

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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(Re)connecting with the Purpose of Higher Education: Transformation Through Social Justice

Penny Jane Burke¹, Julia Coffey²

¹*Professor Penny Jane Burke, Newcastle, Australia* ²*Dr Julia Coffey, Newcastle, Australia*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Dominant constructions surrounding the purpose of higher education are increasingly underpinned by discourses of 'job-ready graduates'. This tends to overshadow alternative understandings of the purpose of higher education, including the social justice commitments that motivate many students. We draw on qualitative data from our study which is the first to explore the relationship between gender-based violence and higher education participation. Study findings provide further insight into the meanings students bring to higher education. Participants contested the hegemonic focus on employability and social mobility, and placed greater emphasis on the importance of higher education for identity, belonging, connection, and their desire to enhance social justice and gender-based equity in their communities. We argue for the need to reframe the debate through engaging multidimensional social justice perspectives, bringing into conversation Freire (1972), Fraser (1997; 2003) and Nussbaum (1997, 2000).

Paper: Dominant constructions surrounding the purpose of higher education (HE) are increasingly underpinned by discourses of 'job-ready graduates'. This tends to overshadow alternative understandings of the purpose of HE, including the social justice (SJ) commitments that motivate many students. We draw on qualitative data from our study which is the first to explore the relationship between gender-based violence and HE participation. Study findings provide further insight into the meanings students bring to HE. Participants contested the hegemonic focus on employability, and placed greater emphasis on the importance of HE for identity, belonging, connection, and their desire to enhance SJ and gender-based equity in their communities. In contesting the hegemonic framings of what and who HE is for, we argue for the need to reframe the debate through engaging multidimensional SJ perspectives, bringing into conversation Freire (1972), Fraser (2003) and Nussbaum (1997, 2000).

We draw from a qualitative study exploring the relationship between gender-based violence and HE participation to demonstrate the value of engaging multidimensional SJ frameworks to reconnect with student perspectives of what and who HE is for. This is in the broader context of funding frameworks driven by neoliberal and corporatized logics of the market, and the fast-paced moves towards the substitution of public funding for private investment in the 'graduate premium'. The assumptions underpinning these funding frameworks are highly problematic; assumptions that students primarily participate in HE as an individual investment in their future employment prospects and that HE provides a level playing field for successful transition into a presumed equitable graduate labour market. Research shows that these assumptions are deeply flawed. Statistical data about

student participation and attainment shows that rising participation rates from non-traditional students coexist with inequalities in access to HE and in graduate employment outcomes (Gale, 2015; Pitman et al, 2019). Further, qualified graduates may not be perceived as employable due to judgements about 'talent' and 'polish' that exclude graduates from under-represented backgrounds (Ingram et al 2018). We engage with these flawed assumptions through the lens of multidimensional SJ theory; by contesting the ways university study has increasingly been reframed as 'banking education' through the logics of neoliberalism, with dehumanising effects (Freire, 1972), by bringing to view the significance of holding together the social justice dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2003) and by developing meaningful engagement with human flourishing and cultivating humanity (Nussbaum, 1997) that builds a sense of reciprocity to notions of benefit.

These multidimensional SJ perspectives recognise that students from under-represented backgrounds are central to reconnecting with the purposes of HE. This requires redistributing opportunities through research to represent students accounts of what matters in their lives. Ethical research requires the recognition of students as active participants in knowledge-formation including their knowledge of complex power relations that are lived through student experiences. In designing the research, we wanted to understand students' sense of human flourishing to challenge assumptions that reproduce individualistic and competitive discourses of employability.

In-depth interviews facilitated rich conversations with 50 participants about the significance of HE in their lives, the challenges and opportunities presented in accessing and participating in university study and what their hopes and dreams are as students. Students largely understood HE in SJ terms, as a form of empowerment, connection and, for some, providing new vocabularies to speak about their experiences. This included new ways of thinking about misogyny, racism and sexism that helped them make sense of their personal experiences and to feel connected to a wider project of enabling human flourishing. HE was described as providing spaces where they could make sense of their identities and experiences; and in some cases, pursue a wider aspiration to enhance SJ agendas aimed at addressing gender based inequities in their communities.

However, HE systems driven by neoliberal policy and practice through institutional regulatory mechanisms can disproportionately impact disadvantaged students; including those who have suffered gender-based violence. Participants described increasing levels of student debt and temporal structures that constrained their progress and sabotaged their ability to persist with their studies in the context of significant trauma and institutionalised misrecognition. Students held strong views and expectations about the role of the university in generating gender equity and offered important insights into how universities could better achieve this. We argue for the need to recognise the diverse and intersecting modes by which students are disadvantaged by neoliberal HE agendas, and to reconnect with the SJ aims which motivate participation in HE.

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