

**Transformative Reimagining:
Sustainable Higher Education for Equity and Social Justice**

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**Professor Penny Jane Burke
UNESCO Chair in Equity, Social Justice & Higher Education
Director, Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education
Global Innovation Chair of Equity
University of Newcastle**

It's a great honour to be invited as keynote speaker at this year's Universities Australia Summit and I thank the organising committee for the privilege and opportunity to be part of ongoing conversations about the perplexing and challenging problem of creating equitable higher education – and perhaps even more importantly generating sustainable higher education *for equity and social justice*. I want to acknowledge the immense leadership and knowledge in the room and the collective work across the sector to build more equitable and inclusive educational institutions.

I would also like to acknowledge that I live, work and have prepared this keynote from Awabakal land and pay my deepest respects to Indigenous leaders, elders and people in Australia and across the world. I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who are the custodians of this beautiful land upon which we are meeting. It is impossible to consider developing equitable higher education without acknowledging the colonial histories embedded in global educational systems and ensuring that we generate higher education equity that foregrounds, respects, embeds and recognises the knowledge, wisdom and values of First Nations peoples. Repositioning higher education as a force for equity and social justice can be at the heart of these important commitments.

Equity is not peripheral to higher education practice; it is a profound part of all that we do. The work of equity requires us to reflect deeply on the directions we are taking, and what values underpin these directions. As a society, we are facing profound and urgent issues of which widening inequalities are a massive challenge - and so - there is an imperative for us to reimagine higher education and its key role in the face of such confronting social issues.

Experiencing a global pandemic has helped uncover our human and more-than-human interdependency. It has forced us to pause and contemplate new approaches. And yet, we are all too quick to recover the TINA effect – the narrative that *there is no alternative*. In a rush to recovery, we forget to ask critical questions about what forms of higher education we want to enable, for whom and why.



So, let's activate our collective imagination through critical questioning:

- What is the purpose of higher education?
- Who participates and on what terms?
- What has equity and social justice got to do with it?
- How might we reimagine higher education as a vehicle for equity and social justice?

The collective act of critical questioning challenges the status quo and activates our capacity to imagine new possibilities. Critical questioning enables visionary thinking. It helps us make rich, nuanced and textured connections - to better understand ourselves as continuously formed in relation to others including those who have been historically excluded from projects of higher education development.

The urgencies of our time are a matter for higher education. The multi-dimensional, multi-scalar social and ecological crises facing communities across the globe alert us to the crucial role of higher education in contributing to sustainable and equitable transformation of and beyond our institutions.

UNESCO (Parr et al, 2022) calls for “higher education institutions and their stakeholders to systematically rethink their role in society and their key missions, and reflect on how they can serve as catalysts for a rapid, urgently needed and fair transition towards sustainability. The complexity of the issues at stake means that solutions should be part of a radical agenda that calls for new alliances and new incentives”.

As Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations explains, “we must work for solutions rooted in justice, with renewed urgency and solidarity”.

Higher education is not outside of complex geopolitical dynamics. These dynamics impact all dimensions of higher education; equity is not a separate issue but is part of the social fabric in which we create the conditions for our collective sustainability, flourishing and well-being.

We have engaged in an extensive process of reviewing our higher education system through the Australian Accord process. As Chair of the Accord, Professor Mary O’Kane asked a fundamental question during this process “if we can’t reform our own system than what can we do?” The final Accord report asks us to refresh our thinking in relation to bold, systematic reform.

We urgently require securely and comprehensively funded systems with visionary thinking that expands the view of the purpose of higher education. While calling on governments, policymakers and civil servants to recognise their role in creating such possibilities, universities and their leaders have a key role to play – those with the power to influence change must do everything in their power to create the conditions for equity, and thus for our sustainable futures.

We must pay attention to *who participates* in transformative processes and *on what terms*. This requires critical consideration of the insidious inequalities that are regularly ignored, silenced, and rendered invisible through a preoccupation with measurement as holding all the answers.

A key example is the way we continuously invoke the metaphor of a barrier, an overused terminology in educational policy and practice. This metaphor ignites our social imagination that the problem of equity is relatively simple to fix as long as we figure out how to measure it. Barriers are tangible, concrete things that are observable and thus easy to quantify and measure. The idea that we can fix the problem of equity through measurement is so seductive that we then ignore the insidious inequalities that are rooted in the very foundations of higher education even as we seek to build equity within it. We lose sight of the ethical dimensions of what we do in the name of equity and how we do it.

A powerful way that insidious inequalities are sustained is through deficit imaginaries. This refers to the idea that equity interventions must correct the perceived deficiencies of individuals constructed through the lens of disadvantage. The problem is located in the bodies of those targeted by equity policy and practice, thus reproducing hierarchies between those granted the power and influence to construct and implement policy and those for whom policy is projected. Dominant temporal structures privilege quick-fix approaches that over-simplify rather than develop long-term commitments in which equitable and participatory processes and relations can be developed and sustained.

Through deficit imaginaries, particular aspirations and identities are privileged and valued. There is sometimes a slippage into a quasi-medical discourse that sets out to provide ‘treatment’ to those with perceived impoverished aspirations and identities, while ignoring the implications of who is seen to ‘know’ and who is seen to ‘lack’. This is reflected in evaluation methodologies that foreground random control trials to measure the impact of the ‘treatment’ provided or withheld. Or evaluation narrowly framed to measure “what works” while ignoring the systems of inequality and injustice that produce the conditions for inter-generational disadvantage. Deficit imaginaries have led to a legacy of educational policy and practice committed to raising aspirations through outreach programs. The idea that historically under-represented people and communities lack aspiration is unacceptable and pathologizing.

Equity can too easily become reduced to a set of crude interventions, focused on changing individuals constructed through disadvantage, with minimal attention to the historical, intergenerational and deeply entrenched multidimensional inequalities in which aspirations and identities are formed, validated and enabled.

The effects can be detrimental, widening inequalities rather than creating the social and institutional conditions for parity of participation. Indeed, conceptions of parity are too often one-dimensional, strongly framed by a quantitative conception only. This reinforces deficit imaginaries by counting numbers of people within one-dimensional policy categorisations – driven by questions such as “how many students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds enrolled in higher education in a particular year?”

We lose sight of the root problem:

- What are the social and economic structures that reproduce the conditions in which there are growing inequalities that affect educational access and participation?

- How do these social and economic inequalities affect how different people, knowledge and forms of learning are unequally recognised, represented and valued in society and in higher education?
- What are the effects of these multidimensional inequalities on human and more-than-human flourishing and well-being?

In short, we need a reframing of notions of parity of participation to challenge deficit imaginaries. A social justice reimagining of parity of participation substantially deepens engagement with equity by examining the implications of *who participates* and *on what terms*. Nancy Fraser explains that:

parity is not a matter of numbers. Rather, it is a qualitative condition, the condition of being a peer, of being on a par with others, of interacting with [others] on an equal footing...
(Fraser, 2013, p.166).

So what is to be done? How do we move away from deficit imaginaries, couched in one-dimensional approaches to parity of participation? How do we challenge insidious inequalities that are reproduced through inequitable educational systems? How do we move forward in solidarity to create the conditions for higher education to be mobilised as a force for equity and our collective, sustainable futures?

I propose a multidimensional framework for equity that offers vital insights to challenge inequalities. These dimensions, when held together, shift our focus from individual remediation and assimilation to the social, economic, cultural and representational inequalities that damage our system, our communities and ourselves.

Redistribution seeks to redress social and economic inequalities - the intergenerational maldistribution of educational opportunities, life chances and key resources. Access to quality resources and opportunities is imperative to full and meaningful participation in higher education and lifelong learning.

Recognition challenges the inequitable cultural value order that leads to **status subordination** through deficit imaginaries. This requires moving beyond tokenistic celebrations of diversity to recognise the knowledge, experiences and identities that students bring, which both enrich and transform local, institutional and sector-wide tertiary education communities.

Representation develops programs collaboratively with students and communities as peers, rather than recipients. It demands rigorous and ethically-oriented co-design and co-development with those who have been denied a voice in the development of higher education and its social contribution.

Human and more-than-human flourishing and well-being demands a broader conception of higher education beyond economic-centred notions and towards its broader contribution to generating collective, equitable, sustainable futures for us all. It recognises the commitments of students who see higher education not only as a pathway for their future well-being but also for the future well-being of others. It recognises the responsibility and contribution of universities to the local, regional

and global communities they serve. It recognises our inter-dependency and the different knowledges, capabilities and values that constitute an equitable and inclusive higher education system.

Methodological rigour avoids collapsing research, evaluation, and programmatic development into instrumentalised methods and considers the ethics of what we do and how we do it. It emphasises participatory practice with a deep commitment to ongoing, dialogic cycles of critical reflection and critical action. It values the time required to do equity carefully, collaboratively, sustainably, and ethically.

This multidimensional framework underpins the [UNESCO Chair in Equity, Social Justice and Higher Education](#) based in the [Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education](#) at the University of Newcastle. A [key project](#) of the UNESCO Chair team focuses on multidimensional inequalities and its manifestation in gender injustice and gender-based violence (Burke et al, 2023; Coffey et al, 2023); what the United Nations calls the shadow pandemic.

Globally 1 in 3 women will experience gender-based violence in their lifetime. In Australia 1 in 4 women have experienced violence by an intimate partner since the age of 15, but this rate is higher for women from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, women with disability, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander women, LGBTQI+ communities and women living in rural and remote areas. GBV is estimated to cost Australia about \$22 billion annually (PwC, 2015). These numbers are staggering and reveal that we have a long way to go to building equity.

Last year all levels of Australian government launched a [national action plan](#) to end gender-based violence. Just this past week Education Ministers published an [action plan](#) addressing gender-based violence in higher education. These developments are immense in recognising the social epidemic that is devastating to our society. Now is the time to seize higher education's crucial contribution in actively challenging injustice and its manifestation in GBV as part of its broader commitment to equity. Although the profound, detrimental, and long-term effects of gender-based violence on all dimensions of personal and social health and well-being has been strongly articulated over recent years, the impact of experiences of GBV on higher education access and participation remains largely a silent issue.

To redress this, the UNESCO Chair team have conducted research with 430 student victim-survivors in the Newcastle region and have found that GBV profoundly undermines higher education equity.

We found that:

- the majority of GBV experiences happened in students' own or someone else's private residence.
- On average students first experienced GBV at age 13.
- Student victim-survivors aspire to use their university education to help other victim-survivors and to make a difference to their families, communities and society.

The students valued the opportunity to participate in higher education but this was countered by a profound sense of alienation, not belonging, unworthiness and isolation. Bertram and Crowley describe this as insidious trauma, which does harm to the soul and spirit. Insidious trauma is deepened by institutionalised misrecognition: this is the combined impact of stigmatisation with deficit imaginaries. The silencing of gender-based violence as an issue of institutional significance reinforces a personal sense of not belonging articulated by many of our participants – here are some poignant examples.

“why am I studying this degree? Like why? How could I be of any use to anyone?”

“You can’t get over this feeling of you’re not worthy, you don’t even deserve to be here.”

“The after-effects of abuse lowered my self confidence and esteem so that I felt I did not deserve a better life.”

“My ex said I was too stupid and too dumb to go to uni. I believed him for a long time.”

(quotes from student participants)

Maldistribution was a major factor in undermining students’ capacity to flourish. Students suffered profound financial deprivation as well as restrictions on their freedom. Rigid policies such as compulsory attendance as well as the burden of large student debt exacerbated by severe disruption to their studies was a major theme emerging from the survey data. Students made important recommendations to the university on this basis as illustrated on this slide.

“After I experienced [domestic violence] I was homeless, living in my car and I did my first ever final exams at university the day after sleeping in my car.”

“Access to consistent and quality psychological services would help.”

“Please excuse our attendance rates for compulsory tutorials. We are so often going through wars at home that no-one knows about, attendance in the middle of one of those wars could mean additional violence for us.”

“We carry such a heavy burden already, the ever-growing financial burden [of student debt] is scary.”

“[Domestic violence] prevented me from being able to meet assessment deadlines. I was deeply afraid that my partner would find the letters or emails and become violent. This resulted in a huge [student] debt.”

(quotes from student participants)

Their insights teach us how redistribution, recognition and representation can be held together to guide transformation for equity. The students provided powerful recommendations to university leaders and policy-makers including:

- providing quality education for staff & students about GBV,
- building capacity & new forms of expertise to address and combat GBV,
- taking an explicit stance against all forms of injustice including GBV,
- ensuring costs of study are covered, safe accommodation is available and free healthcare (including trauma-informed counselling services) & legal services are available;
- creating flexible and responsive time structures and inclusive pedagogical, curricular, assessment and support frameworks and practices.
- avoiding punishing students suffering coercive control and restrictions on their mobility;
- providing navigational support to ensure access to key support, services, resources, opportunities and pathways.
- exercising zero tolerance of stigmatisation;
- reforming policies that lead to excessive debt, withdrawal and poor educational profiles.

Through the collaboration taking place under the UNESCO Chair, which includes research, evaluation, new programs, student advocacy, relational navigation and inter-agency collaboration, we are producing critical knowledge and action to mobilise HE in its capacity to contribute to gender justice, higher education equity and to challenge GBV. A key role is providing a platform for students to articulate their knowledge and insights to create collective action for social change, and to build capacity for new forms of expertise.

The UNESCO Chair team at the University of Newcastle is collaborating with student victim-survivors and community service agencies to build a gender justice hub, which aims to:

- Produce new knowledge to understand the extent and nature of GBV among HE students.
- Ensure the voices of victim-survivors inform an improved HE sector.
- Produce an evidence-base with specialist community services to support increased resourcing that enables access to lifelong learning and higher education and capacity-building.
- Develop models for partnership with HE students/future students, to support their educational journeys, life chances and to build collective capacity, knowledge and action.
- Help improve HE policies, procedures and curriculum, preparing the next generation of professionals to understand the complexities of gender injustice and its manifestation in gender-based violence.
- Challenge universities and other professional organisations to become change-drivers in the fight against GBV
- Recognise the knowledge, insight & capacity of students for societal and institutional transformation.

The gender-based violence project is one case study of many that illuminates how social, economic, cultural and representational injustices, when ignored, can sabotage our collective efforts to build equity. Challenging ourselves to move from one-dimensional models to rigorous, multidimensional

frameworks enables us to dismantle harmful and insidious deficit imaginaries. When insidious inequalities are ignored they unravel our institutional and personal efforts, investments and commitments to equity. We need to urgently move towards solutions for higher education rooted in social and ecological justice by fostering a culture of solidarity and compassion. This means thinking differently about equity, carefully considering the key messages we communicate and holding ourselves accountable to communities navigating social, economic, cultural and representational inequalities.

The UNESCO Chair project I shared illuminates that students have high aspirations to contribute to society, including participating in meaningful paid work that benefits themselves *and* others. Students and community partners are co-leaders with universities in processes of reframing the purpose of higher education, and of contributing valuable knowledge and wisdom from their experience and expertise. We simply cannot contemplate a reformed system of higher education that puts equity at the centre without recognising the value of this body of knowledge.

The narrowing of higher education for job-ready, market-centric, commercialised purposes undermines our capacity to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities, promote gender equality and build peace, justice and strong institutions, key sustainable development goals that centre equity and social justice. Hyper-individualism, entrenched as it is in a culture of competitiveness rather than collaboration, compassion and solidarity, is toxic for us all. Overlooking multidimensional inequalities is ultimately damaging for sustainable higher education, while doing harm to our students and to ourselves. If we ignore these social imperatives, we ignore our long-term, collective well-being.

I would like to end by paying special and heartfelt tribute to the participants, team members and community sector partners in the UNESCO Chair project I shared. I want to acknowledge the wisdom and knowledge they bring to processes of higher education transformation.

Importantly, the UNESCO Chair scheme is not conceived of as the work of a lone scholar. Rather, UNESCO understands that transformation can only come through collective action, through cooperation, collaboration and meaningful parity of participation in the project of change. It is only together that we can systematically transform higher education for equity and sustainability.

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