining to the fear of standards dropping in the nexus of quality and equity.

B6. Failure to centralise equity within quality enhancement in relation to evaluation in both academic practices and institutional practices

- Develop comprehensive frameworks (including policies, toolkits, resources) for evaluation (at various levels) with specific focus on evaluation and high-level levers which fund/focus/reward/incentivise/hold accountable such evaluation processes. Quality as equity (fitness for purpose) needs to be linked. Formative and summative evaluation.
- Change current Quality Assurance departments to Quality and Equity Departments/portfolios to oversee, operationalise and enhance quality AND equity—nice as long it does not get read as quality vs equity but quality AS equity.

B7. Unwillingness to alter the hidden curriculum of social formations around quality as exclusion

- Promote understanding of the problematics of the hidden curriculum of current concepts of quality—dissemination of research into this often does not feed into academic development/institutional transformation projects.
 - Develop critical capacities in departments/schools/institutions to investigate, interrogate hidden curricula of social formations around quality as exclusion.
 - Develop strategies to promote new imaginaries of more just etc. social formations from equity approaches.
 - Conduct interdisciplinary research on the social formations of those students and staff participating in more equitable educational practices.
-

C. Systemic norms and pressures

C1. Constrained by the dominant, ubiquitous neoliberal order which has morphed into surveillance capitalism

- Build international collaborations to show how global principles of surveillance capitalism are being enacted in different contexts.
- Identify and elevate other desirable norms and values of equity, social justice, inclusion and meaningful learning and sharing.
- Research and expose and analyse and make sense of the ways that surveillance capitalism is playing out in education, and specifically how it plays out in terms of equity and existing inequalities.

C2. Systemic barriers—e.g., external professional accreditation requirements that dictate course content or assessment methods

- Change and update professional regulatory requirements.
- Establish a regular ongoing two-way dialogue with professional accreditation bodies regarding course content e.g., new directions in profession/discipline seminar, timed to cycle into accreditation.
- Systemic barriers—e.g. external professional accreditation requirements that dictate course content or assessment methods.

C3. Out-dated regulatory environment has failed to keep up with the demands of the time and the opportunities of technological affordances

- Resource regulatory bodies appropriately to enable them to keep up with rapidly changing pedagogical possibilities and to undertake anticipatory and future-focused scenario "planning".

C4. Failure of most national systems to properly fund equitable public education

- Leverage the events and lessons of the Covid19 experience to reshape the funding of education going forward.
- National political lobbying and campaigns to reverse defunding of public education.

C5. Resistance to change, e.g., due to conservatism, fear of additional work, ideology, fear of 'diluting standards,' fear of 'floodgates'

- Provide opportunities and incentives to debate relevant state of the art for disciplines and professions.
- Provide incentives to encourage more equitable practices (individual incentives might include awards, recognition in promotion systems etc., institutional incentives might include funding or institutional awards, e.g., at national level).
- Provide ongoing education and discussion around equity issues.

C6. Demand for compliance with standard definitions of 'quality' or 'equity' crowds out efforts to try alternative approaches

- Lobby for inclusion of sections allowing the discussion of wider issues and challenges within compliance rubrics and especially in follow-up and accountability actions
- Reward experimentation and allow failure.
- Utilise current crises and extraordinary conditions as opportunities to reopen a conversation about excellence and equity.
- Challenge current conceptualisations of quality and equity and offer alternative models—at institutional policy level, in pedagogical training events, in research, at local level.
- Find an institutional champion.
- Offer institutional awards or recognition for developing new ways to promote educational equity.

C7. Unwillingness to give up presumed entitlements and exceptionalisms that have been promised with the dominant (modern/colonial) system and its institutions (including universities)

No options generated

C8. Demand on academics to bear all responsibility for equity within teaching while refusing to address a 'hidden curriculum' that reinforces the acceptance of inequity

- Explicitly refer to statutory basis for responsibility to actively challenge inequity, e.g., Public Sector Duty in Ireland.

C9. Lack of sustainable "business models" for new forms of provision based on current realities and possibilities

- Demand transparency and accountability for business model in place so that resourcing, benefits and costs are known.

C10. Lack of political will in institutions to provide support

No options generated

C11. Conflict between public good purpose of the university and the university as a neoliberal corporate organisation

- Where mission of the public good university is in place, champion, elaborate and exemplify at different levels/units.

C12. Resistance to focusing on good teaching and foregrounding research as the most desirable academic activity

- Encourage HE leadership to point to examples of focus on good teaching, foregrounding research.
 - Ensure teaching receives equal recognition to research in promotional schemes.
-

D. Reflective complexity

D1. Resistance to addressing the depth, magnitude, and complexity of the challenges that we are collectively facing in higher education (and beyond)

- Collect solid data to convince leadership about the seriousness of the challenges, and the inadequacy of previous/existing proposed solutions.

D2. Failure to approach institutional change with constructive, critical conversational dynamics

- Encourage an appreciative and encouraging culture that is non-shaming and non-humiliating. Encourage a culture of open conversation, where there are no adverse consequences to contrary opinions, e.g., 'Chatham House rules'.

D3. Polarised conversations and selective engagements with critical arguments and perspectives that are based on convenience rather than discernment, contextual relevance, and responsibility

- Organise Change laboratories (CHAT) with stakeholders and develop history walls and shared goals.

D4. Overemphasis on the cognitive dimensions of (higher) education, and an inability to connect the multiple dimensions of (higher) education—cognitive, affective, relational, economic, political, and ecological

- Change the narrative, e.g., symbolic incorporation of other dimensions into leaders' narratives. Set up creative interdisciplinary workshops for sharing experiences.

D5. Conflict between pluralism as an ideal which blinds all to the power relations that created the current conditions, and the necessary consciousness to make equity work. (A bit like 'reconciliation')

- Develop alternative conceptual models of higher education that minimise a disproportionately skewed benefit to privileged groups.
 - Distinguish between 'What we're good at' (disciplinary stuff, research, academic work) from 'What we are good for' (the role we can and should play in society).
-

E. Awareness and empathy

E1. Lack of empathy, including unwillingness or inability to imagine the situation of the 'other'

- Gather data on inequality and exclusion/inclusion, e.g., collect student narratives and broad student representation.

E2. Failure to engage with students, to identify their needs, concerns, challenges

- Do a situation analysis. E.g., organise co-creation workshops with high student representation.

E3. Lack of responsiveness to student voices

- Produce a conceptual framework.

E4. Lack of awareness of different social, economic, cultural contexts and learning & support needs

- Create a credible alternative narrative, e.g., develop incentives and actions to drive managers' education about diversity and equity.

E5. Disregarding the relationship between quality and inequality

- Launch an awareness-raising campaign, e.g., develop critical diversity awareness education for academic and support staff and students.

E6. Refusal to give up hierarchical and exclusionary schemas whereby quality implies a form of exclusion and inequality

- Draw up a strategic plan, e.g., you might as a strategy adopt an open education agenda.

E7. Unwillingness to accept responsibility for equity-enhancing actions

- Find champions, e.g., identify teachers that organise CPD courses for other teachers.

E8. Lack of imagination (for all sorts of reasons)

- Evaluate progress, and adapt as necessary, e.g., doing benchmarking including organising conferences, seminars, workshops.

E9. Failure of university managers and decision makers to educate themselves about equity

No options generated

E10. Inadequate understanding of equity as numbers of representatives from marginalised communities in a higher education institution

No options generated

F. Supporting students

F1. Lack of strategic support structures for unprivileged student groups

- Build awareness, and establish programmes, policy and strategies for responsive support to students while ensuring that these initiatives do not result in increased and pathogenic vulnerability and stigmatisation.
- Conduct research (individual institutions, cross-institutional) of horizontal and vertical inequalities among student bodies to inform policy and operations.
- Research and evaluation for identification of what is 'strategic' for the range of what is unprivileged students in specific contexts and feed recommendations to those with strategic influence nationally and institutionally.
- Seek to make explicit and to expand the definition of 'unprivileged/marginalised' students.
- Build awareness that defining 'unprivileged' is a continual process, engaged in on an ongoing basis—not static!
- Promote and support research (individual institutions, cross-institutional) into conceptually mapping the notion of 'privilege' and 'inequality' using Therborn's framework—vital, existential and resource/material inequality.
- Conduct international research on HE practices for engaging with students (and student partnership) in HE to address re: social/support issues (in order to avoid well-worn paths within institutions).
- Establish programmes and structures to address (and continue to respond to) to student needs.
- Map the notion of privilege as a lack of oppression—exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (existential, epistemological/ontological).
- Seek to comprehend and not be blinkered by what is only strategic (how do we do this without problematising 'access for success?').
- Research and deconstruct our current notions of 'strategic support' in HE and equity.

F2. Failure to address the demand for formal and informal education of immigrants in limbo

- Establish academic development programmes for migrant/refugee academics.
 - Establish policies for scholars at risk (including students and staff) within each context, linking to international initiatives.
 - Mainstream the provision of educational opportunities to marginalised groups, e.g., immigrants, refugees, etc.
 - Change institutional policy and strategies that support students based on a deficit understanding of their needs, character, competencies.
 - Commission impactful research on in/formal education provision, needs and responsibilities of persons not covered by national law to inform policy and practice.
 - Ensure that student support initiatives do not result in increased and pathogenic vulnerability and stigmatisation.
 - Explicitly link education for persons not covered by national law to institutional definitions/mission for equity and quality.
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