

## Evaluation for Equity and Justice: a Special Issue of ACCESS

### Introduction: Unearthing Inequalities in Evaluation Practices

Formal evaluations of programs, plans, and policies are often heralded as essential tools for accountability and ensuring value-for-money. However, they are rarely scrutinized for the ways they create and perpetuate inequalities. Two key dynamics in evaluation practice—the processes of knowledge production and the mechanisms determining who and what gets valued—are central to understanding how inequalities are reproduced. This Special Issue aims to explore how these practices can be reimagined to resist the reproduction of inequities and uncover opportunities to harness evaluation for promoting equity and justice.

Despite the diverse array of evaluation practices available to assess complex social phenomena, the field of equity remains dominated by experimental designs rooted in epistemologies that can silence marginalised voices (Burke & Lumb 2018, 12; Burke & Lumb 2024; Brisolara et al. 2014; Donaldson et al. 2009). This narrow focus underscores the urgent need for approaches, both within the field of equity and beyond, that challenge dominant value systems and address the perpetuation of multidimensional injustices in an era of increasing inequality. Justice-oriented evaluation methodologies help disrupt the marginalization of socially disadvantaged perspectives, with significant implications for advancing equity and justice.

### ACCESS Journal: A Platform for Critical Dialogue

ACCESS is a journal dedicated to fostering critical debates on higher education and global inequalities. This Special Issue centres on approaches to challenge injustices produced through evaluation, critiquing the fixation on the question of "what works" as both undemocratic and ineffective (Biesta 2007; Gordon et al., 2022). This Special Issue rejects the notion of evaluation as apolitical or objective, instead recognizing the deeply embedded ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions of evaluative practices and is guided by an understanding that ethical considerations are central to justice-oriented evaluation (Guba & Lincoln 1989, 7). Evaluations can fail to address questions of consent, representation, and accountability, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. This Special Issue calls for reflections on how evaluators can navigate ethical dilemmas with transparency, reflexivity, and a commitment to shared decision-making. Contributors are invited to interrogate dominant value systems, resist the subjugation of marginalised knowledges, and reimagine evaluation as a tool for transformative social change.

### Core Themes and Questions:

This Special Issue invites contributions that explore the following key questions and concerns:

- **Contesting Neutrality in Evaluation:** How might we challenge the perceived neutrality of evaluation practices? Evaluation is often framed as an objective process, yet it is shaped by the values, interests, and power dynamics of those designing and implementing it. Contributors are encouraged to critically examine the assumptions and power relations underlying evaluation methodologies and to propose approaches that prioritise inclusivity and equity.
- **Solidarity Practices Among Practitioners:** What forms of solidarity could emerge among practitioners to disrupt the hegemonic evaluation culture that perpetuates inequality and injustice? This question invites contributions from those involved in exploring collaborative

efforts among evaluators, First Nations, community stakeholders, and marginalised groups to shed light on strategies for fostering equitable evaluation practices.

- **Higher Education as a Vehicle for Social Change:** How can higher education shift how evaluation is viewed and practiced? Institutions of higher education play a pivotal role in shaping evaluative norms and practices. This theme asks contributors to reflect on how higher education can model justice-oriented evaluation practices and cultivate a new generation of evaluators committed to social equity.
- **Foregrounding Marginalised Knowledges and Experiences:** How can evaluation processes learn from and centre marginalised knowledges and experiences, ensuring these voices inform evaluation processes and outcomes? Contributions from empirical studies and from theoretical work are both invited. We encourage work that explores innovative methodologies and case studies that elevate the perspectives of underrepresented groups, highlighting the limitations of conventional evaluation frameworks and proposing more inclusive, justice-oriented alternatives.
- **Critiquing Hegemonic Practices:** What impact does the dominance of experimental designs and positivist epistemologies in evaluation have in relation to equity and justice? It has been argued that these approaches often marginalise alternative ways of knowing, particularly those rooted in the lived experiences of socially disadvantaged communities. Through generative critique of hegemonic practices, contributors can show whether and how alternatives might differently account for the complexities of social phenomena, embrace diverse epistemologies, and prioritize the perspectives of those most affected by social inequalities.
- **Innovative Approaches to Justice-Oriented Evaluation:** Can evaluation *for* equity and justice produce innovative approaches that disrupt conventions and paradigms? Participatory and community-driven methodologies, for example, actively involve marginalised groups in the evaluation process, ensuring their knowledge and experiences shape the outcomes. Decolonial and feminist frameworks challenge Eurocentric and patriarchal norms, advocating for the validation of Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems. Contributors will show how these approaches can shape the future of policy and program evaluation.
- **The Role of Ethics and Power in Evaluation:** Power dynamics also play a critical role in shaping evaluation processes and outcomes. Who defines the evaluation criteria? Whose voices are prioritized? These questions highlight the need for evaluators to critically examine their own positionality and the power structures that influence their work. Contributors are encouraged to share theorisation and practice that is fostering humility and continuous learning for all involved, including empirical cases in which those tasked with facilitating evaluation processes have managed to build more equitable, authentic relationships.
- **Case Studies and Practical Applications:** How are the challenges and opportunities of justice-oriented evaluation being navigated in empirical contexts and cases? What are the affective and personal challenges of pushing back against exclusionary epistemologies? Where are the examples of evaluations of community-based initiatives, public policies, or educational programs that prioritize equity and inclusion? Contributors are encouraged to not only detail what are seen as 'successful' practices but to reflect on failures and lessons learned, fostering a culture of openness and collective growth, providing detailed accounts of their experiences, offering practical insights for others seeking to adopt justice-oriented approaches.
- **Looking Ahead: The Future of Evaluation:** How will evaluation methodologies evolve to address emerging challenges, such as climate justice, migration, and economic inequality? What role can technology and data play in advancing equity, and how can evaluators mitigate the reinforcing of inequalities within these tools? This Special Issue aims to extend critical dialogue on the future of evaluation, inviting contributors to envision new possibilities

for the field, anticipating futures in which evaluation serves as a tool for forms of social change that amplify marginalised voices and challenge systemic injustices.

## Call for Submissions

We invite submissions that address the themes outlined above, including:

- Research articles exploring theoretical and methodological innovations in justice-oriented evaluation.
- Empirical studies highlighting case studies, best practices, and lessons learned.
- Theoretical reflections on the politics of knowledge and the role of evaluation in challenging dominant value systems.
- Commentaries on emerging trends and future directions for the field of evaluation.
- Forms that represent marginalised or subjugated ways of knowing and/or communicating in relation to evaluation.
- Frameworks drawing on decolonial and feminist commitments to challenge Eurocentric and patriarchal norms, advocating for the validation of Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems.

Submissions should adhere to the journal's guidelines, including formatting and word count requirements. We particularly encourage contributions from underrepresented voices, including scholars and practitioners from marginalised communities. By bringing together diverse perspectives, this Special Issue aims to advance the collective understanding of how evaluation can serve as a tool for equity and justice.

The editorial team welcomes you to contact us to discuss potential contributions, including alternative, creative or 'non-traditional' forms of research output and publication. Please email [ceehe@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:ceehe@newcastle.edu.au) to establish contact in the first instance. We are happy to set up a phone or zoom call if that is seen as useful.

The deadline for abstract submissions is **12 March 2025**. For detailed submission guidelines, please visit <https://novaajs.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/index.php/iswp/about>. We look forward to your contributions and to fostering a rich dialogue on the transformative potential of evaluation.

## TIMELINE

Abstracts due	March 12 2025
Submission of full papers	June 30 2025
Publication	November 2025

### Editorial team:

**Rhyall Gordon** is Praxis Officer at the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education. With many years of experience in working in community development and a PhD in community economic development, he is keen to contribute to how evaluation can be a force for good in programs with a concern for social justice.

**Matt Lumb** is Associate Director of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle in Australia. He grew up in the unceded Country of the Gumbaynggirr peoples on the mid north coast of NSW. Since his PhD looking at the unintended consequences of

university activity in high schools, he has collaborated extensively to show how evaluation can reproduce social inequalities.

**James Ballangarry** is a Lecturer at The Wollotuka Institute Indigenous Education & Research. He is a Gumbaynggirr man from the mid north coast of NSW. James played a key role in developing the Re-Imagining Evaluation Framework: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework for the NSW Department of Education. His work focuses on exploring how First Nations approaches to evaluation can drive more equitable outcomes for First Nations peoples.

**Monica McKenzie** is the Indigenous Evaluation Partner at The Wollotuka Institute for Education and Research. A Dharawal-Yuin woman, mother, and lecturer, she brings many years of experience working in public education. She now describes her work as 'being curious for a living.' Monica values the importance of elevating diverse lived experiences and understands the significance of sensitivity to difference in the evaluation process.

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