

Equity in Higher Education: Time for Social Justice Praxis

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

In this paper we draw from our recently co-authored book (XXXXX and XXXX, 2025) to engage with the conference theme by providing examples from the UK, USA, and Australia, where long-standing problematic policy systems for access, equity, and/or widening participation exist. We trouble the assumed purpose of widening participation in higher education as articulated in contemporary policy discourses, to analyse how higher education institutions support social reproduction and to reclaim the potential of higher education for a more broadly valuable process of social justice transformation. We articulate the possibilities provided by a new approach to equity and widening participation in higher education; constructed via critical, feminist, Freirean, and post/structural commitments. We present two case studies to illustrate how we, in the XXXXX of XXXXXXXXXXXX for XXXXXX in XXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX (XXXXX), put these ideas to work through ongoing reflection/action as part of our sustained, collective, social justice praxis.

Full paper

In this paper we draw from our recently co-authored book (XXXXX and XXXX, 2025) to engage with the conference theme by providing examples from the UK, USA, and Australia, where long-standing problematic policy systems for access, equity, and/or widening participation exist. We engage with the debates and contestations raised in the call for papers through our own related questions regarding the purpose(s) of higher education and the underpinning assumptions regarding access, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Returning to a key question “who is recognised as having the right to higher education?” we will problematise the current equity agendas, imbued as they are with deficit, a concept that will sustain our critique of hegemonic forms of equity and widening participation policy and practice.

We commence the paper by troubling the assumed purpose of widening participation in higher education as articulated (both implicitly and explicitly) in contemporary policy discourses, to analyse how higher education institutions support social reproduction and to

reclaim the potential of higher education for a more broadly valuable process of social justice transformation. We then build on prior work developing 'Pedagogical Methodologies' (XXXXX, XXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXX, 2017; XXXXX and XXXX, 2018) to offer a new framework in PPOEMs (Praxis-based, Pedagogical, Ethically-oriented Methodologies): a methodological framework developed to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) within the social institution of higher education that holds a powerful position in the production, legitimation, and dissemination of knowledge. This is a framework that responds to questions we see as urgent. Questions such as: as we negotiate new twenty-first-century forms of the production of knowledge, whilst apprehending and situating past bodies of knowledge, how might we open new temporalities, spatialities, and relationalities for transformative possibilities? What role might higher education play in generating decolonial, social justice praxis to address the urgent issues of our times; the human and more-than-human crises that knowing differently and collectively could enable us to act in the world response-ably?

We articulate the possibilities provided by a new approach to equity and widening participation in higher education; constructed via critical, feminist, Freirean, and post/structural commitments (XXXXX, 2012). In this, we aim to show how ethical methodological frameworks can engage participants across differences and power in the research/practice nexus, opening up access to theoretical, methodological, and conceptual tools to illuminate and examine the complexity of inequalities, as well as then translate these insights for policy and practice. Throughout this paper, we argue against monodimensional, deficit imaginaries, which contribute to a vicious cycle of equity interventions unwittingly perpetuating insidious inequalities. We offer the idea of an equity spectrum to bring attention to the contested and often overlapping perspectives that come into play in the complex timescapes of higher education, as an institution that both reproduces and transforms unequal relations. We reiterate the imperative of continuously thinking-with the challenges and dynamics we are negotiating, and this might mean navigating different positionalities across the spectrum at any one time, or at different times in which we are working-with others across and with relational differences.

We present two case studies to illustrate how we, in the Centre of XXXXXXXXXXX for XXXXXX in XXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX (XXXXX), put these ideas to work through ongoing reflection/action as part of our sustained, collective, social justice praxis. The first case study details a praxis-based project, situated within the XXXXXX Chair in XXXXXX, XXXXXX XXXXXXX and XXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX at the XXXXX; a project attending to the overlooked question of how experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) over the life course impact higher education equity. The second case study details a praxis-based project of counter-hegemonic evaluation at the XXXXX, whereby methods of evaluation practice are animated with and through a sustained focus on methodology, responding to the ethical dilemma of valuing across difference, adopting spaces of care-full evaluation. These case studies reach beyond superficial, one-dimensional and decontextualised solutions, instead digging into the challenge of higher education equity work in often overwhelming times.

We conclude the paper by considering ways of restructuring equity in higher education. We reiterate how critical, praxis-based re/framings of 'the problem' offer a powerful force for transforming higher education for equity and social justice. Working within the site of struggle and contestation that is the research/practice/policy nexus in contemporary higher education calls for meta-theoretical commitments that have sophisticated, creative, and conceptual rigour. We argue that praxis-based approaches can open up critical time, space, and resources for collaborative, reciprocal, reflexive, and ethical ways of reframing equity and widening participation around broadly valued social purposes.