

Symposia Abstract Book - Main Abstract Book with Submissions and Programme (All Symposia)

(Re)connecting with social justice: Contesting neoliberal transformations of higher education (0429)

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Chair: Matthew Bunn¹

Discussant:

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Rationale Text: This symposium begins by assessing how the covid-19 pandemic provided the basis for accelerating the neoliberal transformation of Australian higher education. It explores the Australian government's moves to further instrumentalise universities and narrow their remit toward the immediate needs of Australian business and industry. Given the heavy reliance of Australian universities on income from international students, the policy of border closure implemented in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a financial crisis for the sector. At the very height of this crisis, the conservative Coalition government announced its intention to pass the 'job-ready graduates' legislation. The package cuts government funding of higher education by 15 per cent and removes university managements' discretion over the internal allocation of their incomes (for instance using international student fees to subsidise research). Most controversially the legislation all but removes public funding from students enrolling in most humanities degrees, more than doubling their costs for students and families. The legislation aims to drive students into STEM (science, technology and mathematics) degrees that, the government claims, make students more 'job-ready'. This narrative will be contested in this symposium. Whilst covid-19 has been identified by many as a potential portal toward more progressive alternatives, the prevalence of job-ready and employability narratives represents instead a narrowing of the value and purpose of higher education. We contend that these interests are traceable in part to powerful lobbies and business interests, showing a clear intent to transform higher education study and participation for the purposes of capital. In contradistinction, this symposium presents research that illuminates how students engage with higher education for a range of purposes and that social justice commitments are commonly motivating participation despite students navigating multiple inequalities and dominant policy discourses. An argument is made for (re)connecting with the ways we understand the purpose of higher education as it is, to challenge this becoming increasingly taken for granted through the discourses of neoliberalism, corporatism and marketisation. We re-assert that, because understandings of equity are being consumed within wider neoliberal discourses, there is an urgent need for access to a university education that promotes social justice, critical analysis skills, and fosters human flourishing. A multidimensional framework is offered that enables dialogue across critical theories, helping to (re)connect with social justice perspectives of equity and broader questions about what and who higher education is for.

|Linked Submissions:

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|(Re)connecting with the Purpose of Higher Education: Transformation Through Social Justice (0446)

|Penny Jane Burke¹, Julia Coffey²

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

|**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

|**Paper 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).</p></div>

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|Employability and the Possibility Paradox in Australian Higher Education (0447)

|Matt Lumb¹, Matthew Bunn¹

|¹*University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia*

|**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

|**Paper Abstract:** <p style="text-align:justify">Widening participation in higher education is an accelerating policy and funding concern in many western contexts. The imperative for this growth in student participation is variously couched in a language of equity and social justice, and/or nation-state productivity in relation to supposed ‘knowledge economies’, or confections blending the two. This paper articulates a proposed paradoxical effect that discourses of choice, agency and opportunity produce. We begin to interrogate the effects of this ongoing construction via an agential realist re-reading of policy papers and reviews, drawing on Brøgger and Madsen (2021) and their affirmative-diffractive re-reading of policy instrumentation approach. In doing so, we consider the performative production of realities through practices and doings performed in relation to contemporary policy texts. We explain the problem we see in the production of these realities and theorise their effects on projects of equity in higher education.</p></div>

Structural Adjustment in the Face of the COVID-19 Shock: Fault Lines in Australian Higher Education (0472)

Jean K. Parker¹

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Paper Abstract: This paper sketches out the impacts of the COVID-19 funding shock on Australian higher education. It examines the three pillars that have characterised higher education since the 1980s: massification through the integration of professional and academic learning, austerity and casualisation in staffing, and the ever growing dependence on the international student market. Against these, the paper examines the way in which the financial impact of COVID is being harnessed by policy-makers and university managements.

The COVID shock is emboldening those making a case for greater stratification between elite research universities, and teaching only institutions, in which working class students will be increasingly steered toward solely professional courses. In relation to staffing, the COVID experience has only intensified the prevailing trend of precarity and austerity. In relation to international student fee income – which has been such a central element of Australian higher education funding – there remain large questions out of the crisis.
