

## EDITORIAL

### Writing the field of equity

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To cite this article:

Bunn, M, Burke, PJ, Lumb, M, Moreau, M-P, Shaw, J, Tsegay, SM 2021, 'Writing the field of equity: Editorial', *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp 1–9.

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#### Introduction

This inaugural issue of *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, builds on the ground laid by *International Studies in Widening Participation*, while taking new directions. The journal is increasing its focus on challenging injustices in diverse contexts of worsening inequalities despite years of equity policy in higher education. In foregrounding the concept of 'access' we are committed to producing a body of work that both troubles and advances equity commitments. As well as raising significant questions about access to what forms of higher education and for whom, the journal is concerned with wider debates about access, including access to writing and publishing in the field of equity in higher education.

Part of this project involves engaging with a diversity of voices and perspectives, methodologies and theories which foreground a concern for disrupting the dominant forms of representations of and in the fields in which the knowledge of equity is produced, formed and contested. The journal thus welcomes contributors at early and advanced stages of their careers and applies broad understandings of equity issues, which includes how class, dis/ability, gender, geography, faith, nation, race and sexuality intersect. The journal encourages contributions which critique and challenge academic conventions, bringing to light different ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies and formats. Such aims and commitments have shaped this first issue – a special issue dedicated to *Writing the field of equity*, authored by the new executive editorial team. This is our invitation to readers not only to engage with our pieces but also to author your own, contributing to these ongoing debates and issues that shape the field of equity in higher education.

Our intention with this inaugural special issue is to open a space where the struggles for access, what is being accessed and participation in higher education can be articulated, debated and troubled. We hope you read the issue through the lens of the dilemmas and challenges you negotiate in relation to access, equity and writing, and that the issue raises new questions that you take up as contributors to the future shape of the journal, and the field, across a range of diverse international contexts.

More specifically, *Writing the field of equity* grapples with questions of what we write about and why we engage in writing, who is included/excluded in such processes and how the politics of

Published by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, with the support of the Pathways and Academic Learning Support Centre at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and the Cluster for Education Research on Identities and Inequalities at Anglia Ruskin University

knowledge-formation and representation play out in writing practices. The issue is concerned to align our editorial and writing practices with the social issues explored in our writing: writing (and being published) as a privilege. We consider the gendered, classed, raced and linguistic power relations that enable the claim to know and the legitimisation as an author, which requires access to higher education and to academic codes and networks. Access to writing is related to inequalities of time, place and space, requiring that we pay attention to the histories, temporalities and geopolitical spatialities in which whole groups of people have been excluded from authorship. This raises the ongoing question of who (and what) gets 'silenced' through publishing processes (or even before writers engage with the publication process). This is a complex web and requires close attention to the intricacies of exclusionary practices that make it possible to have an 'authorial voice' and to write about certain issues in particular ways, including attention to the role of networks, peers and supervisors, editorial practices, prestige cultures such as league tables, gatekeepers and the discourses at play at certain moments in time and space that are (mis)aligned with particular value judgements (that are often deemed as neutral). It is also the case, of course, that authors can continue to be silenced when published, for example through the politics of citation and what and how contributions are differently (and unequally) valued and judged.

Equity is a polysemous, multifaceted and contested concept. It is often translated in narrow terms as counting individuals from targeted policy categorisations of social disadvantage (such as low socioeconomic status) who have enrolled in and/or progressed through higher education. It is sometimes associated with deficit discourses that focus the problem of equity on what students from disadvantaged backgrounds supposedly lack (such as aspiration, study skills, confidence). Equity has been weaponised in its appropriations by conservative agendas, with some examples including narratives of dumbing down, lowering of standards, and the minimisation of structural racism and sexism. This often co-exists with some acknowledgement of social privilege and advantage in relation to patterns of higher education access and participation (including what and where students study in relation to social privilege and advantage) but justifies this through meritocratic discourses tied to potential and capability.

Equity in higher education has also been represented through social justice perspectives, including for example Nancy Fraser's multidimensional social justice framework, which holds together the often disparate threads of redistributive, recognitive and representative justice (Fraser 1997, 2003 & 2009). This is in sharp contrast with policy narratives which have been selective in their focus, with policy interventions often economic in nature (for example, through the provision of bursaries) and, increasingly, cultural (as exemplified by the recent Clapping for Carers campaign in UK), but rarely concerned with political and affective equalities. A growing body of work draws from Fraser's multidimensional social justice framework to reframe access, equity and widening participation in higher education (Burke 2002 & 2012; Bozalek & Boughey 2012; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek 2017; Bozalek et al. 2020). Social justice approaches to equity also emphasise the need to understand inequalities in higher education not only as measurable barriers but as affective lived, embodied experiences (Burke 2002, 2012 & 2017; Leathwood & Read 2008; Read 2011; Brooks & O'Shea 2021; O'Shea 2020). Research has brought attention to the lived experiences of groups that have been largely ignored or constructed as 'the problem' in equity policy and literature, such as refugees (Stevenson & Willott 2007; Tsegay 2021) or carers (Brooks 2015; Moreau 2016). The politics of representation has been a key concern of critical researchers including how policy categorisations such as low socioeconomic status overshadow and exclude from view the identity positions of (for example, working class) communities (Threadgold, Burke & Bunn 2018; Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020). The growing policy concern to evaluate equity and the ways evaluation methodologies often misrepresent

those participating in equity programs has also been a key concern of social justice approaches to equity in higher education (Lumb 2018; Bennett & Lumb 2019; Lumb & Burke 2019).

These multidimensional social justice perspectives are highly significant in examining writing the field of equity, as ‘good’ academic writing has often been constructed as apolitical, decontextual, disembodied and devoid of emotions. They show instead that access to the written form (and, *a fortiori*, being published) constitutes a form of privilege which reasserts classed, racialised, gendered and linguistic power dynamics. Suffice here to remind how archives are often populated by stories narrated by and about the White, male and middle-upper class citizens – less so of the marginalised, associated with other auralities. Academic writing in particular can be exclusionary as it relies on gatekeeping processes and specific linguistic codes to which all do not have access (Moreau & Galman, this issue). These codes are built deeply into the representations, forms, content and style of our writing. The papers within this special issue explore the empirical and conceptual dimensions of how writing is in and of itself an exclusionary practice and an act in the production of exclusion, marginalisation and social inequality.

### **Reflecting on representation**

One of the key issues raised in this special issue is who has access to representations: to defining what kinds of groups and categories exist in the world, what features and what aspects of their character are salient. The group *is as it is*, an ‘ontological slippage’ which allows the reader to assume the reality of the group represented. This is a dangerous slippage in such a politically contested domain as equity and inequality. So quickly can those deemed ‘underrepresented’ be marginalised from the representations of themselves. These are replaced with sterilised ‘docile bodies’ (Santos 2014, p. 152), a narrow identity made to represent the aspects of a person deemed relevant by the professionals who oversee, regulate and evaluate the suitability for higher education access. Representations (such as low socioeconomic status) are often engaged in higher education at a sufficient distance from the people being represented to forget the subtlety and nuance of lived experience. It rounds off the complex edges and polishes away the blemishes and inconsistencies to produce a neutral, inoffensive representation. From this, we can infer and conjecture all the different symbolically violent notions that our power might allow.

Bunn (this issue) draws attention to this as a serious concern through exploring who has access to representations in equity writing. When equity writing is drawn back into representations that align with the dominant account, the very people we seek to represent are excluded, an act of representational violence. This violence is twofold, in that it is both the setting of the parameters of epistemic categories and discourses by professionals and elites, and the *lack* of access to representations that marginalised groups are being represented by. Equity categories, if not the notion of equity, has been preconstructed in ways that neutralise many of the cultures, identities and personhoods that exist beyond the objectives of policy-makers and institutional administrators. Instead, the values prescribed into higher education are constructed as universal, despite being a narrow spectrum of the differences and contrasts in our societies.

Equity groups are primarily political categories being portrayed as scientific categories. These political categories already comprise the history of struggle and contestation, one that the representation itself conceals. They conceal the histories of domination, of colonialism, of patriarchy, that are so quickly invoked and perpetuated as *legitimate* through their unproblematised use. They are used because they show aspects of a person or people that are politically conducive to the people in social positions with constitutive power, and sustained

more through the inertia of domination and an ensuing complicity/compliance, than by any rigour in the production of meaningful representations.

Lumb and Ndagijimana (this issue) demonstrate how quickly these ways of knowing are obscured for students known primarily through their status as ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’. The plurality of languages, beliefs, and ways of knowing across the Global South and Indigenous groups are funnelled into a narrow colonial lens, in short order obscuring, if not annihilating any opportunity for a plural recognition of knowledge within higher education. Representational violence is invariably produced in the inability to access the shape, form and mono-national hegemony of the representational form that comprises so much of the way that a nation state and its institutions will view them, and subsequently act upon them.

In many ways the *lack* of officiality of refugee and asylum seekers as an equity group demonstrates just how powerful representational violence is. It shows that the way in which a group is officialised, sanctioned, *recognised* by state power is a violence. It demonstrates the narrowness and rigidity of the way in which forms of social suffering, inequality, deprivation and marginalisation are represented within the processes of officialisation. Yet without the status of an officially recognised category, the fate of groups might be even worse, having no means to access state resources, such as higher education fee waivers or scholarships, having no ‘domestic’ legitimacy. People with refugee and asylum seeker experiences accessing higher education are hence bound up within other equity categories, such as Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB), without recognition of the distinct and complex ways that their social situation enables them, nor of the ways that refugees and asylum seekers might construct themselves in their own group making (see Tsegay, in this issue).

Ndagijimana’s reflection on the aspiration to proficiency in French language (colonial) demonstrates the power of officialised representations. It draws people into a reverent relationship to the very representational violence being inflicted. It offers a narrow path to liberation from oppression only through assimilation into the monocultural form it demands of those subordinated to it. Yet, as one violence is mastered, another is met. It serves as a powerful reminder of how the seeming naturalness of being an Anglo, English-speaking Australian is an arbitrary form that can be taken for granted *only* when it is not being challenged. Lumb’s reflections point precisely to the difficulty of this: how can you know differently when the processes of legitimation are the very structuring of your means to recognise? It is a structuring of being and requires an immense reflexivity to even begin to unearth. Higher education is bound up within this settler-colonial violence, not only through the denial of formal access for marginalised groups, but also through the denial of epistemic alternatives to the sanctioned knowledge contained within higher education and its disciplines. And indeed, as Lumb and Ndagijimana allude to, the innocuousness of the wrapping of the representation of the idyllic Australian lifestyle is built on an overt settler-colonial violence.

Although official/legitimate categories are often portrayed as looming monoliths, officialisation is not produced through a single sweeping moment. The extremely complex layers of approval and sanctioning take representations through a long journey of documents, submit buttons, spreadsheets, budgets and committees. There is no ‘moment’ where the group comes perfectly into being, but is shaped through minor but consequential acceptances and approvals of it as it is carried through these processes. For example, both Tsegay and Burke point out how ethics procedures in higher education institutions routinely return the obligations of the researcher toward rationalist accounts of research ethics, subsequently displacing different ways of knowing ethics within research. These procedures bend the possibilities of even what can be

represented, what must be avoided, and what *lives and is brought into reality* in any given artefact or apparatus of research. But all of these adjustments and *absences* incrementally force out the alternatives.

So what is to be done? Burke notes, a ‘representational ethics’ is required that is sensitive to power, authority and domination within our writing. This sensitivity requires *presence*, of being aware of the stakes of writing in any of its mediums so demanded in equity work. The forms in which things are written exceed the journal article – the ethics document, the grant application, the risk assessment – and require vigilance in how they play their own part in the alteration, if not deformation, of a representational ethics. At each stage of writing we must take representations seriously and to guard against dismissing criticality as being ‘too difficult’, too complex, or too depressing. Although the answer is not likely to be forthcoming, we maintain presence, and a ‘patient praxis’ (Bunn & Lumb 2019), that is, willing to be uncomfortable, and to sit with the unsettling and difficult questions of representation throughout our writing.

### **Writing knowing: Form and content are inseparable**

Representation is closely connected to questions of ontological access – what forms of writing provide access to being (recognised as) a knowing subject. The approaches we take to writing, and the underpinning ontological positionings and epistemological perspectives that shape how and what we write, are significant in framing the focus, aims and lines of argumentation developed in our writing. Our special issue attends to the ontological and epistemological relationalities of form and content and argues with Richardson (2003) that form (how we write) and content (what we write) are entwined:

Writing is also a way of “knowing” – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (p. 499)

In hegemonic framings, writing is often perceived as detached from methodology and method. Richardson’s reframing of writing as a way of knowing disrupts hegemonic constructions that writing is simply reflecting, rather than forming, knowledge and knowing. The pieces across this special issue explicitly challenge hegemonic constructions of writing to closely consider the significance of writing for epistemological and ontological formations and what that means for questions of access. In Burke’s contribution, these questions are the focus of attention, including consideration of the underpinning methodologies that shape our writing, knowing and thus knowledge of ‘the field(s) in which we are differently (and unequally) situated as writers/readers/knowers’ (Burke, this issue).

How we write is crucial in what is made visible, included and recognised – and also what is invisible, excluded and misrecognised. Questions of form are always related to the politics of knowledge and knowing. The continual exclusion of the personal from the formation of legitimated knowledge is reproduced through taken-for-granted academic conventions such as the privileging of writing in the third person and the valuing of what is constructed as objective forms of knowledge. In this issue, authors intentionally disrupt the privileging of the “objective voice” to bring in personal accounts of knowing and knowledge. Tsegay writes a personal account of his academic journey to explore the complex inequalities in accessing quality higher education and writing in the context of Eritrea. In writing reflections and analysis of personal conversations, Lumb and Ndagijimana (this issue) consider the ‘undiscussable’ dimensions of their everyday encounters, creating a new space of developing relational forms of knowing and

grappling with their differently situated selves within complex histories of colonisation, including how language is entangled in power relations.

These contributions illustrate the power of personal forms of writing for generating relational knowledge about the complexities of access in its broadest sense. Such rich forms of knowing are undermined by the construction of form in generic or neutral terms as mere convention that authors must conform to in order to be publishable. We argue in this special issue that posing writing in such generic terms produces a distortion of the power relations in which differently situated writers are (not) recognised as authoritative knowers. Indeed *how* we write shapes *what* we write about. The idea that there is no question of form – that the conventions around writing in a particular disciplinary field of practice is beyond interrogation – is highly problematic. The idea that form is inconsequential to and/or detached from content reproduces hegemony and fixes in place the power of particular ontological positions, which produce author/ity and contribute to what is recognised as a ‘significant’ contribution to knowledge, or not.

We learn about form in the context of the disciplinary foundations or subject specific contexts in which our training/education is developed and these are tied to shared understandings of social and academic literacy practices. Form is reinforced through the pedagogical spaces and communities of practice in which disciplinary/subject specific knowledge is produced. Unless we are experts in the field of academic writing, it is rare to interrogate or analyse the implications of particular forms of writing on the formation of knowledge. We argue in this special issue that forms of writing are crucial to the formation of knowledge and this is deeply entrenched in histories of exclusion of forms of writing/communication/expression. This is most clearly demonstrated in the article by Moreau and Galman in which they draw from a different form of expression, the comic, to powerfully re/present the experiences of carers and care-oriented labour in higher education. As they argue, the written form can function as an exclusionary space that filters who and what gets access and representation/recognition. Those who do not fit the profile of the ‘bachelor boy’ can be excluded and emotions, care work and other work, and dimensions associated with femininity are constructed as antagonist to academic writing.

### **Towards writing as inclusive praxis**

In the essay *It Matters What Stories Tell Stories; It Matters Whose Stories Tell Stories*, (Haraway 2019), through ‘compost narration’ or ‘writing-with in layered composing and decomposing in order to write at all’ (2019, p. 565), Haraway reminds us that nothing makes itself nor tells its own story. The work helps us to think about how this special issue develops something of a meta-writing project, unfolding in close connection to the difficult term *equity*; a collection of *writing-about-writing-about-equity* in which writer/researchers engage, at least in part, in a sustained troubling of their own positions in relation to the possibility of a different higher education and, often times, ‘who they are as a researcher in a way that holds promise for advancing the critical edge of practice’ (Lather 2016, p. 126). Burke (this issue) asks us to explicitly consider the implications of writing being a social and relational practice that cannot be disentangled from methodological, epistemological and ontological concerns. And it is to some of these ontological concerns – for example, the writerly beings, the being of writing, the beings written – that this section of the editorial now turns.

For Coole and Frost (2010), drawing on Stephen White, ontology facilitates consideration of more than the nature of being but also the ‘underlying beliefs about existence that shape our everyday relationships to ourselves, to others, and to the world’ (2010, p. 5). The ontological turn (Lather 2016) has certainly offered new, and re-turnings to, ways we might conceptualise

relationships and realities. Adopting a relational ontology, how might we assess some of the multiple, co-existing and fluid formations that enact the tensions and encounters, rough objects and reals, beings and realities, writings and the written of this special issue? It is certainly well-rehearsed territory to describe this as an issue written in the social context of an increasing neoliberalisation of higher education that sees the growing hegemony of ideas such as ‘knowledge economy’ attached to the existence of universities. As Ozga explained some years ago (2008), this concept of the knowledge economy is a ‘meta-narrative that assumes and requires the commodification of knowledge in a system of global production, distribution and exchange’ (2008, p. 265). This meta-narrative has developed as part of a broader set of conditions which do nothing to facilitate more socially just arrangements in institutions such as universities. These are conditions which shape what it is possible to be and to become in higher education; conditions that limit and delimit what is possible or even likely, arguably ‘shaped by the narrowed ontological boundaries set within dominant imaginaries [that] prevent the possibility of lateral possibilities, imaginations, anticipations and futures to arrive’ (Lumb & Bunn, 2021, p. 126).

These power relations have immediate consequences for writing the field of equity in higher education, as multiple yet constrained ontologies unfold. Bunn (this issue) notes, in an extended deconstruction of the ‘labyrinthine challenge’ of representation, that in writing we are not just reflecting a reality but taking part in its construction. Bunn asks us to consider how we might ‘feel the weight of the water’, beseeching us as a responsibility, perhaps an ethic of writing equity and certainly an ‘endless labour of vigilance and reflexivity in our writing’, to consider the very immediate possibility of violence through representation that the field of equity in higher education can facilitate par excellence. Also focusing on how writing relates to a responsibility in relation, Tsegay (this issue) writes about the personal privilege of writing and the difficult question of whose voices are involved. This special issue is alive, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly, with these sorts of considerations such as how difficult it is for projects of writing not to re-inscribe settler colonial perspectives and commitments including the marginalisation of ways of being that are so commonly swept aside in projects of imperialism. As a way through this messy terrain, Burke (this issue) argues for practices that re/member one’s own social, cultural and historic location; particularly given the ways in which hegemonic practices tend to ‘exclude at the level of the ontological (who can claim authority) as well as the epistemological (what kind of knowledge is seen as worthy of recognition)’ (p. 27).

The ontological turn has seen in some quarters a new appreciation for the ways in which writing has historically been both time-intensive and material in character (Ulmer 2017) with artisanship and craft practices enjoying a remembering and renewal. Moreau and Galman (this issue) take up the comic as an arts-based research practice in seeking to consider the parts and the whole of a social problem in higher education simultaneously. In their piece, they show how the comic strip presents a readerly space where ‘the contiguous images and words that characterise comic art allow readers to be challenged by individual carers’ stories while also considering the larger socio-cultural context’ (p. 47).

Richardson (2003) points to difference in the ways we write as being a method of discovery; a powerful point that disrupts notions that writing is simply a reflection of ‘what is known’. We understand writing as actively shaping meaning-making processes. This special issue aims to provoke readers and potential contributors to this journal to use writing in different ways as a form of inclusive praxis; a way of bringing new perspectives and hidden dimensions of access and inequity to light.

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