

'One size does not fit all': theorising the measurement of equity initiatives to deconstruct limited spatio-temporalities of purpose and impact (0072)

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The Critical Interventions Framework Part 2 (CIF 2) was commissioned by the Australian Department of Education in 2015 as a one year research project to identify 'effective' equity interventions across Australian higher education (HE) from outreach to employment. Drawing on this study, the paper provides a critical analysis of the claims of scientific measurement posed by formal evaluation. It argues that current approaches to the measurement of equity initiatives are imprecise because they are dominated by the logic of immediate business.

A 'measure' is defined as a generalisation of the concept of the length, area and volume of a space and/or time. It is an assessment, or 'mapping', of a spatio-temporal field (Waymire and Gupta, 1981). At first glance, audit-based assessment is posed as being about measuring the effects of an equity initiative; however, it is widely acknowledged by equity practitioners that neo-liberal forms of evaluation only measure a narrow, short-term outcome and therefore cannot measure the success of equity initiatives. Despite general recognition of significant limitations by equity practitioners, the details of this inadequacy are yet to be theorised in comprehensive ways. This paper attempts to do this and to offer a more suitable approach to the understanding and application of the measurement of equity initiatives.

Evaluation methods are not currently calibrated to (re)cognise the breadth and types of experiences of equity program participants, whom are not isolated individual entities, but who are dynamically connected to their social fields. Initiatives achieve effects in relation to participants' histories and wider relationships. As such, approaches to measurement need to be contextualised and (re)constructed. Equity practitioners may then be enabled with knowledge about how to design and apply mixed-methods (for example, how to construct meaningful questionnaire and interview questions) in order to achieve deeper, more nuanced forms of questioning as valid finely-tuned measurement methodologies.

Human Capital (HC) is the governmental approach that conventional measurement is presumed to be couched in. This is the (idealised) logic that an educated and employed population is more cohesive, manageable, less costly, internationally competitive and therefore profitable. However, on closer inspection, it is not this wider HC approach that is operational in equity evaluation. Instead, the focus is on the assessment of how effective an initiative is in producing people who—sequentially—participate and complete at a HE institution. This is what Lynch, Walker-Gibbs and Herbert (2015) call the immediate 'bums-on-seats' mentality, which is not about the wider space of possibilities involved in education: different

types of education, like vocational further education; employment; and the wider trajectories that many initiatives enable for participants. The limited spatio-temporality of audit thus requires deconstruction as an inadequate and inaccurate chimera.

'Measurement' is a construct, like a 'grammar' or a language, which is used to explain a space-time (Gupta, 2006). Indeed, in measure theory, a branch of mathematics, a measure is described as a systematic way to assign a number to each subset of a set, intuitively interpreted as its size. At present, in conventional evaluation, only measurement of one sub-set/sub-field of the overall set/field is considered. Only one aim/outcome, or one 'size', is measured. Evaluation is about immediate business, not wider forms of HC, nor social justice. As Burke and Hayton assert (2011):

'what are the ethics of widening participation?' ... This is a question first and foremost for any government that is committed to issues of social justice and equality in education. (p. 157)

Deconstructing the 'real dichotomy' (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2015), which currently operates between how equity practice works in contrast to how the measurement of their effect is framed, is therefore an urgent task.

Also important to deconstruct are associated deficit discourses about widening participation and non-traditional students. The dominant discourse implies lack, as powerfully illustrated in the national Australian newspaper's 'Top 50 most influential people in HE', which included Milly Shanahan, 'student of the demand-driven system':

Our interest in Milly is that she represented a new generation of students—first-in-family, low-ATAR—who were being accepted into university courses across Australia ... Milly was accepted into Notre Dame on the proviso she complete a foundation studies course first, which she did. But having failed the maths component, was asked to repeat. Having failed maths the second time round, Milly transplanted herself to Wollongong where she had a third attempt at doing foundation studies in order to get into nursing ... Whether she eventually made it into that undergraduate program or not, Milly's is a salutary tale: the demand-driven system has given a lot of non-traditional students access to university. But getting in is not the end of the story.' (The Australian, 2014)

Misrepresenting this young woman as the 'face' of diversity is debasing of both her experience and of widening participation. Milly did not access higher education. She was required to complete a qualification program in order to get into a degree. The narrative is only one aspect of the other three areas she studied. This is a

commonplace deficit view of equity students, with 'lack' of academic literacies, 'poor' grammar and 'lack of cultural capital' becoming a mainstream depiction of them.

Unfortunately, an adaptation of the concept of 'cultural capital' is used to represent it as another skill that equity students lack and must develop. This assumption is based on the premise that knowledge acquisition is one-way and rapid. It also presumes that academic culture is hermetic, static and fixed, and that it should stay that way. This is a reductionist view that Bourdieu did not limit the concept of 'cultural capital' to; instead, he qualified that it is deeply contextual. He argued that inclusion is not about striving to impose hegemonic cultural forms onto non-dominant cultures (1986, p. 245).

Theorising equitable forms of measurement enables awareness of improved methodologies. To illustrate this, an outline will be provided of the CIF 2 project findings and the 'Initiatives Assessment Tool', which was developed to guide the project research instruments, research participants and research staff, so that both quantitative and finely-(at)tuned, qualitative forms of measurement could be captured and counted.

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