



RESEARCH PAPER

What are we missing? Exploring meso-level institutional intervention to address persistent inequities in Australian higher education

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This paper seeks to inform Australian higher education sector conversation on ways institutional meso-level strategy could form a bridge between the macro and micro level drivers underpinning higher education inequities. There has been much academic and practitioner discussion of persistent inequities, their causes, and the ways in which these might be engaged and addressed. The paper focuses on institutional based strategic measures and the role these might play in more effectively dismantling these stubborn inequities. It considers how this approach could be used in Australian higher education to better respond to larger global, national and sectorial forces affecting inequities, and more successfully create equitable individual experiences and outcomes in universities. Relevant current literature is analysed to ascertain the potential value and critical elements of such a method. The discussion collates these insights into a suggested set of practice recommendations for a whole-of-institution strategic equity framework.

Keywords: higher education; equity; widening participation; access; diversity; inclusion

Introduction

This paper takes the position that the purpose of equity practice in the higher education sector is to create parity of participation and outcomes for groups traditionally under-represented in higher education. Although not addressing equity practice specifically, Nancy Fraser (2009) theorised that to achieve such an outcome, three types of obstacles must be actively dismantled. Fraser describes status inequality as a key barrier, created by a cultural hierarchy valorising some cultures over others. She also argues that parity is obstructed by distributive inequality, that is privileged access (or lack thereof) to economic structures and access to resources. Finally, Fraser identifies that to achieve equity it is also necessary to tackle political inequality, including where certain groups are excluded and/or marginalised from systems of representation and voice (see also Berkovich, 2014; Burke, 2018; James, 2015).

It is widely acknowledged (Australian Government, 2016; Bennett et al., 2015 Croucher, Marginson, Norton, & Wells, 2013; Li & Carroll, 2017; Smith, 2009; Whitney & Purchase, 2018; Zacharias, 2017; Zacharias & Brett, 2018) that the obstacles to achieving equity stubbornly persist for traditionally under-represented cohorts. This is despite substantial focus, investment and effort on equity-related policy and program provision in Australia over the past

50 years (Australian Government, 2016; Bennett et al., 2015; Croucher et al., 2013). The literature recognises that important progress has definitely been made and some change has been effected, including better success and participation rates for many (but not all) targeted equity groups. For the purposes of this paper, equity groups in higher education include: women in non-traditional disciplines, people with a disability, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people from low socio-economic (low SES) backgrounds, people from regional and remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Importantly though, the literature highlights that despite the advancements made, substantial inequities remain. Bennett et al. (2015) observe that the pace of change is slow and that “if growth rates are maintained, parity will not be reached (or even approached) for a considerable length of time” (p. 27). Barrow and Grant (2018) describe this as “equity’s mixed fortunes” (p. 2) in higher education.

So, what are we missing? Burke (2017) has asked: “Why is it that despite extensive levels of investment, inequalities continue to persist?” (p. 4). This paper explores the meso-level gap that sits between the macro and micro levels of equity practice. To address this divide, it is suggested that an institutional (meso-level) strategy be introduced to bridge these realms. This would provide a mechanism for interrelating the micro-level programs, activities and policies within an institution to the broad macro-level drivers, such as national policies and other socio-structural factors. A whole-of-university equity strategy could act as this meso-level bridging and maximise impact by synchronising, orchestrating and embedding equity-related efforts across the institution in a coordinated effort informed by literature, research, and practice evidence (Bennett et al., 2015; Smith, 2009; Williams, 2013).

This paper considers this concept of a meso-level equity strategy, through a socio-ecological lens (Ballantine, Hammack, & Stuber, 2017; Berkovich, 2014). Using a socio-ecological analysis allows an understanding of dynamics and interrelationships between macro- and micro-level factors, for example, the cumulative impact of macro and micro forces on equity outcomes. This approach suggests that macro-level measures could be used to better deconstruct and respond to the confluence of Fraserian equity obstructions (Morgan, 2013; Smith, 2009). To do this, the paper examines Australian and international readings relevant to higher education equity practice. Analysis of the literature is used to draw out the features which could be used to build a meso-level response by universities to maximise the impact of equity practice. The paper then considers the practice implications of this analysis, concluding with an outline of elements which could be used to form an equity practice strategic framework more likely to disrupt the obstacles to equality, as identified by Fraser.

Methodology

This paper draws on the findings of a review of academic literature and governmental reports relevant to Australian equity practice in higher education, with a focus on policy, historical context, and efficacy. Overall, the review aimed to glean understandings of institutional interventions which could better mitigate ongoing inequities of higher education access and benefit, and to translate this knowledge in a way which could inform Australian university policy and practice. Although the project did not adopt a systematic review methodology, it offers an initial analysis of relevant materials to allow an opportunity to reflect on the nexus between research, theory and practice (Burke, 2017) in this particular area of equity practice. The findings are designed to instigate sectoral dialogue and further analysis, which, in turn, may lead to shifts in existing practice.

A scoping study was used to broadly synthesise relevant academic understanding, map key conceptual themes applicable to the contemporary context, and collate a set of practice

recommendations (Colquhoun et al., 2014), for equity practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and university leaders. The review focussed on literature that could be used to inform the development of whole-of-university equity and diversity approaches to improve student equity in Australia. Materials reviewed included journal articles, books, research reports, and governmental reports, which were selected on the basis of relevance to the research (as outlined above).

The search parameters included whether the material related to one or more of the following: 1) equity practice, social justice and/or closely associated areas; 2) higher education; 3) whole-of-university or other education systems-based view; and 4) critical analysis of impact for students targeted by equity initiatives. Generally, the study included literature published between the years of 2008-2018, except where earlier material contextualised historical, theoretical and/or policy paradigms. The materials reviewed tended to address Australian, British, American and/or Canadian jurisdictions. In total, 38 literature items were reviewed, 26 of which were included in the final analysis and are referenced directly throughout this paper. Those excluded from the final analysis were discarded because they were less immediately relevant, and/or focused on an overly small cohort or system therefore lacking verifiable systemic implications. The author acknowledges that the volume of literature reviewed was restricted by time and resource constraints. A more comprehensive body of literature could help address existing gaps in the analysis, including material sourced from a more diverse range of countries and educational systems. Also, the veracity of the findings may have been strengthened if the project had allowed 'testing' the suggested practice framework features against existing verified equity exemplars within higher education. That is, it may be informative in a future development to closely review the practices of those universities recognised as successful in their equity initiatives and the extent to which these institutions are using the identified features of effective meso-level equity strategy outlined below.

The scoping study was an iterative process, where the parameters were adjusted as new considerations arose from the literature and from collegial discussion and feedback. Broadly, the steps involved: 1) using a single data-charting form to capture the key relevant points of each literature item; 2) conducting a qualitative thematic analysis of the full body of data to map significant recurring conceptual themes and thematic interrelationships; and 3) collating this data analysis into a description of the key findings and their practice implications.

Discussion of findings

If we assume that Fraser's (2009) three-dimensional theory of social justice is a key means of tackling persistent inequities, any form of equity oriented effort should be based on an objective to redistribute resources, recognise less privileged cultures, and facilitate representation of the voices and interests of those historically marginalised. Therefore, from a Fraserian perspective, equity practice, in all its wide variety of forms, needs to address these obstacles in some way in order to effect equality. From a socio-ecological perspective, most institutionally-based programs or interventions are not designed to bring about equity on their own, therefore, barriers to equity could more effectively be broken down by equity-related initiatives working in concert with one another. This suggests that at a meso-level, greatest impact on inequalities is achieved when the entire body of an institution's equity-related policies, activities, and programs act synchronistically to collectively address all three Fraserian targets of distributive, political and status inequities. This then raises the question of whether a whole-of-university equity strategy could help drive this synchronicity? And, if so, what characteristics should such an equity strategy feature to be impactful? Academic literature offers significant guidance on the elements required for sound equity strategy design and implementation.

Student equity policy in Australian higher education: An historical overview

For more than half a century, Australia has had broad policy stipulating that higher education should play a role in redistributing economic and social opportunity by opening up higher education access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Australian Government, 2017; Croucher et al., 2013; Zacharias & Brett, 2018). This policy context has involved developmental change across decades, as outlined by Bennett et al. (2015, pp. 23-24). These developments have included examples such as the Martin Report, *Tertiary Education in Australia* (Australian Universities Commission, 1964) and the Whitlam Government's removal of fees for university students in 1974 (but later re-introduced by the Hawke Government in 1989 as a loan scheme). Subsequently, this commitment was dramatically expanded via the Dawkins reforms of 1988, where the Unified National System of Higher Education was instituted to disassemble the binary between universities and Colleges of Advanced Education. At the start of the next decade, *A Fair Chance For All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990) reinforced equity priorities and set these into higher education performance targets. Then, in 2008, the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) resulted in government and program changes focused on participation and outcomes, primarily for students from low SES backgrounds via reforms including the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Despite this commitment being welcomed by the sector, annual funding cycles have made for precarious provision of programs and initiatives. Subsequently, there has been greater policy focus on access and success for other target groups including students from regional and remote areas and those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (Bennett et al., 2015; Zacharias & Brett, 2018).

Uncapping of university places by the Labor government in 2010, established a demand-driven era that came to an end in 2017 under a conservative government. Recent analysis of the uncapped period suggests that numbers of students from key equity groups did grow overall, as did the general student cohort during that period (Harvey, Cakitaki, & Brett, 2018). Importantly however, it has also been noted that the participation gap between students from equity groups and the wider cohort was not improved during this policy (Productivity Commission, 2019). Recent reports have emphasised that students from equity groups enrolled during this period have higher incompleteness rates compared to their peers (Harvey et al., 2018; Productivity Commission, 2019). This suggests that although the demand-driven era may have opened up more opportunity for students who were traditionally unlikely to attend university, this system has not necessarily translated into more equality of outcome or benefit. Debate continues about the merits of capped versus uncapped higher education policy. This brief history gives us an important context to better understand the nature of macro-level policy drivers affecting equity practice in Australian universities across several decades. Moreover, the literature also shows that broadly similar trends have been in play in much of the developed Western countries – largely an opening up of universities from being a place of learning for the privileged few to being less exclusive and elite, and *more* open to the masses.

Persistent inequities

Much of the literature reviewed reflected on the extent to which these efforts had improved the experiences and outcomes of equity groups. A substantial number of the articles (Bennett et al., 2015; Haintz et al., 2018; O'Shea & Stone, 2014; Whitney & Purchase, 2018; Zacharias & Brett, 2018) consistently identified that overall progress has definitely been made, however, generally, equity cohorts remain at an ongoing disadvantage in four main areas. This includes inequity in the areas of students: 1) completing their full degree program (including doing so without substantial interruption), notwithstanding other factors that characterise attrition, such as study mode, e.g., part-time and online; 2) matriculating to post/graduate studies; 3) obtaining higher

status graduate employment; and/or 4) working in the field related to their tertiary qualifications. Enduring differentials in higher education experience and benefit was also highlighted in a recent report by the Australian Government (2016), *Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education*. The report looked at 2014 participation data and compared the rates of equity target group participation with each equity group's prevalence in the general community. On the basis of these metrics, the report concluded that in higher education, "people from disadvantaged groups remain under-represented" (Australian Government, 2016, p. 13). These statistics demonstrate that although there have been improvements, generally equity groups are not yet enrolling in higher education at a rate proportionate with their representation in the general community.

Similarly, Haintz et al. (2018) considered the extent of improvement for students targeted by equity programs, pointing out that even where equity initiatives had measurably increased access and participation for some groups, significant inequities remained in relation to success and completion rates for those groups participating. Whitney and Purchase (2018) also highlighted the higher education outcome disadvantages experienced by equity group graduates, and suggested that socio-economic background played an especially dominant role. Bennett et al. (2015) also drew attention to graduate disadvantage faced by some cohorts, and an urgent need for intervention to allow students from equity groups to secure comparative benefit from their higher education. The discrepancy in experience and outcomes noted by these authors illustrate the types of inequities which have not yet been addressed, even though access and participation rates have progressed overall.

Much of early Australian higher education equity policy envisaged that pulling down the university walls and opening up access to all Australians, would inherently redistribute economic, social and political opportunities and advantages for those traditionally excluded (Croucher et al., 2013). This expectation was built on the premise that massification would holistically tackle inequities, however, it was realised that "massification did not solve the issue of unequal access to tertiary education benefits" (Croucher et al., 2013, p. 133). Whilst it is important to recognise that there has indeed been progress, Marginson (2016) suggested that, at near saturation point, massification becomes "regressive" (p. 234) without other interventions, by actually reinforcing, rather than challenging, social and economic stratification. Trow (2007) made a similar reflection when he took a retrospective look at this issue after his original thesis in the 1970s on massification. Recently, Zacharias (2017) also noted that the latest massification and diversification created by the demand-driven funding model for Australian universities, had not created improved participation rates for equity target groups, instead other factors were more determining. Given that 50 years of policy, reform and investment has not yet fully addressed the Fraserian obstacles to social justice in the higher education sector, perhaps it is time to explore other ways forward.

A whole-of-organisational equity strategy could act to leverage more impact from the myriad of institutional equity-related policies, programs, services, and activities at an institutional level. This approach could, therefore, help bridge the gap between policy and individual outcomes. A key theme from the literature was the argument that such a mechanism can act to choreograph "all the pieces of the campus diversity puzzle in an integrated whole" (Williams, 2013, p.130) and more effectively translate equity practice into equality of experience and outcomes for students. For example, Bennett et al. (2015) asserted that equity initiatives "are likely to have greater impact if nested within a cohesive institutional equity strategy" (p. 90). Smith (2009) suggested that without such a framework, equity practice can actually obstruct its own objectives, saying that a crowded scene of equity-related initiatives can "obscure a lack of

change” (p. 230). A more strategic approach could help marshal equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives at the institutional level, and thereby more successfully mitigate the obstructions to equality of participation, outcome and benefit, as identified by Fraser.

Unique contexts and cultures

Another obstacle highlighted by the literature was the distinctive organisational character of universities. Several articles characterised higher education organisational structure and culture as unique, complex and change resistant. Indeed, Williams (2013) summarised this phenomenon as an “inherent anarchy of the academy...mak[ing] organisational change...formidable...and diversity-themed change the most challenging of all” (p. 178). The challenge of developing a comprehensive equity framework, coupled with a complex and anarchic culture, is compounded further because of the countless sources of external influences on the higher education institution. The literature repeatedly pointed to contemporary higher education providers facing a “perfect storm” (Williams, 2013, p. 31) of strategic pressures, affecting the very structure and purpose of higher education institutions (Morgan, 2013; Smith, 2009; Van der Zwaan, 2017). Some of these key pressures include, for example: the growing hyper-competitiveness of the sector; the fragility of government funding; fast-paced massification and diversification of the university corpus; ever-increasing expectations of universities to demonstrate equity and diversity credentials whilst also being subjected to a rising backlash against such measures; globalisation; and the advent of the knowledge-based global market. Some readings went so far as to suggest that higher education is in fact at a universal strategic “crossroads” (Morgan, 2013, p. 9). For example, Morgan (2013) suggested, in considering the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada higher education equity, that the very role and function of higher education itself needs discussion. Van der Zwaan (2017) agreed, observing that “...whilst the university is by no means a sinking ship, as some have claimed, it needs to make a clear about-turn in order to survive...almost every aspect will be transformed [in the coming 25 years]” (p. 14).

Given that many of the macro-level forces affecting universities are existential in nature, successful equity strategy in higher education must not only take them into account, but should also contribute to addressing them. There is little point seeking to widen participation and dismantle obstacles in a sector that may be unsustainable in the longer term. This is both a challenge and opportunity for equity practice, as highlighted throughout the literature. Part of the challenge lies in the powerful distraction away from equity-related objectives such critical strategic pressures can pose. However, opportunities also exist because equity practice is inherently well suited to respond to some of the most crucial strategic pressures affecting universities. Using equity practice to help design the institutional responses to these complex broader issues, could be done in a way that will improve equity outcomes *and* build a university’s viability.

Importantly, the literature also contains an alternate view (James, 2015; Pitman, 2014), positing that contributing to a university’s broader strategic missions and objectives will drag equity practice into a neo-liberalistic quagmire, where a Fraserian concept of equity is fundamentally compromised. It does seem logical that the wider influences on a university can at times be contrary to the core objectives of equity practice, and vice versa. However, as outlined above, there is mutual benefit to be gained through collaboration. Therefore, it seems incumbent that a useful balance be sought whereby a core objective of equity practice is to assist the university to respond to the strategic pressures outlined above, but that there are also clear, systematic and transparent checks and balances to navigate any arising tensions and/or conflicts that this may create. The section below outlines the broader strategic issues which are most directly relevant

to equity practice and discusses ways an equity strategic framework can take these into account *and* foster more socially just outcomes in higher education.

Strategic issues

One of the most significant themes of the literature is the major strategic challenge of the rapid change in demographics (Morgan, 2013; O’Shea & Stone, 2014; Smith, 2009; Van der Zwaan, 2017). This challenge encompassed a broad range of associated issues facing universities, for example, rising societal expectations of wider higher education participation; student cohort exponential growth; rapid diversification of student population; diversification of workplaces within and beyond the university; increasing consciousness and discourse in general society of diverse identities, benefits of diversity, and ideas of equity, diversity and inclusion; ongoing alterations in the social order; and the rise of globalised communities and markets. From this array of complex matters, there are two prevailing considerations that should be addressed when considering an institutional strategic equity framework. Firstly, the presence of diversification and massification alone is not sufficient to create actual equity or inclusion. As raised consistently by the literature, universities must *also* make structural and cultural change in response to these demographic changes. Because, as Trow (2007) notes, without such adaptations, massification simply becomes a new form of the social, economic and political stratification which underlain the inequities in the first place. Similarly, diversification may help to reach participation parity in the shorter term for particular groups, but without substantive equity interventions (e.g., initiatives/programs/interventions for equity students to support their completion of studies) this alone is unable to mitigate the enduring inequities we currently see (Bennett et al., 2015; Zacharias & Brett, 2018). Generally, the literature emphasises that to be effective, equity practice must go beyond growing student numbers. Morgan (2013) raises this when she strongly argues that equity and diversity-related initiatives “must not be designed as recruitment tools or...quick fixes, but should [also] provide real benefits for students and staff” (p. 7). A well-designed equity strategy can help drive this deeper systemic transformation needed across the whole organisation to more meaningfully respond to wide-scale diversification and massification.

Secondly, meso-level equity strategy must also respond to broader diversification happening beyond the university campus. Each university will need to formulate an institutional answer to these changes across all of its functions (Morgan, 2013; Van der Zwaan, 2017; Williams, 2013). For example, this broader diversification requires building cultural competence and responsiveness by the whole university in relation to the growing diversity of staff, community partners, research partners, business partners, benefactors, and other stakeholders. To achieve this involves a wide range of adaptations including widening graduate attributes to ensure graduates too are culturally competent; updating teaching content to reflect changed societal demographics; broadening the institution’s research agenda to reflect more diverse interests, perspectives, and applications; and assembling a reflectively diverse workforce afforded equal opportunity for career promotion and development. Smith (2009) asserts that such reforms are an urgent “institutional imperative” necessary to “remain viable and vital” in our “ever more pluralistic society” (pp. 48-49). Importantly, Burke (2017) reminds us of the greater societal benefits of the higher education sector taking on these challenges. She argues that “[b]uilding equitable higher education is imperative to all our futures...[because] growing inequalities pose a threat to all...[and that] higher education has a key role to play in ensuring more socially just and peaceful and stable societies into the future” (p. 8). A meso-level equity strategic framework can help drive this broader organisational development whilst also tackling inequities.

The views expressed by Smith (2009) and Burke (2017) reflect an evolving societal push for universities to actively contribute to solving issues of inequities both within and beyond its own walls (Barrow & Grant, 2018). Williams (2013) and Van der Zwaan (2017) both predict that higher education will increasingly experience urgent pressure to redress inequities within their own university communities. Van der Zwaan (2017) goes further to forecast that universities will be increasingly expected to act as a major player in global efforts to solve entrenched and progressively complex causes of inequality. To handle such a role, universities would need a capacity to act as thought leaders on issues of diversity and equity in much broader contexts than academe alone. Smith (2009) asserts that this role is “central to an institution’s capacity to excel and function in society...[and]...creates the opportunity for vitality, new ways of thinking, and new kinds of knowledge” (pp. 254-255). Meso-level equity strategy could be a vehicle to strengthen this capability within an institution. For example, guiding research and teaching approaches on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion; designing and promoting ways the university will visibly redress inequities within its own systems and structures; and leveraging existing university partnerships to incubate avant-garde equity practice within other organisations.

As universities grapple with this broader diversification, as well as a rising discourse in equity and diversity concepts, and heightened demands on an institution’s equity credentials, the sector is simultaneously facing a contradictory wider backlash against inclusion and equality measures. The literature recognises this and suggests that it creates very real and fundamental strategic challenges for universities, requiring very careful institutional navigation. Barrow and Grant (2018) discuss this incongruence and how, in their view, it weakens higher education equity practice, urging institutions to “tackle these narratives and their limitations in new ways” (p. 14). Williams (2013) points to the strategic pressure created by what he describes as the arising legal and political backlash against diversity and equity related policy, curriculum, research and initiatives. He identifies a recent increase in opposition from conservative forces against progressive and less traditional practices and the negative impact this can have on university leaders and strategic priorities. Barrow and Grant (2018) propose that deftly managing this tension requires a university to articulate and emphasise its own institutional values and objectives regarding equity, diversity and inclusion. They suggest that these stated principles can then be used by an institution as a reliable way finder through conflicting discourses.

Given the larger strategic role equity practice could play in addressing these wider macro forces, it is important to consider where equity practice and strategy should be institutionally situated. Various authors examine where equity should be placed within university structures, how it should be resourced and governed within the institution, and what its relationship to the academic project and other institutional missions should be (Barrow & Grant, 2018; Smith, 2009; Van der Zwaan, 2017; Williams, 2013;). Equity practice is more strategic and more effective when it is situated as a core institutional mission, embedded in other key university functions, and forms an integral part of overall institutional culture (Smith, 2009; Van der Zwaan, 2017; Williams, 2013). In contrast, Barrow and Grant (2018) observed that there was a common perception in academia that “equity work belongs only within particular spaces” of a university (p. 5). This research highlighted that equity practice is typically segregated, and considered an activity practised only by equity practitioners and therefore relevant to a limited portion of university undertakings. Williams (2013) argued that such an approach is a mistake and that equity and diversity must be situated as an embedded priority “of the highest institutional importance and foundational to mission fulfilment and institutional excellence” (p. 198). Zacharias (2017) and Bennett et al. (2015) support this claim, both arguing that equity practice should be strongly aligned with other institutional priorities. The Higher Education

Standards Panel *Final Report* (Australian Government, 2017) also made the link between pedagogical efforts to achieve successful retention, including of equity groups, and “a healthy university culture that embraces diversity and flexibility” (p. 66).

A related question when considering the situational position of equity practice, is the extent to which equity practice relates to the academic mission, and the pedagogy of the institution. Another key theme that emerged from the literature was the view that equity practice needs to be partnered with the institution’s academic project to be most successful (Bennett et al., 2015; Bexley, Harris, & James, 2010; Morgan, 2013). The literature suggests that achieving best outcomes for equity students can be hindered without a strong interrelationship between equity practice and the academic mission. One example includes Williams’ (2013) observation that equity excellence is more likely where diversity and inclusion is a substantial element of university’s curriculum and a key research theme. Bennett et al. (2015) also pointed to the value of including equity-related support within the curriculum and using inclusive pedagogies, because this approach “has broader reach than extra-curricular support programs” (pp. 89-90) and, therefore, greater impact. Smith (2009) considered the academic function as core for equity practice, arguing that “good education, excellent teaching, and a supportive institutional ethos...facilitate[s] student success, regardless of background...[therefore] the [equity] approach needs to reflect the academic core of a specific institution” (p. 260). Furthermore, Zacharias (2017, p. 6) used a university case study to illustrate the value of integrating equity objectives into academic practice. This involved the example of a university which had achieved “transformational change” in their equity practice by “deeply embedding (equity strategy) in the academic enterprise”, using initiatives such as the “introduction of a new course model and admissions processes” specifically aimed at widening participation. Bexley et al. (2010) also reflected on how universities need to design and deliver equity programs in a way that “align[s] with and complement[s] [their] commitment to academic excellence” (p. 12). These are all important insights which signal a crucial relationship between higher education pedagogy and achieving equity outcomes.

However, Barrow and Grant (2018) identified a cultural dilemma in relation to the integration of equity practice into an institution’s academic practice. Through an analysis of academic promotion processes these authors suggested that academic staff tend to consider equity-related matters “intrinsically non-academic” (p. 5). This study highlighted that university processes can often inadvertently reinforce this view, such as academic promotions processes where Barrow and Grant (2018) observed a lack of recognition or reward for equity efforts by academics. These authors concluded there was an academic tendency to consider equity-related activity as less legitimate or important than other aspects of academia, even within direct teaching and research contexts. Morgan (2013) also reflected on this same driver, noting that “the culture of some universities has not evolved and adapted to take account of the [demographic] changes in the student body and society at large...in the last 20 years” (p. 29). Their reflections show that significant cultural change is needed in some universities before equity excellence can be achieved and inequities described by Fraser can be meaningfully dismantled. This situation echoes the conceptual theme that universities can be uniquely resistant to change. However, it is important to recall that the literature also suggests that these university cultural habits can be shifted by a well-designed, meso-level equity strategy.

Similarly, the positioning of equity infrastructure is vital when considering an institutional equity strategic framework. This positioning involves the processes and mechanics of designing, funding, governing, delivering and evaluating equity practice within an institution. The literature recurrently points to the idea that equity outcomes are maximised when equity infrastructure is

incorporated into the university's existing processes, and adequately resourced. As Williams (2013) suggests, without adequate "incentives and resources to encourage the broader campus community's involvement...equity practice becomes the isolated priority of equity practitioners and therefore loses capacity to effect long term and maximum impact" (p. 176). Situating equity infrastructure outside or separate to core institutional infrastructure can act as a "major pitfall" (Smith, 2009, p. 231) of diversity and inclusion efforts within higher education. This was also recognised by Williams (2013) as a dominant feature when "diversity plans fail" (p. 218). Relevantly, the Higher Education Standards Panel (Australian Government, 2017) found that institutions were more effective in retention efforts when accountability and resourcing for equity student retention was mainstreamed "across the university [therefore] requiring a whole-of-institution approach" (p. 48). This then leads us to specifically consider the resourcing of equity practice at an institutional level, including the crucial importance of robust funding sources and processes. An institution's equity strategy must also include a process for embedding funding of equity-related programs within whole-of-organisation resourcing systems. As identified by Bennett et al. (2015), this will help build programmatic resilience and allow strategic equity practice to rise above the ebb and flow of funding fragility. These authors observed that integrating funding for equity initiatives into, rather than segregating from, broader institutional resource allocation processes helps to build long term viability of equity initiatives, develop cross-university accountability, and position equity practice as a core priority of the university. Meso-level equity practice will thus be more impactful where it is integrated into wider organisational architecture.

The importance of evaluation

Similarly, the literature highlighted that evaluative mechanisms for equity also benefit from being incorporated into broader institutional structures. However, the literature also identified that no matter how equity evaluation is situated within the institution, it is crucial that it track accountabilities, determine the extent of *actual* impact and involve quality expertise in higher education equity practice. One significant example of this critique is Bennett et al.'s (2015) *Critical Interventions Framework*. This report argues that rigorous evaluation is vital to the success of equity practice and that this important function is most effective when integrated across an institution with the guidance of equity experts. Bennett et al. (2015) also recommend that such an evaluation process inform a meso-level understanding of the micro-level features and dynamics of specific initiatives within the institution. Therefore, when considering meso-level solutions, such data could be used to reflect on the efficaciousness of the whole meso-level strategy and help determine which specific components might be adapted, upscaled, or applied in other areas of equity practice within the institution. Equity practice evaluation must also consider outcomes beyond numerical values, such as participation, success, and retention rates. Qualitative data is already commonly collected for student feedback on teaching and for staff feedback on organisational matters. Similar approaches could thus be adopted to gain stakeholder feedback on equity practice.

When applying the Fraserian view of social justice it becomes central that the voices and experiences of those individuals intended to benefit from equity programs and policies are captured in data used to evaluate equity practice. This idea was explored by Burke and Lumb (2018) who pointed out that doing so is a significant equity outcome in and of itself, emphasising the importance of using "evaluation that makes a difference" (p. 29). Evaluation can help a university hear and recognise the issues from a diversity of perspectives, and to determine whether the meso-level equity practice is making the difference the institution sets out to make, *and* does so in a way that has meaning for the intended beneficiaries. Other literature pointed out that equity practice evaluation supports a university to better understand the effect of the

“many intersecting influences...that cumulatively influence students’ higher education experiences” (Haintz et al., 2018, p. 102) within an institution. The material reviewed also reflected on the many tensions that can be captured within evaluation. Significantly, Smith (2005) warned against evaluating *activity* rather than *impact*, and urged institutions to focus on using evaluation to determine the level of change achieved because of equity programs rather than the level of equity-related work being done. Overall, these insights suggest that to be effective a meso-level strategy must include an enterprise-wide process for systematic evaluation of impact made by the collective equity-related programs across an institution. This evaluative intelligence will be most valuable when used by the institution to consider progress against the broader strategic objective of dismantling persistent inequities and subsequently shaping future initiatives, policies and other processes right across the whole university.

Institutional leadership

Finally, but crucially, institutional executive leadership is pivotal to the impact of all and any of the meso-level equity strategy elements identified above. The literature consistently emphasised that disengaged senior leaders are one of the most common hindrances for equity in higher education (Smith, 2009; Williams, 2013; Zacharias, 2017). Repeatedly, leadership acting to mobilise equity practice indicated greater chances that the university would significantly address student inequities. For example, Smith (2009) described an absence of involvement from senior leadership as a fundamental jeopardy for institutional level equity practice. Zacharias (2017) noted, in her study of HEPPP funding impact in Australian universities, that high quality equity-related change happened when driven by senior change agents. Williams (2013) observed that where diversity efforts failed to create substantial change a common feature was “low meaningful and inconsistent support” from senior university leadership and went on to suggest that universities need a ‘Chief Diversity Officer’ at Pro-Vice Chancellor or other equivalent executive senior role to provide “broad, integrative, and collaborative leadership to the diversity strategy” (p. 198) across an institution. These authors point out that the executive leadership of a university plays a uniquely definitive role in equity practice because of their capacity to coordinate efforts across the entire organisation.

Institutional level recommendations for equity strategy framework

The discussion above offers a range of insights into ways a meso-level equity strategy could be used to more effectively break down impediments for those traditionally under-represented in higher education. Institutions that engage with the issues highlighted in this paper will be well-placed to create a strategic framework for their whole-of-university equity practice, thereby forming an institutional bridge between broader systemic forces affecting the university and the myriad of equity-related activities happening within the organisation. Such a framework would enable a university to design and provide equity practice responsive to broader macro influences and unique local needs and programmatic contexts at the micro-level. Thus boosting the potential of an institution’s equity interventions to collectively address all three of Fraser’s injustices: social, distributive, and political inequalities. Coaligining institutional efforts within a strategic framework would also help a university to mitigate the equity practice pitfalls, mixed fortunes, and failures well recognised by the reviewed literature. With these factors in mind, a number of further practice recommendations can be offered.

Firstly, a university’s equity strategy needs to articulate a whole-of-organisation long-term, strategic vision and plan for its entire equity practice. As suggested by the literature and a socio-ecological perspective, such a strategy must explicitly respond to both the macro and the micro contexts affecting the university, its community, students, staff, and other stakeholders. Strongly connecting the equity strategy objectives with the university’s broader strategic drivers and

missions will help build a mutual benefit between equity practice and the university. Therefore, also contributing to an institution's efforts to adapt to the existential challenges currently facing higher education *and* tackle wider societal injustices. In particular, the literature reiterated a fundamental need for equity practice to be deeply rooted within the institution's academic project. This should include reaching a set of values shared between the university's equity and pedagogical approaches, and integrating these common principles into curriculum and other relevant processes and initiatives. Similarly, resourcing and accountability for equity practice must be embedded into the organisational budgeting and financing systems, therefore ensuring that equity outcomes become a part of the systemic governance and resource allocation processes within the university. This could help to overcome the uncertainty of resources identified by the literature, and achieve longer-term sustainability, whole-of-organisation accountability, and an integrated means for related performance measurement.

Crucially, the strategy must include a centralised evaluation framework which assesses not just activity but effect. This framework needs to evaluate impact across the whole student life cycle using measurements that quantify participation, success, retention, and graduate destination *plus* broader metrics and insights. Doing so is an important means for addressing Fraserian goals in their entirety, rather than being caught by the risk of only evaluating the influence on some but not all the barriers to equitable participation, experience and outcomes. Centralised evaluation approaches must also recognise the tensions, and sometimes even contradictions, which can arise from efforts to overcome the obstacles to social justice. The literature tells us that we therefore need a systemic and multifaceted approach to the evaluation of an institution's equity activities.

An impactful equity framework needs robust connectivity and partnership between the assorted institutional players involved across the full spectrum of equity-related activities and outcomes. Reflections from the literature suggest that convening a well-connected group of senior leaders can help to successfully drive implementation across the university. On the issue of leadership, the literature called for sponsorship by the institution's most senior leaders, the executive. It seems that active, visible participation by executive leaders is essential to create structural change to forces driving persistent student inequities and remove the remaining obstacles to social justice. A central lesson from the literature is that recognition of traditionally excluded groups, representation of their voice and interests, *and* the more equitable redistribution of benefits can only happen at a meaningful level when institutional executive leaders take mobilising the institution's equity strategy seriously.

Conclusion

This paper has examined ways a meso-level strategic framework within universities could bridge micro and macro drivers of inequity to more effectively tackle the Fraserian obstacles to parity of participation, experience and benefit. Australian and international literature was reviewed to better understand the characteristics most likely to be effective in such a framework and key issues to be taken into account. The paper offers a set of practice recommendations, informed by reflections from the readings and their arising themes. These recommendations highlight the importance of understanding broader strategic forces, their influence on equity practice and their impact on students and staff from equity groups. Finally, the paper calls on university leaders and equity practitioners to incorporate this knowledge into future practice by generating whole-of-institution solutions as a response to these broader imperatives. Doing so, will also better connect the huge array of equity-related efforts within so many Australian universities, hence magnifying the outcomes achieved thus far.

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