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Izabela Pluta, photographic component from *Variable depth, shallow water* (2020) silver gelatin photograph, acrylic face mount, 51 x 61cm
Material structure (artist's hand 1+2) (2022), cast bronze, unique, 14 x 14 x 11cm
Documentation by Lucy Foster
Courtesy the artist and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert, Sydney

Izabela Pluta was born in Warsaw, Poland, and emigrated to Australia in 1987. She lives in Muloobinba (Newcastle, NSW). Pluta completed her undergraduate studies in fine art at The University of Newcastle and her Master of Fine Art at The University of New South Wales. In 2017, she went on to complete her PhD in the Faculty of Creative Arts, The University of Wollongong, entitled 'Allegories of Diaspora: Gleaning the residues of spatial and temporal misalignments'. Pluta is an Associate Professor in The School of Art & Design, Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture, UNSW Sydney, and is represented by Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert.

The cover image is a detail from Izabela Pluta's installation presented in *Renditions*, at Project 8 in Melbourne, in 2023—an exhibition that "acknowledged the radically different modes of perception and ways of seeing" shaped by context and experience (Kim Donaldson and Sean Lowry).

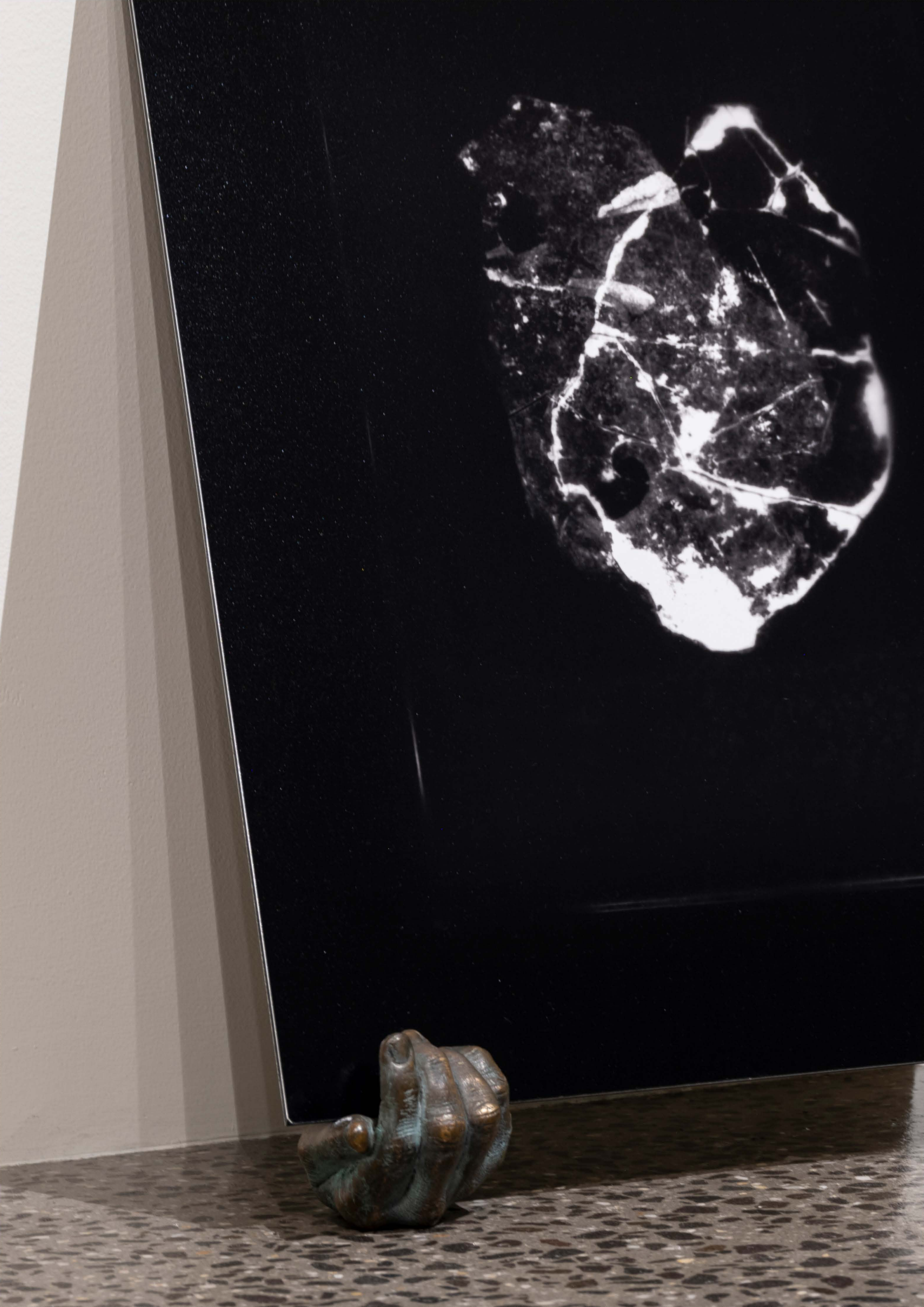
Pluta's practice consistently pushes the limits of photographic representation, engaging in the labour of documentary only to fragment, obscure, and reconfigure its materials. Through processes of dislocation and reassembly, her images shift from neutral description toward forms that translate lived, embodied experience.

The work pictured includes a silver gelatin photograph from *Variable depth, shallow water* (2020), a project developed in Malta following Pluta's dives at the collapsed rock arch at Dwejra—now 12 metres below sea level. The installation features the photograph mounted on sculptural bronze cast of the artist's hands. The camera-less image traces its origin to a pseudo-artefact recovered by local divers from the depths of the Yonaguni Monument. A careful copy of this object rests at the dive centre in Yonaguni, from which Pluta made a xerox—an echo of an echo. It was this fragile imprint, carried back from the site, that she later placed under the enlarger to form the contact print. Together, these components speak to the instability of place and the volatility of geological and environmental time.

The broader photographic methodology informing Pluta's practice is explored in *Twenty-four inversions* (2023). By placing the Xerox beneath an enlarger, and filtering light through the paper, Pluta fuses both sides of the page into a new image. This inverted, negative-like form distances the photograph from its original referent and evokes how light disappears rapidly underwater—a phenomenon mirrored in her fieldwork across oceanic sites since 2018. These gestures metaphorically register ecosystem collapse and the accelerating impacts of climate change.

The editors see strong resonances between Pluta's attention to process, methodology and technology—and the ways these challenge assumptions of photographic neutrality—and the arguments made throughout this Issue. Each contributing author interrogates evaluation as an ethically, politically, and epistemologically charged practice rather than a neutral procedure.
In parallel with Pluta's approach, they examine how methods shape meaning, and how practices of representation reveal the complex value dynamics that organise the field of evaluation.

This journal is published on the unceded lands of the Pambalong Clan of the Awabakal People.



EDITORIAL

Evaluation for equity and social justice in higher education: Confronting notions of neutrality; reconceptualising purpose and practice

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Formal evaluation is everywhere—shaping programs, policies, and even how we see ourselves—yet the question of justice in evaluation remains stubbornly sidelined. For decades, and in the context of equity in higher education work, evaluation has been treated as a neutral, technical exercise, a mechanism for crude forms of accountability and supposed efficiency. But neutrality in this context is not just a myth, it is a convenient fiction that conceals the values and power relations embedded in every evaluative act. Evaluation practices determine whose knowledge counts, whose success is legitimised, and whose voices are heard or silenced. When these dynamics go unquestioned and unacknowledged, we risk reinforcing the very inequities we claim to understand and address.

This Special Issue of ACCESS emerged from a desire to create spaces that challenge silences and blind spots in higher education equity evaluation and to catalyse new conversations about justice in evaluative practice. Its intention is to respond to an absent aspect of discussions in relation to equity in higher education: while evaluation is everywhere—shaping programs, policies, and practitioner identities—questions of ethics, power, and cultural integrity remain marginal. This Special Issue aims to engage with this absence through reconceptualising evaluation as a tool for equity and justice; a tool that can resist the reproduction of inequalities and amplify marginalised voices. Through the Special Issue call for papers, contributors were invited to interrogate dominant value systems, contest the illusion of neutrality, and explore methodologies that prioritise

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inclusivity, reciprocity, and community-defined success. By bringing together diverse perspectives—Indigenous, feminist, decolonial, and participatory—the Special Issue seeks to advance collective understanding of how evaluation can move beyond compliance and control toward transformative social change.

To set the scene for the Special Issue, this editorial lays out the context and rationale for bringing these papers together. The editorial also frames the intellectual and practical stakes involved, articulates why the conversation matters now, and signals the contribution the collection aims to make. By examining the questions that drive the authors' work and situating them within the Special Issue's purpose and scope, the editorial invites readers into a shared space for critical reflection. The papers themselves offer a diverse range of topics, theoretical perspectives, and empirical approaches; however, they also converge on a common stance that challenges dominant assumptions about policy, program and strategy evaluation – calling instead for justice-oriented alternatives[1]. Rather than reducing this diversity to a single narrative, the editorial will show how these contributions speak to one another and collectively advance the field. The second part of the editorial provides a concise overview of each paper's focus and contribution, offering readers a roadmap for engaging with the collection and for understanding how these varied perspectives open new possibilities for justice-oriented evaluation.

We have framed this Special Issue as an urgent discussion regarding the non-neutrality of higher education equity and widening participation evaluation. It is important to examine why such a conversation is necessary. For all its claims of neutrality, mainstream evaluation often functions as a compliance instrument, privileging metrics over meaning. Equity and/or Widening Participation in higher education is part of the policy agenda in many contexts around the globe, including in Australia, the UK, across Europe, parts of Latin America, the USA, and parts of Asia. These are agendas differently shaped in relation to nation-state context but often borrow policy ideas and language from one another. Accompanying each of these agendas is the ever-present demand for monitoring and evaluation. In Australian higher education, for example, frameworks such as the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) dominate the landscape. Despite efforts over many years to foreground the importance of equity provision-evaluation taking much more seriously what matters to people (e.g. Bennett 2018), these formally endorsed frameworks embed neoliberal logics that align equity work with national economic agendas rather than social justice goals (Warren 2025 **SI**). In England, as Schulte (2025 **SI**) articulate, the agenda to widen participation has had a fraught relationship with the idea of evaluation for over twenty years, with efforts to systematise practice within higher education providers leading to the normalisation of practices that commonly deploy 'technical expertise, linear thinking, and rationality' over a more pluralistic set of possibilities. Squire (2025 **SI**) also notes the rise of regulator-funded bodies such as TASO who shape evaluation of access and participation schemes by providing training and guidance, commissioning evaluation, and producing literature reviews – all focused on developing 'robust, causal evidence'. These types of evaluation frameworks can tend to prize 'certainty' through experimental or quasi-experimental designs, pursuing indeed what has been termed a "chimera of certainty" (Warren 2025 **SI**) even as they fail to capture the complexity of lived experience. Success is reduced largely to enrolment, retention, and completion rates —metrics that dominate equity discourse while ignoring cultural

[1] In this editorial, much of the literature drawn upon are papers in this Special Issue. To denote this, we have used "**SI**" within the citation brackets.

identity, belonging, and intergenerational aspiration (Pham 2025 **SI**; Moors-Mailei, Williams & Natapu-Ponton 2025 **SI**). Indicators become technical proxies for effectiveness, sidelining structural questions of justice (Rahman 2025 **SI**) and reinforcing deficit framings that cast underrepresented students as lacking the right forms of aspiration or capability (Warren 2025 **SI**). This fixation on numbers is not benign; it reflects a deeper neoliberal orientation that positions equity cohorts as "under-used resources" for economic competitiveness rather than as agents of educational justice (Warren 2025 **SI**). Compounding these issues is the absence of a critical evaluation culture: universities rarely assess the effectiveness of equity programs, and when evaluations are conducted, findings are often withheld due to sector competition (Pham 2025 **SI**). These dynamics reveal that dominant evaluation practices do not simply measure impact—they actively shape what counts as success, privileging institutional priorities over community-defined outcomes and perpetuating the very inequities they claim to address.

If dominant evaluation logics shape what counts as success, they also shape how institutions—and individuals—govern themselves and create a set of broader forces that make these logics so pervasive. Governments no longer pull the levers directly; they steer at a distance through evaluation frameworks, performance indicators, and accountability regimes—a dynamic Neave famously described as the "evaluative state" (Neave 2012). These mechanisms embed neoliberal rationalities into higher education, positioning evaluation as a tool for governance rather than learning. At the same time, Dahler-Larsen's notion of an "evaluation society" (Dahler-Larsen 2012) illuminates how these external controls become internalised: practitioners measure their worth through outputs, dashboards, and compliance metrics, even when these indicators distort the realities they claim to represent (Tovey, Reid, Boyce, Huff & Onwuka du Bruyn 2025 **SI**; Pham 2025 **SI**). This culture of self-surveillance constrains what is "thinkable" in equity work, narrowing the space for approaches that privilege relationality, cultural integrity, and community-defined success (Moors-Mailei, Williams & Natapu-Ponton 2025 **SI**). Neutrality, far from being a safeguard, operates as an illusion—for evaluation does not merely observe reality; it actively constructs it, shaping priorities and legitimising certain forms of knowledge while erasing others (Tovey et al. 2025 **SI**). These dynamics create profound tensions between institutional accountability and cultural responsibility, a theme that runs through the papers in this Special Issue. By surfacing these tensions, it is important to signal why justice-oriented evaluation cannot be achieved through technical fixes alone. The contributions gathered here challenge the evaluative state's quiet grip, and the normalization of compliance (Kelly & Schulte 2025 **SI**), offering alternatives that reframe evaluation as a practice of care, reciprocity, and shared authority (Squire 2025 **SI**).

While evaluation governance may set the rules of conduct, tools such as program logic models, theories of change, and impact pathways often provide the architecture. These tools promise clarity and are widely used to structure interventions and articulate causal assumptions, yet their influence is far from neutral. At their best, these tools can support transparency, foster shared understanding, and even advance social justice when co-designed with communities and informed by relational ethics. However, when they are driven by an obsession with narrow forms of visible impact and disregard for complexity, they risk reproducing the very inequities they claim to address. As Rahman et al. (2025 **SI**) argue, evaluation can be a dangerously effective path to a 'masquerade' whereby historically formed institutional barriers that require urgent change are understood only as individual challenges with which people need to cope. In equity work, models such as program logic can sometimes force complexity into rigid, linear pathways, privileging neat chains of inputs and outputs over the messy realities of cultural identity, belonging, and intergenerational aspiration (Moors-Mailei, Williams & Natapu-Ponton 2025 **SI**). This reductionist logic aligns with the sector's pursuit of "certainty" through experimental designs and allows evaluation design to dictate program design, reversing the intended relationship (Warren 2025 **SI;** Kelly & Schulte 2025 **SI**). Such architectures ignore context and relational accountability, reinforcing the illusion of neutrality and sustaining structures of control (Tovey et al. 2025 **SI**).

The papers in this Special Issue collectively challenge these tendencies, arguing that complexity is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be embraced—and that pluralism in evaluation design is essential for justice-oriented practice. Kelly and Schulte's (2025 **SI**) work demonstrates the benefits of engaging with complexity through adopting Critical Systems Heuristics, an approach that guides toward normative practices, with questions including "What makes this the right thing to do?". This embracing of complicated contexts and relationality is a common theme across this issue of the ACCESS journal. By surfacing these critiques, the Special Issue underscores why dismantling rigid architectures is not about abandoning structures altogether but about reconceptualising their purpose: from compliance to care, from control to collaboration.

If program logic style tools dictate the architecture of evaluation, then the values embedded within that architecture determine what is seen as credible—and what is erased. Every evaluation rests on values, so why does the illusion of objectivity persist? Axiology—the question of whose values shape what counts as success—is central to equity evaluation, yet it remains largely unexamined in dominant frameworks. Institutional priorities often overshadow community-defined aspirations, privileging indicators that serve compliance over those that reflect cultural integrity or lived experience (Pham 2025 **SI**). This illusion of neutrality masks the reality that evaluation is an act of judgment, not a mechanical process—a point underscored by Tovey et al. (2025 **SI)**, who argue that legitimacy should come from responsibility, not control. Their call for phronesis, or practical wisdom, reframes evaluation as a moral and relational practice, accountable to context and care rather than abstract standards. Indeed, as Hayton shares (2025 **SI**), the motivation behind the development of NERUPI in the UK (the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions) was to show it was possible to combine understandings from educational theory along with insights from practice, while continuing to take account of policy and reporting requirements. The papers in this Special Issue collectively challenge the fetishisation of objectivity, proposing markers of rigour grounded in ethical relevance (Squire 2025 **SI**) and context-specific validity (Moors-Mailei, Williams & Natapu-Ponton 2025 **SI**). Pham's contribution advances this argument through the Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) CARE principles—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics—which embed justice into the very fabric of evaluation design. By surfacing these questions of axiology, the editorial signals a critical shift: from evaluation as a neutral arbiter to evaluation as a value-laden practice that must own its commitments. This is not a technical adjustment; it is a philosophical reorientation that underpins every justice-oriented approach featured in this collection.

Values determine what success looks like, so there are questions to consider regarding what kinds of outcomes we are willing to recognise—and what remains invisible. If belonging, cultural identity, and intergenerational aspiration don't count as success, then what exactly are we measuring? For decades, higher education equity evaluation has been dominated by a metrics obsession: enrolment, retention, and completion rates presented as definitive indicators of impact.

These numbers matter, but they tell only part of the story—and often the least transformative part. It is also often ignored that for something or someone to be quantified, it must first be rendered recognisable within existing categorisations that are an expression of a social gaze carrying judgement and injustice related to class, gender, race, ability, etc. (Burke & Lumb 2024). When evaluation reduces success to technical outputs, it ignores the relational and cultural dimensions that equity programs seek to nurture (Moors-Mailei, Williams & Natapu-Ponton 2025 **SI**; Pham 2025 **SI**). Indigenous and Pacific epistemologies expand the very notion of rigour, proposing indicators such as belonging, identity, and collective wellbeing as legitimate measures of success (Moors-Mailei, Williams & Natapu-Ponton 2025 **SI;** Pascoe & Armstrong, 2025, **SI**). Similarly, the IDS CARE principles—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics—reframe evaluation as a collaborative, ethically grounded process rather than an extractive exercise (Pham 2025 **SI)**. Taken together, these approaches challenge the assumption that rigour equals control, insisting instead that ethical relevance and context-specific validity are the true markers of quality (Tovey et al. 2025 **SI).**

The papers in this Special Issue converge on this point: moving beyond metrics is not about abandoning evidence but about broadening what counts as evidence, embedding cultural integrity and relational accountability into evaluation design. As Squire (2025 **SI**) asks, given the complex power relations identified, how might evaluators of equity, access and participation in higher education pursue an ethics whereby their complex role shifts away from worrying forms of authority toward facilitating learning within a "network of responsible parties". By highlighting these alternatives, this collection signals a shift from evaluation as a mechanism of measurement to evaluation as a practice of meaning-making—one that honours complexity, resists reductionism, and opens space for justice-oriented futures.

Shifting policy, program, or strategy evaluation practice in new directions is a formidable challenge, particularly when the term "evaluation" carries longstanding conceptualisations that continually reassert purposes and legitimate practices. To move beyond this commonsense territory is to risk being constructed as illegitimate, unreasonable, and outside what is considered true. Yet, given the stakes identified within this Special Issue, these are risks worth taking. As Moors-Mailei, Williams & Natapu-Ponton demonstrate, for some communities evaluation cannot be understood as a technical exercise—it is a cultural practice grounded in relationships and reciprocity. Guba and Lincoln (1989) anticipated this argument, asserting that "to approach evaluation scientifically is to miss completely its fundamentally social, political, and value-oriented character" (1989 p. 7). Indigenous–Pacific paradigms such as *fa'afaletui*, *vā*, *talanoa*, and *tok stori* (Moors-Mailei, Williams and Natapu-Ponton 2025 **SI**) should never be cursory additions to furnish the fringes of equity evaluation. These are rich and fundamental frameworks within which cultural integrity and reciprocity are sustained through iterative, relational, and ethical conduct. These approaches dethrone neutrality and situate evaluation in context and care, demanding that any credible process remain accountable to the communities and contexts it serves. Pascoe and Armstrong (2025 **SI**) describe how creating a safe social space for sharing is so intricately woven into cultural practices as to feel 'natural' to many First Nations community members, and therefore almost difficult to define. For these authors, notions of relation, reciprocity and respect are brought together through reference to *reverence*; a way to signal where power relations need to shift in recognition of whose knowledge and perspective matters when it comes to justice-oriented evaluation. Tovey et al. extend this vision through Reflective Dialogue (RD), a living practice that "moves at the speed of trust" and resists the illusion of rule-bound certainty. RD's enabling conditions—spaciousness, attunement, and accountability to relationship—echo the commitments articulated by Pascoe and Armstrong (2025 **SI**) and Moors-Mailei, Williams and Natapu-Ponton (2025 **SI**), positioning evaluation as dialogic and interpretive rather than mechanical. Together, these contributions signal a profound shift: from evaluation as compliance to evaluation as cultural praxis, where humility, care, and collective flourishing become the true markers of rigour.

Justice-oriented evaluation needs to be understood as not a solo act—it thrives on solidarity among practitioners, communities, and scholars. Solidarity among practitioners is not only about shared critique but about cultivating spaces for mutual learning and ethical courage. As Tovey et al. (2025 **SI**) argue, evaluators often feel trapped between complicity and irrelevance within compliance-driven cultures; RD's enabling conditions—such as safety and shared risk—offer a way to hold this tension collectively rather than in isolation. Similarly, Hayton's account of NERUPI (2025 **SI**) demonstrates how collaborative frameworks can resist hegemonic norms by sustaining dialogue across institutions, while Moors-Mailei, Williams and Natapu-Ponton (2025, **SI**) remind us that solidarity requires humility and accountability to relationships, not just technical alignment. These commitments converge on a common stance: dismantling extractive practices and resisting hegemonic evaluation cultures that privilege 'certainty' over complexity. The Special Issue itself becomes a space for collective praxis, where diverse voices interrogate dominant logics and co-create justice-oriented alternatives. By foregrounding collaboration over compliance, these contributions remind us that evaluation's emancipatory potential depends on networks of care and collective action.

If evaluation is to serve equity and justice, it must stop asking "what works" and start asking for whom, on whose terms, and how our design supports this. The critique of a what works approach can certainly take many paths, including in relation to the democratic (e.g. Gordon et al. 2023) that responds to a 'democratic deficit' (Biesta 2007) which arguably circulates through "what works" agendas. In a revisiting of his essay "Why 'What Works' Won't Work", Biesta recently analysed the continued rise of evidence-based education, describing the resulting research monocultures and subsequent education monocultures that leave "little time and scope for engaging with normative questions about what education is for and professional questions about how education should be enacted." (Biesta 2025 p. 4). Looking forward, the challenge appears structural: to embed sovereignty, pluralism, and ethics into the architecture of evaluation in higher education. Authors in this Special Issue call: for paradigms that privilege cultural integrity and community-defined outcomes: dismantling frameworks that treat equity as a technical problem rather than a structural question of justice: blueprints for ethical futures; and reframing evaluation as collaborative and self-determined rather than extractive. The authors urge us to embrace uncertainty and complexity as conditions for flourishing, cultivating evaluative soil where practical wisdom—phronesis—can thrive. The issue sees a sustained critique of neoliberal logics, underscoring why this shift is urgent: as long as evaluation remains tethered to economic competitiveness and reductive metrics, it will reproduce the inequities it claims to address. In our view, futures should not be imagined or enacted in isolation. We see reconceptualisation of evaluation *for* equity and social justice requiring solidarity among practitioners, policymakers, and communities to co-create evaluative cultures that resist compliance and nurture care. Collective action—through shared frameworks, dialogic practices, and ethical alliances—will be essential to sustain this transformation. The path ahead demands courage to break with orthodoxy, reframe rigour through ethical relevance, and design evaluations that nurture belonging, dignity, and justice. This is not a technical adjustment but a moral and political project—one that invites readers to join in reconceptualising evaluation as care, not control, and as a collective endeavour toward equity and transformation.

The papers

In this section of the editorial, we introduce each of the papers in the order they appear. As we invite you to engage with these contributions, we acknowledge the challenges navigated by the authors who have made this Special Issue possible. Writing about evaluation—and doing evaluation itself—is never neutral work. As Squire (2025 **SI**) shows, navigating evaluation of equity is an ethical minefield. It is intellectually demanding and emotionally charged, often unfolding in spaces of tension, uncertainty, and discomfort. As Tovey et al. (2025 **SI**) remind us, evaluators are called to inhabit a posture of judgment that resists the lure of control and neutrality and staying accountable to relationships. This is not easy work. It asks us to sit with complexity, to hold competing values, and to navigate institutional pressures while remaining answerable to communities. It can provoke anxiety, vulnerability, and even fatigue, because the stakes are high: evaluation shapes what counts as knowledge, whose voices are heard, and whose futures are imagined.

Moors-Mailei, Williams and Natapu-Ponton – Beyond metrics: Centring Indigenous Knowledges in higher education equity evaluation

This paper dismantles the illusion of neutrality in equity evaluation, showing how dominant frameworks reproduce epistemic exclusion. It introduces Indigenous–Pacific paradigms—fa'afaletui, vā, talanoa, tok stori—that define rigour through reciprocity, cultural integrity, and relational accountability. Rather than treating evaluation as a technical exercise, the authors position it as a practice of care and sovereignty, generating indicators like belonging and intergenerational aspiration. Their argument is both critical and hopeful: evaluation can move beyond extractive logics to become a transformative, justice-oriented process that honours Indigenous authority and community-defined success.

Warren – Beyond 'skills through equity' and 'the hope of redemption': contesting neoliberal Australian widening participation policy and hegemonic evaluation practices

Warren interrogates the neoliberal underpinnings of widening participation policy, tracing how equity agendas have been co-opted by economic competitiveness narratives. He critiques evaluation practices that pursue a "chimera of certainty" through experimental designs, while ignoring the complexity of lived experience. The paper exposes deficit framings that cast underrepresented students as lacking aspiration and positions disadvantaged groups as "under-used resources." By linking these dynamics to the Australian Universities Accord, Warren calls for evaluation that resists reductive metrics and reclaims social justice as the core purpose of equity work.

Kelly and Schulte – Evaluation for equity and justice in higher education: The Political, the Relational, and the Transformational

Kelly and Schulte take careful account of the Widening Participation context in England as it has developed over recent decades, including the key players, shifts in processes relating to legitimate practice or evidence, and the ways in which evaluation of policymaking and programming is shaped by macro, meso and micro level socio-political factors. The authors introduce Critical

Systems Heuristics as a framework to create spaces in which more explicit identifications can be made in relation to, for example, the authorities, assumptions and judgements at play within an evaluation process. The paper articulates a specific use of this framework, deconstructing the approach to WP and consequences for evaluation as by formulated by a central stakeholder in England, the Office for Students.

Tovey, Reid, Boyce, Huff &* Onwuka du Bruyn *– Judgment, flourishing, and the composting of evaluation through Reflective Dialogue

Tovey et al. challenge the positivist "illusion of neutrality" that pervades evaluation, introducing Reflective Dialogue (RD) as a living, relational practice. RD resists rule-bound certainty and moves "at the speed of trust," enabling evaluators to act with phronesis—the practical wisdom to discern what is good and just in context. The paper offers enabling conditions for RD, such as safety, attunement, and accountability to relationships, positioning evaluation as dialogic and interpretive rather than mechanical. Using the powerful soil metaphor, the authors contrast the "positivist-poisoned garden" with RD's fertile ground for ethical, human knowledge-making—a space where evaluation can truly flourish.

Squire - What Counts? Who Counts? Ethical evaluation in access and participation

The role, perspectives and experiences of those responsible for conducting evaluation in relation to access and participation is an under-explored area of higher education policy and program literature. Squire presents an engaging analytical account from within the complex politics of policy and program evaluation of access and participation work in England. This work brings specific attention to ethical dilemmas identified by thirteen people (including the author) who held responsibility for producing evaluation processes and products in this context. The paper asks many questions, including whether it is possible, given the complex power relations at play, to argue for an ethics which sees evaluators taking seriously their situation in a "network of responsible parties".

Pham – Critical evaluation through the lens of Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Pham reframes evaluation as an ethical and political act, introducing the IDS CARE principles—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics—as a blueprint for justice-oriented evaluation. The paper critiques the dominance of institutional metrics and the absence of student voice in data governance, arguing that extractive practices reinforce systemic inequities. By centring Indigenous data sovereignty and participatory approaches, Pham shows how evaluation can shift from external judgment to collaborative, culturally accountable processes. This vision positions evaluation as a tool for empowerment, not surveillance.

Rahman, de Henau and Matlock – Waves of evidence: A novel approach to the collaborative enquiry of equity in higher education

Rahman et al. present a fascinating project of collaborative enquiry that challenges conventional policy and program evaluation approaches. The authors bring together policy, practice, theory, methodological innovation across three distinct programmatic projects, with multiple investigators, to develop a collaboration that draws on Barad-inspired diffractive cooperative enquiry. This paper demands the reader's attention and rewards that attention with a journey of 'productive tension' rather than the sorts of consensus that can drive 'the reproduction of institutional inequities', as the authors so aptly put it. Rahman et al demonstrate plurality of approach is possible and necessary if we are to counter narrow, evidence hierarchies privileging a restricted set of methodological possibilities and notions of rigour.

Pascoe and Armstrong – Evaluation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Preparation program experience: An exploration of the program's contribution to First Nation student futures

Presented in the form of a yarn, this exchange with the SI editors offers insight from the authors on the challenges faced when trying to ensure contemporary higher education institutions actively value culturally safe, Indigenous-led programs. The yarn asks us to consider why an award-winning program would be discontinued and absorbed into a mainstream model without consultation. We are challenged by questions such as why rigid approaches to review and reporting are seen as legitimate when they are clearly unfit for purpose if we consider cultural standards of conduct. The authors argue for Indigenous co-designed evaluation in higher education, the valuing of culturally embedded preparatory programs, and the need for forms of reverence when an effort seeks to build knowledge with community members through evaluation research.

Hayton – Reflections on evaluation of widening participation initiatives in England: the emergence and development of NERUPI

Hayton provides an historical and conceptual account of the NERUPI Framework and its evolution in response to policy, practice, and theoretical developments in English higher education. NERUPI is now a network of over 70 higher education organisations, many of whom implement a framework developed by author Hayton and Dr Andrew Bengry. Through this personal account, Hayton offers insight into the challenges of evaluating widening participation (WP) initiatives by reflecting on NERUPI's efforts over many years to sustain a collaborative set of contexts and approaches that resists narrow, positivist models of evaluation.

Concluding thoughts

The authors in this collection have leaned into the discomfort that comes with unsettling convention with both courage and care, offering insights that challenge dominant logics and open space for justice-oriented alternatives. Their work reminds us that evaluation is not only technical but deeply ethical and relational—a practice that requires humility, reflexivity, and solidarity. We thank these authors for their generosity in sharing these ideas and for contributing to a conversation that is as urgent as it is transformative. The editorial team would also like to thank ACCESS Journal Manager Ms Julia Shaw, whose expert curation of the process has ensured a generative experience for us, plus a final product with a provocative character and an equally bold aesthetic. In relation to the look and feel of this issue, we also would like to thank Izabela Pluta for contributing her artwork for the cover imagery. You can read in the front matter of this issue some of the connections made back and forth between the editorial team and Izabela in relation to the focus of the issue and the artwork. No journal survives without the generous labour of reviewers. As an editorial team, we are grateful to the many anonymous reviewers who strode into yet another context of evaluation in higher education, (the peer review!), to challenge and encourage authors with an impressive combination of capability and care. From all of us on the editorial team, we invite you to engage with the author's work in this Special Issue of ACCESS.

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Beyond metrics: Centring Indigenous Knowledges in higher education equity evaluation

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Evaluation in Australian higher education is often presented as objective and neutral, yet dominant frameworks remain deeply embedded in Eurocentric epistemologies that privilege compliance, standardisation, and quantifiable metrics. These approaches marginalise Indigenous knowledges and risk reducing equity to a technical rather than structural and justice-oriented concern. In this article, we critically examine how such frameworks entrench epistemic exclusion in the evaluation of equity programs. Drawing on Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies, including fa'afaletui, vā, talanoa, and tok stori, we argue for relational, culturally grounded, and community-led approaches to evaluation. Case studies from the University of Technology Sydney, Western Sydney University, and Griffith University demonstrate how Indigenous-Pacific methodologies are embedded in program design, delivery, and evaluation, generating indicators such as cultural identity, belonging, and intergenerational aspiration that remain invisible in mainstream evaluation logics. We show how Indigenous-Pacific frameworks not only expand what counts as rigour but also reposition evaluation as a practice of reciprocity, accountability, and justice. Our contribution is both critical and hopeful and a call to reimagine evaluation not as a tool of control, but as a relational and transformative practice that honours Indigenous sovereignty and community-defined success.

Keywords: Indigenous epistemologies; Pacific epistemologies; higher education equity; educational evaluation; decolonising evaluation; Talanoa; Fa'afaletui; relational accountability

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Introduction

Evaluation practice in higher education is frequently framed as neutral and objective, tied to measures of performance and accountability such as reporting, targets, and benchmarking (Smith et al. 2018; Parker et al. 2024). Yet dominant frameworks are embedded in Western epistemologies that privilege quantifiable metrics, standardisation, and compliance, often at the expense of relational, cultural, and community-centred conceptions of success (Biesta 2007; SenGupta et al. 2004). As Biesta (2007) cautions, the "what works" approach risks reducing complex educational and ethical questions to technical decisions that obscure the broader social purposes of education. Indigenous evaluation scholars similarly argue that evaluation must be decolonised, as claims of neutrality have long marginalised Indigenous values and ways of knowing (Kawakami et al. 2007; Cram 2016).

A central limitation of these dominant approaches lies in values they normalise and reproduce. Evaluation is never value-free, yet the values embedded within Western frameworks often remain unexamined. As Burke and Lumb (2018) argue, equity evaluation requires critical attention to whose values determine what is counted as evidence and what is deemed worthy of measurement. Following Guba and Lincoln's (1989) foundational critique of fourth-generation evaluation, they highlight how traditional frameworks reproduce dominant power relations by privileging norms grounded in whiteness, individualism, and institutional authority. Lumb and Burke (2019) further show how these value commitments shape the discursive boundaries of equity itself, constraining what is thinkable or measurable. When applied uncritically, such evaluative logics reinscribe deficit framings that position equity-group students as needing to catch up to predetermined norms rather than recognising diverse forms of knowledge, capability, and success.

These critiques have direct implications in the Australian higher education equity landscape, where evaluation frameworks such as SEHEEF (Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework) are closely aligned with governmental accountability agendas. Although these frameworks seek systematic improvement, they remain situated within epistemological and axiological orientations that privilege compliance, quantification, and individualised outcomes over relational accountability, community-defined success, and Indigenous sovereignty (Walter & Andersen 2013; Gordon et al. 2021). Taken together, this body of literature reveals that dominant evaluation regimes risk entrenching epistemic exclusions and reproducing inequities even as they claim to advance equity.

In this article, we critically examine how such frameworks operate in Australian higher education equity programs and propose culturally grounded alternatives rooted in Indigenous worldviews and values. We argue for an expanded understanding of rigour that encompasses cultural responsiveness, ethical relevance, and context-specific validity (Biesta 2007; SenGupta et al. 2004; Smith 2012; Katz et al. 2016). While grounded in Indigenous-Pacific paradigms, these approaches generate insights with relevance far beyond their cultural origins, contributing to wider debates about knowledge production, evaluation, and practice in diverse educational and societal settings (Vaioleti 2006; Sanga & Reynolds 2017).

As Pacific authors, we represent multiple Pacific heritages and migration histories. We write from the positionality of educators, researchers, equity practitioners, and women working within Australian higher education institutions. Our work in student equity and community engagement is inseparable from our cultural responsibilities to families, communities, and ancestors. We offer these insights for all stakeholders engaged in equity work in higher education. We also acknowledge that we operate within a system that marginalises Indigenous knowledge and frames equity work through deficit-informed logics. We have witnessed, and at times been required to work within, frameworks that prioritise institutional metrics over community-defined success, silencing the relational and cultural dimensions of learning that matter to Indigenous peoples. Our critique is not detached or external. It emerges from our proximity to the very programs we design, deliver, and evaluate. We are situated within the tensions of navigating accountability to both our institutions and our communities. As such, we do not claim neutrality. Instead, we assert a standpoint deliberately grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, which frames evaluation as a relational and ethical practice rather than a technical exercise. These Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies build on the work of prominent academics over the past two decades (Vaioleti 2006; Anae et al. 2010; Pulotu-Endemann 2001; Sanga & Reynolds 2019; Smith 2013).

Our engagement with Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies is not symbolic; it reflects our ontological grounding and our responsibility to uphold cultural authenticity in all aspects of our work. We bring to this work our cultural protocols and a collective commitment to reimagining evaluation of higher education equity programs as a practice accountable to the learners and communities we serve. This commitment compels us to question not only how evaluation is done, but whose knowledge counts, whose voices are legitimised, and what is considered valid evidence of impact. We contend that evaluation must move beyond extractive approaches that impose external definitions of success and instead embrace culturally grounded paradigms that privilege community agency, relational accountability, and collective wellbeing. In naming our positionality, we also acknowledge the diversity within our collective.

We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are committed to nurturing our relationships with respect and integrity, acknowledging that we all work on unceded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land. We honour this complexity and the relational responsibilities it entails. It is important to note here, that while we write from within the Australian Higher Education context, we acknowledge that this is and will always be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land. Any effort to reimagine evaluation in higher education must begin with privileging the voices, knowledge systems, and sovereignty of Australia's First Peoples. At the same time, as Sāmoan and Cook Island-Niuean educators, we also see value in offering insights from our own cultural traditions. In this article, we introduce three Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies, Fa'afaletui, Vā, and Talanoa/Tok Stori, not as substitutes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, but as examples of what becomes possible when evaluation is grounded in relational, collective, and culturally embedded philosophies. These epistemologies highlight alternative ways of knowing and being that can complement and extend equity evaluation in Australian higher education, affirming that diverse Indigenous traditions have much to teach about accountability, belonging, and justice. By grounding evaluation in these Indigenous knowledge systems, we invite a shift from extractive, metrics-driven models to approaches that are relational, ethical, and culturally responsive.

The collaborative process of writing this paper across institutional contexts, and from the diverse positions we bring, is itself a demonstration of Indigenous relational knowledge-making practices grounded in reciprocity and collective responsibility. In this way, our work challenges dominant evaluation frameworks while also enacting relational, culturally grounded knowledge-making in the very way we write, think and do together. We offer this both as critique and contribution, grounded in our hope for a higher education system that recognises the sovereignty of Indigenous knowledge systems and makes space for equity work to be done with care and cultural resonance.

Dominant equity evaluation frameworks in Australian higher education

Over the past decade, Australian higher education has developed a series of frameworks designed to strengthen the evaluation of equity initiatives. These include the Critical Interventions Framework (CIF), the Equity Performance Framework, and the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF), as well as more recent institution-led models. While they have advanced accountability and evidence bases, they remain anchored in technocratic logics that privilege quantification and compliance over relational and community-defined measures of success.

The Critical Interventions Framework (CIF) introduced by Naylor, Baik, and James (2013) was the first attempt to systematise the evaluation of equity initiatives. It proposed a typology of interventions across the student life-cycle, Pre-access, access, participation, and attainment, and emphasised the need for evaluation given what it described as a paucity of evidence. While influential in creating a shared language, CIF framed equity largely through government-defined categories such as low socioeconomic status, regional and remote, disability, non-English speaking background, women in non-traditional fields, and Indigenous students. Its indicators focused on access, participation, retention, and completion, thereby reducing equity to measurable institutional outcomes rather than exploring systemic drivers of exclusion. CIF Part 2 (Bennett et al. 2015) sought to strengthen the evidence base through a large-scale review of publications, survey data, and interviews. It identified initiatives demonstrating impact and emphasised features such as curriculum-embedded support, mentoring, and collaboration with schools and communities. The report concluded that the equity evidence base remained underdeveloped, particularly in relation to completion and graduate outcomes. While Indigenous students were recognised as having lower success and retention rates than their peers, this was largely presented as an outcome disparity with limited interrogation of structural inequities or colonial legacies embedded in higher education institutions. CIF Part 3 extends this lineage by updating the Equity Initiatives Framework to version 2.0 and synthesising recent impact studies across the student life cycle, including pre-access, access, participation, and attainment (Bennett et al. 2024). However, the report itself acknowledges that reliance on published impact studies and documented evaluations offers only a partial and incomplete picture of equity practice across the sector, as many effective initiatives remain undocumented or are constrained by publication conventions that narrow methodological and contextual detail. This limitation underscores how dominant evaluation regimes continue to privilege what is measurable and comparable over what is relational, contextual, and culturally meaningful.

The Equity Performance Framework (Pitman & Koshy 2015) extended the evaluation agenda by consolidating national datasets into performance domains of access, participation, attainment, and graduate outcomes. Its purpose was to strengthen accountability and benchmarking at the system level. Although it acknowledged the importance of belonging and student experience, its indicators were drawn almost exclusively from quantitative national surveys and statistics. This reliance on numbers, while useful for comparability, left limited room to capture the relational, cultural, and community dimensions of equity, echoing what Walter and Andersen (2013) critique as the fetishisation of statistics detached from Indigenous sovereignty and context. These limitations highlight how dominant frameworks struggle to recognise relational and cultural forms of success, reinforcing what Lumb and Burke (2018) identify as deeper questions about whose values shape what counts as evidence in equity work.

The Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF), released in 2021 with a detailed guidance manual, embedded program logic and continuous quality improvement into the equity evaluation process. It distinguished between routine monitoring and more advanced impact evaluations, drawing on both quantitative and theory-based approaches. The framework has since influenced national reporting and the Universities Accord, where it is presented as a robust tool for accountability (Robinson et al. 2025). However, critiques raised during sector consultations point to its privileging of quasi-experimental designs, burdensome reporting requirements, and limited ability to capture intangible outcomes such as belonging. While SEHEEF allows for qualitative data it does not mandate relational or identity-based indicators meaning the kinds of reflections that emerge in programs such as shifts in students' cultural identity, sense of belonging, service or contributions to community are not formally recognised or required. This omission keeps evaluations centred on programs rather than on holistic development, reinforcing the very gap our work seeks to address. This absence of relational and identity-based indicators aligns with Smith et al (2018), who argue that evaluation in Indigenous higher education has long been marginalised and conflated with performance monitoring rather than designed to reflect Indigenous standpoints.

More recent institutional frameworks have attempted to redress these gaps. Zacharias et al. (2024) developed a student-centred evaluation framework at Swinburne University using human-centred design and Indigenous governance structures. This approach broadened indicators of success to include prosperity, wellbeing, cultural safety, and psychosocial support, and acknowledged that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, success is defined collectively through contributions to family and community. While this represents progress towards culturally grounded evaluation, these Indigenous insights were still mediated through program logic categories, reproducing linear and Western causal assumptions. As Nakata (2007) argues, frameworks that translate Indigenous experience into existing disciplinary structures risk reinscribing deficit positions rather than transforming the epistemic terms of evaluation.

These frameworks demonstrate Australia's growing capacity for systematic equity evaluation, yet they remain grounded in Western epistemologies, program logic, and policy categories that treat equity as a technical problem of effectiveness rather than a structural question of justice (Robinson et al. 2025; Burke & Lumb 2018). This risks entrenching compliance cultures while obscuring the colonial foundations of higher education and the conditions they create for students. A shift is needed towards approaches that privilege Indigenous standpoints and render evaluation culturally grounded and transformative, drawing on methodologies centred on sovereignty, resistance and relational accountability (Rigney 1999; Smith et al. 2018; Smith 2012). Walter and Andersen (2013) remind us that even quantitative approaches can be reconfigured through Indigenous sovereignty, reframing data practices around Indigenous epistemologies rather than institutional demands. Pacific approaches such as fa'afaletui, vā, talanoa and tok stori further unsettle Western evaluation logics by positioning relationality, reciprocity and collective meaning-making as legitimate forms of evidence. Together, these approaches reorient evaluation from a compliance exercise to a practice of justice, belonging and care, affirming communities as knowledge holders rather than data sources.

Despite their increasing sophistication, dominant equity frameworks reveal both the progress and the persistent limitations of equity evaluation in Australian higher education. They have strengthened accountability and provided shared languages of evidence, yet they remain shaped by axiological assumptions that privilege measurement, linearity and institutional priorities over relational, cultural and community-defined understandings of success. As Burke and Lumb (2018) caution, such assumptions delimit what is recognised as valuable, reducing the space for alternative ways of knowing and evaluating. Moving beyond these constraints requires approaches that centre sovereignty, relationality and collective wellbeing. Pacific and Indigenous knowledges offer precisely this possibility, opening pathways to reimagine evaluation on different epistemic terms and grounding it in the values, aspirations and authority of the communities it seeks to serve.

Indigenous-Pacific knowledges

In response to the limitations outlined above, Indigenous knowledge systems offer evaluation paradigms grounded in relationality, sovereignty and collective wellbeing. This orientation aligns with what Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2012) describe as Indigenous critical praxis, in which communities enact epistemological authority through sustained collective reflection, dialogue, and action grounded in their own cultural, historical, and relational contexts. These approaches emerge from worldviews in which knowledge is inseparable from relationships to people, place and the spiritual, and where accountability is exercised through reciprocity rather than institutional authority. Indigenous scholars continue to reclaim and restore methodologies that honour collective responsibility, ethical interdependence and cultural integrity (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2002; LaFrance & Nichols 2010; Goodwin, Sauni & Were 2015). Across education, health and the social sciences, this resurgence challenges extractive and metrics-driven logics and reasserts Indigenous intellectual traditions as authoritative sites of theory and method. Rather than being positioned as cultural additions to existing systems, these traditions provide essential paradigms through which Indigenous-Pacific knowledges can be engaged as epistemic frameworks that fundamentally reshape what counts as evidence, value and educational success.

Indigenous epistemologies do not simply extend or supplement Western evaluation models. They reorient evaluation itself by redefining its purposes, processes and ethical commitments. Whereas dominant frameworks prioritise standardisation, linearity and institutional control, Pacific-Indigenous traditions foreground reciprocity, collective accountability and relational ethics as the basis of credible inquiry. This shift reflects a different ontology of knowledge, one in which relationships are not contextual factors but the grounds upon which knowledge becomes valid. Rigour is therefore understood not through control or neutrality, but through cultural integrity, responsiveness and the extent to which evaluation nurtures belonging, responsibility and justice. Justice here concerns the restoration of fairness, dignity and balance in evaluative practice, achieved by recognising whose knowledge has historically been marginalised and ensuring communities participate and are represented on their own terms. Viewed in this way, evaluation becomes a practice of relational care rather than a mechanism of surveillance or compliance.

Despite this, Indigenous knowledges are often relegated to the periphery, treated as cultural embellishments rather than legitimate epistemological foundations. This marginalisation sustains the dominance of evaluation regimes that continue to define communities as subjects of intervention rather than partners in knowledge-making (Suaalii-Sauni 2014). Within these dynamics, institutions retain authority over determining what constitutes a problem, how success is measured and who has the power to judge impact (Smith 2012; Rigney 1999). Such arrangements entrench hierarchical power relations in which communities are positioned as recipients of evaluation rather than co-creators of change. Relational approaches counter this by locating evaluators within a web of responsibilities to people and place, requiring evaluation to be accountable to the communities whose lives it aims to understand (Cram 2021).

Indigenous epistemologies also invite a re-examination of what counts as rigour. As Lather (2007) argues, rigour is always entangled with the epistemological commitments that underpin method. Indigenous and Pacific approaches extend this insight by grounding rigour in ethical responsibility, reciprocity and accountability to community-defined aspirations. Rigour is not demonstrated through control or distance, but through the evaluator's capacity to uphold relationships, protect cultural integrity and contribute to collective flourishing. This framing positions rigour, epistemology and educational justice as inseparable. Epistemologies establish what counts as knowledge, rigour ensures these commitments are enacted with integrity, and justice provides the horizon against which their value is judged. Together, these dimensions create the foundation for an evaluation practice that is not only methodologically sound but also ethically and politically accountable.

Although this article focuses on three core Pacific epistemologies, these exist within a wider constellation of values and principles that sustain culturally grounded practice. Concepts such as, but not limited to, tautua (service), lotogatasi (shared voice), tauhi vā (relational maintenance) and tapu (spiritual integrity) deepen the moral and relational dimensions of evaluation. These practices do not operate as isolated cultural expressions. Instead, they function as ethical frameworks that guide how knowledge is created, how relationships are honoured and how value is determined. Together, they expand the field of evaluation to recognise diverse ways of knowing and to centre justice-oriented educational outcomes that affirm, uphold and elevate the communities to whom evaluation is accountable.

Fa'afaletui - weaving perspectives into collective understanding.

Fa'afaletui is a Samoan paradigm that reflects the relational and collective ethos of fa'asamoa, where knowledge is not individually held but co-constructed. It weaves together diverse perspectives, from genealogies (gafa), proverbs (alagā'upu), and oral histories, into a collective account of truth. In evaluation, fa'afaletui requires researchers and practitioners to consult broadly, build consensus, and remain accountable to community protocols. Integrity is demonstrated through early engagement, culturally appropriate processes (such as ava ceremonies), and group-based dialogue that values talanoa and collaborative problem-solving (Suaalii-Sauni et al. 2014; Tamasese & Parsons 2014).

Importantly, fa'afaletui unsettles Western paradigms that prioritise linear causality, individual expertise, and efficiency. It demands time, trust, and sensitivity to hierarchical, generational, and gendered dynamics that shape participation. These requirements sit uneasily within academic systems built on speed and measurable outputs, yet they yield outcomes that are richer, more ethical, and culturally embedded. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi (2010) describes fa'afaletui metaphorically through the perspectives of those in the canoe (closest to the issue), those in the treetop (with a broader vantage), and those on the mountain (with strategic oversight). It is only through weaving these perspectives together that a fuller truth emerges. In evaluation, this paradigm ensures that findings are interpreted through cultural worldviews, outcomes are defined by communities themselves, and accountability is maintained to cultural values rather than institutional metrics.

Vā - sacred relational space and ethical accountability

Across Pacific societies, vā is one of the most profound philosophical concepts. Often translated simply as “space,” vā refers to the sacred, dynamic relational space that binds people, communities, generations, and even the spiritual and ecological worlds. In Samoan thought, e teu le vā calls for cherishing and maintaining this relational space, while in Tongan traditions, tauhi vā reflects the duty of care for social and spatial ties (Anae et al. 2010; Kaʻili 2005, 2017). Existence itself is understood as relational, one’s being is constituted through connections, not individual autonomy. The tā-vā theory of reality exposes how Western frameworks separate time from space, reducing evaluation to linear progression and short-term outcomes rather than recognising relational continuity and long-term collective responsibility. Within this framing, tauhi vā is understood as a sustained relational practice through which harmony and balance are cultivated over time (Kaʻili & Māhina 2017). This philosophy directly challenges Western epistemologies that privilege individualism, neutrality, and objectivity. In evaluation, dominant models ask, “What works? What outcomes were achieved?” A vā-based approach instead requires evaluators to ask: “How are relationships being tended? Is respect upheld? Are processes maintaining trust and balance? Do outcomes nurture the collective as well as the individual?” Here, rigour is measured by the strength and integrity of relationships sustained throughout the process, not the precision of statistical indicators.

In practice, this requires long-term presence, humility, and attentiveness to relational obligations that extend beyond discrete project phases. (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges 2019). Evaluators become caretakers of relationships as much as assessors of outcomes. Importantly, vā does not dismiss established evaluation concerns such as validity or reliability but reframes them through relational logics. When embedded in higher education, vā extends impact measures beyond retention and progression to include whether programs nurture belonging, affirm cultural identity, and sustain reciprocal commitments between universities and communities. It reframes evaluation from transactional accountability to relational accountability, where success is judged by the quality of care maintained across relationships.

Talanoa/Tok Stori - Dialogue, trust and cultural truth telling

Talanoa and Tok Stori are dialogic traditions that foreground storytelling, trust, and communal reflection as rigourous forms of knowledge-making. Emerging from Polynesia (talanoa in Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji) and Melanesia (tok stori in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands), both approaches prioritise reciprocity, patience, and relational ethics in the co-creation of knowledge.
Talanoa is often translated as “talk,” but within Pacific contexts it means much more. It is an open, heartfelt process of dialogue that creates culturally safe spaces for sharing experiences, aspirations, and stories. As Vaioleti (2006) notes, it positions the evaluator not as a distant observer but as a co-learner, building meaning through empathetic connection. Tok stori, deeply rooted in Melanesian village life and the wantok system of kinship and responsibility, generates knowledge

through inclusive conversation and consensus (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2002). Such dialogic practices exemplify Indigenous critical praxis, where collective dialogue becomes a site of critique, decision-making, and social transformation (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2012). Both traditions resist efficiency-driven imperatives, privileging time, patience, and trust over speed or extractive data collection.

In evaluation, these approaches affirm oral knowledge systems and cultural sovereignty, generating evidence of belonging, identity, wellbeing, and resilience often invisible in surveys or administrative datasets. They challenge evaluators to adopt humility, reflexivity, and accountability to the community. In higher education, talanoa and tok stori create dialogic spaces where Pacific students, families, and communities' articulate success on their own terms. They are not interchangeable techniques that can be slotted into program logic; they require structural shifts in evaluation, from transactional to relational, from outcome-focused to process-conscious, from institutional to community accountability.

Together, fa'afaletui, vā, talanoa, and tok stori reposition evaluation from an extractive exercise to a practice of reciprocity and justice. They generate forms of evidence, identity, belonging, intergenerational aspiration, and collective wellbeing, that remain invisible within Western frameworks such as SEHEEF. By centring Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies, evaluation is redefined not as an act of compliance but as a practice of cultural accountability and relational care. In doing so, they demand structural change in higher education: recognition of cultural authority, community-defined outcomes, and the redefinition of rigour itself.

Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies conceptualise evaluation as iterative, relational, and co-constructed (Goodwin, Sauni & Were 2015). The Fala Methodology (Fainga'a-Manu Sione 2023) exemplifies this cultural alignment, positioning researchers and evaluators within a sacred, layered relational space where knowledge is co-woven. Vā foregrounds the sacred relational space that binds people and obliges evaluators to nurture it with care, reciprocity, and respect. Talanoa and Tok Stori re-centre storytelling, dialogue, and communal knowledge as valid and rigorous forms of evaluation. Together, these approaches affirm that "cultural fit" (Goodwin, Sauni, & Were 2015) is not peripheral but central to what counts. Fa'afaletui weaves diverse perspectives into collective truth-making, honouring genealogies, oral histories, and shared decision-making.

Reframing evaluation - insights from Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies

UTS Pasifika Programs

At the University of Technology Sydney, Pasifika Programs demonstrate how Indigenous and Pacific epistemologies can transform evaluation into an iterative, relational, and community-accountable practice. What began in the early 2020s as school-based mentoring has evolved into a multi-strand initiative spanning mentoring, leadership development, pathway programs, and professional engagement. Across these activities, evaluation is intentionally grounded in Pacific worldviews, privileging collective meaning-making, cultural identity, and strengthened vā as core indicators of success.

The Pasifika Mentoring Program was built on collective, strengths-based practice, and this shaped its evaluative focus on identity, belonging, and leadership. As Pacific student mentors worked in schools across Sydney, the program identified cultural identity, wayfinding, leadership capability, and representation through Pacific role-modelling as central markers of success. For many students, seeing Pasifika Student Ambassadors functioned as a powerful form of identity affirmation. This was captured through talanoa, structured self-reflection prompts, and mentor observations that traced shifts in students' sense of belonging and their belief that university was a place where Pacific people thrive. These indicators fall outside conventional evaluation frameworks, yet they reflect the outcomes most valued by Pacific students, families, and communities.

The On-Campus Experience Days provide a key site where the Pasifika Program enacts culturally responsive evaluation. Western tools, including pre and post engagement surveys, track changes in confidence, belonging, and clarity about educational pathways. These sit alongside Pacific-led approaches that privilege voice, relationality, and collective meaning-making. Talanoa circles with Pasifika Student Ambassadors produce deep insight into cultural pride, aspiration, relational confidence, and students' reflections on respect, service, and leadership as foundational values. Culturally attuned observation rubrics capture indicators grounded in vā, including how students show respect during group interactions, how they step into acts of service during activities, and how emerging leadership behaviours surface throughout the day. Communal practices, such as shared meals and informal conversations with ambassadors, offer further evaluative moments in which students articulate a sense of belonging and begin to see themselves reflected in university spaces. Evaluation also demonstrated that participation strengthened the Pasifika Ambassadors themselves. Talanoa revealed that mentoring and facilitation deepened their cultural identity, sense of belonging at UTS, and commitment to service. Ambassadors consistently noted increased confidence, responsibility to community, and visible growth in leadership capability. This mentor-focused insight formed a critical evaluative layer, highlighting that program impact was reciprocal, shaping both mentees and mentors through relational, cultural, and intergenerational growth. These culturally grounded indicators provide a more holistic account of success than conventional attendance, compliance, or output-based measures.

By 2023, the program extended into the professional domain through the UTS and Pacific Professionals Network: Pasifika Professional Mentoring Program, a pilot pairing university students with Pasifika industry mentors. Evaluation continued this blended approach, combining reflective surveys with talanoa-based assessment centred on story, relationship, and cultural obligation. Students described seeing someone like themselves in professional spaces as transformative, naming representation as a core driver of aspiration, confidence, and future orientation. Mentors framed their involvement as 'building our village', positioning mentoring as tautua (service) and intergenerational responsibility. These insights show how evaluation grounded in vā and talanoa produces rigorous, culturally anchored evidence of impact that sits alongside employability measures and graduate capability frameworks without being overshadowed by them.

Across all program areas at UTS, Pacific epistemologies are intentionally embedded as the foundation for evaluation. This is formalised through tools such as the @ Uni Academy - Pasifika Engagement Framework, which outlines indicators including cultural safety, visibility of Pasifika mentors, relationship quality, strengthened vā, parental and community participation, and self-reported growth in identity and leadership. The evaluation approach integrates surveys, talanoa, reflective journals, and culturally anchored rubrics, with findings feeding directly into program reporting cycles, planning, training, and continuous improvement.

Despite these advances, institutional systems remain dominated by enrolment, retention, and completion metrics. Indigenous-centred indicators such as strengthened vā, cultural identity, community engagement, and intergenerational aspiration struggle to gain formal legitimacy because they fall outside conventional logics of evidence and accountability. This tension underscores both the transformative potential of Indigenous evaluation approaches and the ongoing challenge of embedding their validity within university structures that continue to prioritise quantifiable, individualised outcomes over relational and collective forms of success.

Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education (PATHE)

At Western Sydney University, the Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education (PATHE) program privileges Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies as the foundation for design, delivery, and evaluation. Relational approaches are embedded at every stage, ensuring that impact is both interpreted and acted upon. PATHE identifies indicators such as strengthened cultural identity, intergenerational aspiration-setting, and sustained school–community–university partnerships. Guided by principles including vā fealoaloa'i (respect), tauhi vā (nurturing relationships), and tautua (service), PATHE enacts practices such as talanoa-based career consultations, the Celebrate Pasifika initiative to engage families, and quarterly Teachers Network Meetings, each serving as a site for evaluative insight that is both culturally resonant and educationally meaningful.

Co-designed with teachers and communities, initiatives such as the Leadership Summit and Chase the Dream enable students to nurture aspirations, strengthen cultural pride, and confidently navigate Western education systems. The Australian Universities Pacific Associations Conference (AUPAC) was initiated by PATHE in response to conversations among Pacific university students about wellbeing, belonging, and connection. Designed as a space for cultural affirmation and collective strength, AUPAC has evolved into a national platform where Pacific students connect through sport, culture, and academia. Now student-led and nationally coordinated, it exemplifies evaluation shaped by student voice and community-defined success. PATHE has designed the Leadership and Legacy Profile, a proposed longitudinal evaluation tool intended to trace students' evolving interests, cultural identity, leadership experiences, and aspirations from Year 7 to Year 12. It aims to reframe evaluation as a holistic, strengths-based process. The profile is embedded in the PATHE Teachers' Toolkit, which supports largely non-Pacific teachers to continue engagement, confidently, with Pacific learners. The Toolkit integrates the Profile as a reflective concept informed by teachers' input, offering cultural guidance, practical strategies, and post-workshop activities that uphold tauhi vā (relational care).

In addition, during on-campus senior high school visits, each PATHE module concludes with an informal Talanoa Circle facilitated by PATHE Student Ambassadors. One guiding question is displayed at a time, and student groups share reflections for several minutes before a nominated "talking chief" presents to the wider group. Grounded in vā (relational space), this process privileges collective reflection and emotional resonance over written surveys, generating rich qualitative insights into confidence, belonging, and cultural pride which are dimensions often overlooked by conventional metrics.

Unlike Western evaluation systems centred on standardisation and quantification, PATHE emphasises identity, belonging, and cultural affirmation, dimensions often invisible to dominant metrics yet deeply influential in students' journeys. Evaluation unfolds through communal learning spaces where educators, families, and students share reflections and co-create future directions. One staff member observed that his students' aspirations shifted after watching Pacific university students perform at a cultural day, an experience that affirmed their cultures were visible and valued While such shifts are not recognised in SEHEEF's outcomes, PATHE values them as relational evidence of how cultural visibility influences aspiration and engagement. In this way, PATHE complements conventional metrics by affirming Pacific-Indigenous knowledge systems and expanding success to include identity, service, and social contribution alongside academic achievement.

Pathways in Place & Māori and Pasifika Pathways to Success (MAPPS)

At Griffith University, the Pathways in Place initiative and the Māori and Pasifika Pathways to Success (MAPPS) program embody Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies in both design and evaluation. Fa'afaletui provides a guiding metaphor, weaving together the perspectives of First Nations, Pasifika, refugee, and underserved communities to co-create pathways into higher education. This approach shifts evaluation away from measuring isolated outputs toward a collective account of impact that acknowledges perspectives across community, institution, and policy environments.

Evaluation privileges stories, genealogies, and lived experiences that emerge through fono and talanoa. Instead of reducing student success to retention or completion rates, these dialogic methods surface insights about belonging, cultural identity, and intergenerational responsibility. In doing so, they challenge dominant frameworks that assume linear causality and struggle to capture cultural and relational dimensions of change.

MAPPS extends this ethos through the Fonofale model (2001), which provides a holistic frame for student check-ins across spiritual, cultural, physical, and mental domains, underscoring that academic achievement cannot be separated from wellbeing. Informal practices, such as shared meals, culturally safe drop-in sessions, and communal spaces, are intentionally used as evaluative moments. These encounters enable staff and students to interact on equal footing, fostering trust and openness that formal survey instruments often miss. A notable example is the Samoan language competition hosted at the Logan campus. While presented as a cultural celebration, it also generated rich insights into how language, identity, and pride shape students' aspirations for higher education. Teachers and community judges observed how preparing and presenting in Samoan not only strengthened students' linguistic skills but also affirmed their sense of belonging within the university. This illustrates how cultural practices themselves can function as evaluative processes, producing evidence of impact that is both academically meaningful and culturally resonant.

Together, these practices show how Griffith's initiatives reconfigure evaluation: positioning language, relationships, and holistic wellbeing as legitimate forms of evidence; elevating collective narratives alongside individual outcomes; and embedding reciprocity and accountability into every evaluative exchange. In this way, Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies are not supplementary but transformative, reshaping evaluation from a tool of measurement into a practice of community capacity-building and justice.

Taken together, the three programs demonstrate that culturally grounded evaluation does more than complement existing systems. It reconfigures the epistemic foundations of evaluation by affirming identity, strengthening belonging, and positioning evaluators within relationships of responsibility rather than authority. Across contexts, Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies function as the organising logic for determining relevance, interpreting change, and defining success. They illuminate forms of impact that remain invisible within dominant frameworks, showing how learning, aspiration, leadership, and wellbeing emerge through collective, relational, and cultural processes.
Across UTS, WSU, and Griffith, shared lessons emerge. Culturally grounded evaluation affirms identity, nurtures belonging, and positions evaluators as relationally accountable rather than externally authoritative. Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies do not operate as supplementary additions; they offer a fundamental reorientation of what counts as evidence, success, and justice in higher education. Yet institutional systems continue to privilege efficiency, hierarchy, and narrow metrics of attainment, making it difficult for relational, community-defined success indicators to gain recognition.

While these approaches are deeply grounded in Indigenous worldviews, their underlying principles are not culturally exclusive. Values such as reciprocity, relational accountability, collective meaning-making, and ethical responsibility have broader significance and can strengthen evaluation practice across diverse cultural groups, including non-Pacific communities, when applied with integrity and respect for their origins. Meaningful engagement requires universities to invest in capacity-building, advocacy, and flexible evaluation designs that uphold culturally responsive, community-led methodologies (Rigney 1999; Smith 2012; Walter & Andersen 2013; Tamasese & Parsons 2014). Western tools may still have utility, but within Indigenous frameworks they must be reshaped to serve relationships rather than govern them.

Conclusion

Reimagining evaluation through Indigenous epistemologies is not an optional enhancement but a necessary reorientation if Australian higher education is to pursue genuine educational justice. This shift is required because dominant, compliance-driven models are grounded in epistemic assumptions of universality, standardisation, and technical rationality that privilege efficiency and quantifiable outputs while obscuring relational, cultural, and community-defined forms of success.

Across the literature, dominant evaluation models in higher education are shown to be shaped by technical rationalism that privileges efficiency, linearity, and quantifiable outputs, narrowing complex educational questions into technical problems and reinforcing existing colonial hierarchies and deficit framings of Indigenous communities (Biesta 2007; Smith 2012; Cram 2016). At the same time, scholars emphasise that quantitative and qualitative methodologies alike can be re-envisioned through Indigenous worldviews, where data practices are aligned with sovereignty rather than extraction (Walter & Andersen 2013). In this framing, rigour is secured not through standardisation or control but through reflexivity, ethical responsibility, and accountability to communities (Lather 2007).

Our case studies from the University of Technology Sydney, Western Sydney University, and Griffith University illustrate how Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies offer paradigms that reconfigure evaluation as a relational practice grounded in reciprocity, belonging, and ethical accountability. These epistemologies generate indicators such as cultural identity, community trust, and intergenerational aspiration. These forms of evidence remain structurally invisible within mainstream frameworks like SEHEEF, not because they lack legitimacy, but because the frameworks were never designed to recognise relational or community-defined success. These Indigenous approaches are deeply grounded in cultural worldviews, yet the values they embody relationality, reciprocity, care, collective accountability are transferable across cultural groups, benefiting Pasifika and non-Pasifika communities alike by broadening what higher education understands as meaningful learning and success.

The implications for policy, practice, and research are profound. National frameworks must embed Indigenous sovereignty by recognising relational and cultural indicators alongside access, retention, and completion. Institutions must resource community-led evaluation, develop Indigenous leadership capacity, and shift organisational logics from compliance to relational accountability. For research, advancing Indigenous-led scholarship requires redefining rigour as ethical responsibility, cultural integrity, and reciprocity rather than control or standardisation. This demands not only methodological change but structural change, including the redistribution of evaluative authority and the centring of Indigenous voices in decision-making.

When evaluation is treated as a site of relationship, reciprocity, and transformation, it ceases to be a mechanism of surveillance and becomes a practice of justice. The challenge for Australian higher education is now unmistakable - to continue upholding frameworks that define rigour through compliance and institutional authority, or to embrace approaches that define rigour through relationality, accountability, and justice. Evaluation can remain a tool that reproduces the status quo, or it can be reclaimed as a practice that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, nurtures belonging, and affirms the self-determined success of the communities' universities are meant to serve. The future of evaluation in higher education depends on whether rigour is measured by control or by justice.

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POLICY REVIEW

Beyond 'skills through equity' and 'the hope of redemption': Contesting neoliberal Australian widening participation policy and hegemonic evaluation practices

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This article problematises established rationales for widening participation in Australian higher education which pursue neoliberal national economic agendas. Rather than valuing the subjectivities of those it seeks to include, widening participation practice and evaluation has predominantly fashioned individual agency in terms of the skills required to compete in a globalised economy. This discourse is punctuated by regular higher education policy reviews which have informed government efforts to improve access to university for key equity cohorts, including students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Culminating in the 'skills through equity' logic of the Australian Universities Accord, widening participation's success has as a result been progressively measured against national economic outcomes guided by hegemonic evaluation practices. This has placed an unnecessary burden upon the students widening participation aims to support, determining the legitimacy of their university aspirations within a narrow frame of national economic success or failure. Students from underrepresented backgrounds are thus cast as redemptive figures in the pursuit of a more 'inclusive' (and competitive) society. To fully understand the experience of higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds in their own terms, this article advocates for, evaluation practice which embeds social justice commitments and prioritises researcher reflexivity.

Keywords: Widening participation, neoliberalism, evaluation, meritocracy, qualitative inquiry

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Introduction

> *Indigenous people are used to create a counterpoint against which the dominant society can critique itself, becoming living embodiments of the romantic ideal, which offers a desolate society the hope of redemption and of recapturing what it feels it has lost in its march forward. Those who wish to present a critique of individualism point out that Aboriginality is about community; those who wish to highlight the detrimental effects of industrialisation on the environment point to Indigenous people as the original conservationists. We present a remaining, though strategically distant image of what has been lost, and what could be regained.*
>
> (Dodson 1994 p. 8)

In using the 1994 Wentworth lecture to explore the construction of 'Aboriginality' in the Australian national imaginary, Mick Dodson exposed the social and cultural positioning of Indigenous Australians as 'other', whether that be to reify modernity or lament its regression as a 'desolate society'. Speaking on behalf of Indigenous Australians, Dodson lamented how '[o]ur subjectivities, our aspirations, our ways of seeing and our languages have largely been excluded from the equation, as the colonising culture "plays with itself"' (Dodson 1994 p. 9). Contributing to broader post-structuralist critiques of colonialism (e.g. Said 1978), this redemptive casting of Indigenous Australians can be understood through critical theory's sustained engagement with what Karl Marx understood in terms of 'alienation', the dialectical tension inherent to modernity whereby the exercise of state sovereignty denies civil society's collective power of self-determination (Flohr 2024). Where Dodson refers to Indigenous Australians being 'excluded from the equation' as Australia negotiated its national identity, Marx's central critique of emerging theories on modernity was that the state relied on the competitive tendencies of capitalism to objectify civil society from its own collective agency to maintain a system of private property and the accumulation of wealth by a governing elite (Flohr 2024).

The aim of this paper is to unpack the relevance of this critique in the context of Australian Government policy discourse regarding efforts to support the participation of students underrepresented in higher education (widening participation) and how it has been facilitated by hegemonic evaluation practices. The first section of this paper foregrounds this analysis by tracing the persistence of neoliberal discourse throughout key policy review documents which have set national benchmarks for widening participation practice. In exploring what appears to be an inclusive project which promotes social mobility, this paper contends that the evolution of widening participation policy in the Australian context has cast specific underrepresented cohorts, such as students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, in a similar redemptive role to Dodson's critique of 'Aboriginality'. The consequences of this are that rather than fully exploring students' motivation to access higher education pathways and the challenges they may face (their subjectivity), widening participation policy has persistently submerged the agency of students from underprivileged backgrounds within a discourse of international economic competitiveness. As these policies have been adopted in countries such Australia and the UK which have simultaneously embraced neoliberal governmentality, they suggest an ongoing tendency on the part of the state to calibrate socioeconomically marginalised subjectivities within a narrow frame of market-based logics. The fragility of this dialectic inheres within an unsteady assumption that the promise of social mobility offers sufficient incentive to participate in a narrative of national economic redemption, whether or not this aligns with the intentions of underrepresented students. On this incentive alone there is a tension in how governments have framed widening participation as a path to social mobility, persistently failing to acknowledge the struggle inherent to one's social positioning within unfamiliar educational and career fields (Friedman 2013; Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020; Sandel 2021b) and alarming evidence of growing inequality under neoliberal, market-based policies (Piketty, 2024). A further troubling aspect of widening participation's adherence to neoliberalism and market-based logics is the potential blame which may await those whose aspirations, or lack of 'merit', preclude their anticipated contribution to national economic ends.

In building these arguments, this paper draws on well-established critiques of neoliberalism's influence upon governments across the world under the pretence of addressing stagnant economic growth from the 1970s. As Harvey (2005 p. 19) explains, neoliberalism is fundamentally 'a political project to re-establish conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.' Mixed with discourses of meritocratic striving which present individual agency and abilities as the key to social mobility, in enshrining market principles neoliberalism has been a means through which the state can present a solution to social inequality while maintaining governance by a wealthy elite – what Littler (2013 p. 69) refers to as 'an alibi for plutocracy'. Shifting outside traditional Marxist theories of power and the state, in his account of biopolitics Michel Foucault maintained that the market economy is the dominant principal of neoliberal governmentality which structures 'the way political power itself works' (Littler 2013 p. 62). Touted as a political ideology which prioritises freedom of the individual, this vigilant mode of governmentality and the entrepreneurial spirit it prioritises in fact captures only a narrow frame of market-based human motivation.

As this paper will demonstrate, a consequence of this narrow framing in the context of Australian widening participation discourse has followed neoliberalism's tendency of staking national economic 'survival' with the choices made by individuals (Davies & Bansel 2007). By way of outline, since the publication of *A Fair Chance for All* in 1990, followed by the Bradley Review two decades later (Australian Government 1990, 2008), widening participation discourse in Australian higher education policy has progressively misplaced the agency of those it seeks to include with anxiety for the health of the national economy. In 2024, the relationship between widening participation and economic needs was sharpened by the Australian Universities Accord's (Accord) 'skills through equity' agenda, which frames students from under-represented backgrounds as the 'answer' to Australia's anticipated skills shortfall by 2050 (Australian Government 2024 p. 2). The social justice potential of the Accord's laudable recommendations regarding representational parity are thus subsumed in language which projects widening participation's failure as risking 'lasting damage' to Australia's economic success (Australian Government 2024 p. 2). As it has evolved over the last several decades, widening participation policy has consistently placed students from underrepresented backgrounds within a compromising dialectic of economic success. Driven by neoliberal logics of elite accumulation, it remains unclear what their role in redeeming such success will amount to in terms of a more just and equal society.

Against the backdrop of this instrumentalist framing of widening participation across key policy documents, the second section of this paper aims to contribute to a growing segment of widening participation literature drawing attention to the epistemological and ontological shortcomings of the hegemonic evaluation practices increasingly relied upon to determine the impact of outreach initiatives (Burke & Lumb 2018, 2024; Lumb, Burke & Bennett 2021; Gordon et al. 2022). In Australia's case this has shaped an evaluation practice focusing on quantitative data in the hope of arriving at 'objective' conclusions regarding program impact, a focus on the 'measurable' which risks perpetuating deficit notions of equity cohorts failing key metrics such as 'aspiration' and 'ability' (Gordon et al. 2022). In addition to problematising the 'certainty' that quantitative, experimental methods prescribe, this article shares Burke and Lumb's (2024) concern regarding hegemonic policy and programme evaluation's tendency to 'embed neoliberal capitalism in contexts and institutions of higher education' and its role in constructing certain demographic groups 'as a problem demanding a solution' in the interests of capital.

As much as this is a theoretical problem for evaluation practice, the final section of this paper also considers the very real political, and certainly emotional, harms of widening participation policy's neoliberal orientation in the Australian context. Arguably the greatest concern with measuring widening participation outcomes against a calculus of national economic success is neoliberalism's unfailing belief in reward reflecting merit, what Michel Sandel refers to as meritocratic hubris (Sandel 2021b, 2021a). A nation's failure to satisfy projected skills needs can all too easily be attributed to a lack of merit or aspiration on the part of those widening participation seeks to include, eliding vast imbalances in educational opportunity and how this frames the realities of higher education participation (Sandel 2021a). The political consequences of this alignment between personal and economic success are all too clearly being played out across a geopolitical context in which belief in democratic principles is fracturing, contributed to by alarming increases in economic inequality (Davidson et al. 2024; Piketty 2024; Sandel 2021b).

This article concludes that the presiding economic rationale of widening participation discourse and evaluation practice fails to value the subjectivities and challenges of those it claims to represent. Neoliberal notions of individual success and failure misconstrue the social justice imperatives that widening participation intends, and offer little scope to address the inequalities which perpetuate underrepresentation in higher education (Burke & Lumb, 2024). Widening participation must exist beyond a national 'hope of redemption' which prefigures marginalised subjectivities within narrow, instrumentalist economic goals with disregard to individual motivations and goals. Evaluation strategies that provide insights into the higher education goals people hold and how initiatives support their navigation of concrete barriers to higher education such as academic attainment will help us more democratically orient widening participation goals. In practice, this means questioning the viability of hegemonic evaluation practices which are neither equipped nor motivated to understand the richness and complexity of individual lives and how this shapes their engagement with widening participation initiatives and the challenge of accessing higher education (Lumb, Burke & Bennett 2021; Gordon et al. 2022). Doing so opens widening participation to more reflexive evaluation approaches with an embedded commitment to social justice , which are less concerned with establishing causality and certainty as they are with understanding *why* and *how* an intervention may have achieved its intended outcome and for whom.

From *A Fair chance for All* to 'skills through equity'

As Hannah Forsyth writes, 'the story of Australian higher education chronicles both the creation and maintenance of privilege and a vehicle for social mobility.' (Forsyth 2014 p. 201). To be sure, the question of 'Who gets to go to uni?' has received legitimate attention by Australian governments and institutions and there is lasting evidence that gradually expanding access to university on gendered, racial and class grounds has afforded educational and career opportunities to many Australians (Forsyth 2014). The point of the following section is not to contest that social justice has a demonstrable presence in the history of Australian higher education. It is rather to demonstrate that in its neoliberal guise, widening participation policies have been progressively motivated by narrow economic goals rather than a more expansive interpretation of what accessing higher education might mean for underrepresented cohorts. This leads into discussion regarding the consequences of hegemonic evaluation practices and alternative methods which prioritise qualitative inquiry and how this allows for deeper insight into the experiences and motivations of students from equity backgrounds.

A Fair Chance for All

> *"Access to education is vital. Education is one of the principal means for individuals to achieve independence, economic advancement and personal growth. But in the past, the benefits of higher education have been enjoyed disproportionately by the more privileged members of our community. Those benefits need to be share more widely and more equitably in the future."*
>
> (Australian Government 1988a p. 6)

The social justice origins of Australian widening participation policy are explicit in John Dawson's foreword to *A Fair Chance for All* as a 'keystone of Labor Policy' and the Government's intentions to achieve 'a fairer and more just society', drawing on the connection created between education and equality established by the Whitlam Labor government in the 1970s (Australian Government 1990; Gale & Tranter 2011). This policy document was written just as Australian economic policy was beginning to adapt to neoliberal and globalised frameworks which would come to complicate attempts to address social inequity. Perhaps because of this there is a clarity to this initial roadmap for achieving the more equitable distribution of economic growth and its relation to educational opportunity, accompanied as it was by a broader government agenda based on 'fairness' (see Australian Government 1988). *A Fair Chance for All* was also informed by the *Higher Education: a Policy Statement* White Paper which clearly identified for the first time 'significant barriers' to higher education participation for specific groups: people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, people from low-income families, people from rural or isolated areas and women (Australian Government 1988a).

The resilience of many of these categories in subsequent higher education policy documents is testament to both the lasting influence of *A Fair Chance for All* and the challenge of addressing educational inequities given disparities in educational attainment (Gale & Tranter 2011; Harvey Burnheim & Brett 2016). It also foreshadowed widening participation as integral to strengthening Australia's 'economic base', recognising the growing diversity of its economic profile which required 'a well-educated, skilled and flexible workforce' (Australian Government 1990 p. 7). Herein lies the recent genesis of 'disadvantaged groups' as 'under-used resources', who via higher education had the potential to contribute to 'a more highly skilled and efficient workforce' (Australian Government 1990 p. 7). Among the objectives established to achieve this broader economic goal was an increase in the participation of people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to a level that 'more closely resembles the mix of the general population' (Australian Government 1990 p. 14).

The Bradley Review

With added urgency given evidence of declining educational standards and little signs of levelling demographic participation, the 2008 Review of Australian higher Education led by Denise Bradley (Bradley Review) drew upon 'international consensus' to highlight the connection between higher education and the state of the national economy (Australian Government 2008). Reflecting ensuing years of economic globalisation under neoliberalism, the tone of the Bradley Review is far more concerned with international competitiveness in higher education and the Australian economy than *A Fair Chance for All*. Although referencing the importance of maintaining a just society, addressing the issue of underrepresentation is framed squarely in relation to economic risk: 'the failure to capitalise on the abilities of all Australians is a significant economic issue to the nation' (Australian Government 2008 p. 10).

Rather than drawing on substantive political imagination or reference to social justice, the recommendations received by the Gillard Government from the Bradley Review relied specifically on external analysis which framed skills shortfalls as the main reason to address the issue of educational attainment and access to university. These recommendations included raising the rate of 24–34-year-olds holding a bachelor degree or above by 2020 to 40% and setting the access rate target of 20% for the proportion of students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds enrolling at university by 2020 (Australian Government 2008). This recognised that increases in raw numbers of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds seen since *A Fair Chance for All* had not shifted the proportional representation of these students (Harvey et al. 2016)

However, the significance of setting such clear demographically-based enrolment targets was undermined by a policy imperative to make 'greater use of human capital' to increase global competitiveness (Australian Government 2008). This rationale is elaborated under the starkly worded heading 'Providing opportunities for all capable students to participate' (Australian Government 2008). Capable or not, the Bradley Review deepened the neoliberal logic of widening participation policy in attributing a lack of awareness among underrepresented student cohorts regarding the benefits of higher education to their low aspirations (Australian Government 2008). As was the case in other countries such as the UK, this justification established aspiration raising as the key rationale for widening participation practice rather than recognise structural barriers which excluded specific cohorts from accessing higher education (Sellar 2013). Drawing on neoliberal ideas of individual success, widening participation's impact could thus be measured in part by the extent to which it was able to lay responsibility for underrepresentation at the feet of the cohorts it was aiming to support (Rainford 2021). This misattribution in part contrasts with *A Fair Chance for All* which at least recognised the importance of institutional commitment to achieving equity goals by 'working towards behavioural changes on the part of academic and administrative staff' (Australian Government 1990 p. vi). This hints at an early awareness that widening participation requires institutional shifts embodying 'recognitive justice', approaches which seek to appreciate the strengths and values students from underrepresented backgrounds bring to higher education rather than what they are perceived to lack (Gale & Tranter 2011).

Countering this deficit approach which has characterised widening participation practice, it is now well understood that it is not low aspirations which function as a barrier to higher education participation but rather the expectation of being able to gain access given the challenges faced by educationally disadvantage students (Bok 2010; Cakitaki et al. 2022; Rainford 2021). The clearest challenge to widening participation is addressing academic attainment, hampered by Australia having one of the most socioeconomically segregated schooling systems in the OECD (Greenwell and Bonner, 2022). Reified in the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), educational attainment has become a function of relative socioeconomic advantage which builds throughout students' lives (Smith, Parr & Muhidin 2019) reflecting ongoing political unwillingness to reform the schooling sector on a needs-based funding model (Bonner et al. 2021) rather than allow it to drift according to neoliberal market imperatives of individual choice.

Aligned with human capital theory's influence upon economic policy and the role of higher education, the neoliberalisation of secondary education since the 1970s has meant that the decision of choosing between an under-resourced public school and higher quality private alternatives, and ultimately the chance of attending university, is largely determined by socioeconomic status (Edeji 2024). There is thus a contradiction in widening participation's adoption of the idealised neoliberal aspirational citizen epitomised by market driven higher education decisions and employment goals (Sellar 2013), given the education gap exacerbated by the same market-based mechanisms. Regardless of aspiration, the actual prospect of higher education participation is shaped by the realities of educational disadvantage in Australian high schools and how this shapes students' expectations of attending university. This is but one manifestation of 'cruel optimism' that widening participation in its neoliberal guise fails to recognise, engendering objects of desire without acknowledging factors that simultaneously undermine them (Berlant 2011; Sellar 2013).

The Australian Universities Accord

Raising and capitalising on aspirations is nevertheless framed as an integral mechanism towards achieving the Accord's 'skills through equity' agenda outlined in 2024. Like the Bradley Review before it, the Accord uncritically observed the distributive rather than redistributive dynamic inherent to widening participation in Australia (Gale & Tranter 2011) in that observed increases in participation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds since 2008 had been matched by 'higher-than-expected growth in the total undergraduate population' (Australian Government 2024 p. 119). While this may have served national economic interests by producing more university graduates, it did little to make access to higher education more equitable overall as the proportion of undergraduates from low socioeconomic grew but marginally. Falling short of the 20% participation target set by the Bradley Review, the proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds rose from 16.3% in 2008 to just 17.1% in 2021. Given the raw increase in representation overall, the Accord frames the failure to meet the 20% target as 'not a bad thing' before setting the target of parity representation by 2050 for First Nations students, students from the lowest quartile SES backgrounds and regional, rural students (Australian Government 2024 p. 119).

These targets follow logically from previous demographic metrics which have framed widening participation practice and evaluation. Along with recommending better support to help students succeed at university via a needs-based funding model, parity representation is a laudable goal. However, the Accord missed a clear opportunity to move the Australian widening participation agenda away from an aspiration model which fails to genuinely recognise the barriers which surround these aspirations, beyond claiming that students from low-SES backgrounds 'lack opportunities to develop a more concrete expectation that they will engage in higher education, or to broaden their perception of what is possible' (Australian Government 2024 p. 124). Without clearly acknowledging concrete barriers such as educational disadvantage, the Accord endorses outreach strategies that 'nurture aspiration and help people convert aspiration into action' (Australian Government 2024 p. 125). Once again it is the agency of socioeconomically disadvantaged students that is faulty, a neoliberal strategy which merges potential students' higher education goals within the economic imperatives and redemptive casting of 'skills through equity'. The following section will explore how this policy platform has developed alongside hegemonic evaluation practices within the field of widening participation.

Widening Participation and Evaluation Practice

Government frameworks

In publishing *A Fair Chance for All,* the Australian government forecast a combination of yet to be determined system-wide and institutional measures to evaluate the performance of actions designed to support the higher education participation of underrepresented students (Australian Government 1990). Recognising the difficulty of identifying socio-educational disadvantage, the document states 'it may be necessary to use a range of factors to adequately define social and/or economic disadvantage' to inform the design of performance indicators (Australian Government 1990 p.55). Although it pointed to the possibility of using qualitative evidence to measure the impact of programs supporting equity students, *A Fair Chance for All* primarily foreshadowed that the objectives of individual institutional programs would be measured in 'quantitative terms' (Australian Government 1990 p. 56). The Federal Government subsequently relied on the Equity and General Performance Indicator Framework, which since 1994 has consistently informed reporting to track higher education access, participation and completion for six equity groups: students from a non-English speaking background (NESB); students with disability; women in non-traditional areas of study; students from Indigenous backgrounds; students from low socio-economic status backgrounds; and students from regional and remote areas (Martin 1994). Other than recommending the 20% low SES national enrolment target by 2020, the Bradley Review advocated the ongoing use of existing performance measures to monitor sector-wide and institutional performance (Australian Government 2008).

The task of measuring the specific impact of programs designed to support the participation of students from equity backgrounds was not a clear focus of government policy until the development of the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) in 2021 (Robinson *et al.* 2021). The object of the SEHEEF is to provide a means to monitor and understand the effectiveness of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which was established in 2010 following the Bradley Review to support institutions to undertake activities to support the access, participation and success of students from low-SES backgrounds. The HEPPP was expanded in 2021 to refocus the funding of outreach initiatives to support students from Indigenous backgrounds as well as students from regional and remote areas (Robinson et al. 2021).

The development of the SEHEEF was prompted by the first systematic evaluation of the HEPPP in 2017 which recommended its continuation given evidence of its effectiveness, but also the need for a 'rigorous' framework from which 'robust' evidence could be accumulated to better understand the effectiveness of equity programs (ACIL Allen Consulting 2017; Robinson et al. 2021). In addition to supporting institutions to develop Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) practices in program evaluation, the SEHEEF responded directly to ACIL Allen Consulting's endorsement of experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation designs to establish a Quantitative Impact Evaluation model to provide estimates of equity program effectiveness (ACIL Allen Consulting 2017; Robinson et al. 2021). The SEHEEF also recommends the use of theory-based evaluation methods which it rightly recognises are better equipped to understand the contextual complexity of equity interventions, as well as why they might be having purported impacts (Robinson et al. 2021).

The challenge of certainty and hegemonic evaluation practice

However, it is unclear whether the differences between experimental and theory-based methodologies can be so easily reconciled by their inclusion in a single evaluation framework. The adoption of quantitative methods to measure the impact of equity initiatives in Australia as recommended by ACIL Allen Consulting's report, follows international recognition regarding the lack of causal evidence for the impact of widening participation activities (Baines et al. 2022; Martin 2024). As with the framing of the SEHEEF, causal evidence is prized for the 'certainty' that it insinuates given the well-worn application of experimental methods such as randomised control trials (RCTs) in fields such as medicine. Yet the language of 'counterfactuals' and 'control groups' these disciplinary origins lend to the application of experimental methods in fields such as education should immediately pose caution to widening participation researchers and practitioners, predicated as they are on the notion that there is a 'treatment' for the challenges that underrepresented students face (Burke & Lumb 2024). Attending to such solutions may appeal to rationales for widening participation founded in neoliberal economic goals, but they do not extend our understanding of the barriers students face in accessing higher education or necessarily ground their investigations in ways that correspond with the subjectivities of those involved. What matters most to the evaluation process and the evaluator may not align with community interests and needs (Burke & Lumb 2024). This fundamental disconnect speaks to broader concerns regarding the ethical and ideological fit of RCTs in educational and social research (Hayton & Bengry-Howell 2016; Gale 2018; Parra & Edwards Jr 2024).

Theory-based methods and qualitative inquiry

Building on the ontological complicity of hegemonic evaluation practice in supporting neoliberal forms of governmentality in the widening partition space are considerable theoretical issues of epistemological authority. Alluding to the fundamental scientism of experimental methods when applied outside clinical settings, Hayton and Stevenson (2018 p. 1) point out that in applying such methods widening participation practitioners and researchers risk 'pursuing a chimera of certainty'. The eager pursuit of counterfactual analysis in the context of interventions which engage young people as they consider their futures and present academic challenges fails to address the epistemic challenges of understanding 'what works' in such complex social settings (Harrison 2022).

These critiques mirror arguments developed within the field of evaluation more broadly which highlight pitfalls in adherence to positivist beliefs that social change can be easily attributed to specific interventions (Picciotto 2012). This scepticism was preceded by the development of theory-oriented approaches which recognised the limitations of quantitative methods in investigating the 'black box' of *how* an intervention leads (or doesn't) to its intended outcome (Chen & Rossi 1989; Weiss 1995; Pawson & Tilley 1997). The examination of causal linkages between an intervention and its outcomes is a particular strength of theory-based evaluation (TBE) developed by Weiss (1995). TBE involves the development of a theory of change through which specific mechanisms of change can be articulated in terms of assumptions i.e. what needs to happen for an outcome to be realised (Stame 2004). Theory of change models are in turn being adopted by widening participation practitioners and researchers to provide insight into the context of interventions and to suggest how they are leading to intended impacts (Harrison & Waller 2017; Barkat 2019; Thomas 2020; Hanson, Brown & Crockford 2022; Schulte & Benson-Egglenton 2025).

One promising theory of change approach for the evaluation of widening participation interventions that has not received significant attention is contribution analysis. Developed by John Mayne (2001), contribution analysis directly addresses the difficulty of establishing causality in complex socioeconomic settings by considering the interplay of external factors and assessing the possibility that an intervention is contributing to a desired outcome rather than attributing this impact directly. A further strength of this method is its anticipation of revisions to theory according to emerging evidence (Mayne 2012), meaning that an intervention can be more accountable and not expressly bound by the question of 'what works'. As with other theory-oriented evaluation models, contribution analysis allows for flexibility in evaluation design and how data is collected and analysed as it is 'methods-neutral' (Bohni Nielsen & Lemire 2025).

This methodological flexibility is of great advantage to widening participation practitioners and researchers, given it can prioritise qualitative inquiry to generate understandings of an intervention's impact within the bounds of individual experiences and multiple realities (Creswell, 2013; Fetters, Curry & Creswell 2013). When combined with practices such as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2023), qualitative inquiry also equips program evaluators with the means of examining their own role in knowledge production, allowing them to be mindful of the epistemological conceit that can characterise evaluation practice (Gordon et al. 2022). This goes some way in allowing the impact of an intervention to be considered in students' own terms, deepening engagement with individual subjectivities and students' experiences of pursuing higher education. How thematic insights align with intended outcomes, or not, can thus be calibrated with critical insights which may question the very 'theory' upon which an intervention is based. Take on-campus experiences as an evidenced-based intervention which supports students transition to university as an example (Martin 2024; Zacharias et al. 2018). Analysing qualitative data regarding these experiences will help us understand why they are helpful and for whom, or alternatively how they can be improved if they did not successfully meet intended outcomes. Receptive to revision (Mayne 2012), a theory of change can be refashioned to integrate alternative or additional assumptions and outcomes which are better aligned with student need, which may or may not align with the aims of broader widening policy agendas.

Challenging meritocratic hubris

Qualitative inquiry is crucial to ensure that the 'change' theories of change are hoping to affect does not emulate the practice of remedying capacities students are perceived to lack for successfully accessing and participating in higher education, and thus prioritising evaluation as a tool to affirm political goals (Gordon et al. 2022). Encouraging such 'misrecognition' via maintaining the legitimacy of specific forms of capital perceived to be essential for higher education 'success' is precisely what widening participation needs to avoid (Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020). Thoughtful access to students' narratives can provide researchers and evaluators a much richer understanding of individual motivations for seeking higher education beyond what human capital they may provide and insight to the barriers they face.

Separate from the often technocratic goals of government widening participation policy, qualitative inquiry allows for engagement with the 'deeply personal nature' of students' journeys to, through and beyond higher education (O'Shea et al. 2024 p. 13). This means coming to terms with the 'price' that can be exacted by social mobility given processes of misrecognition within higher education which prescribe essential capacities to 'play the game', logically seen as lacking among students from underrepresented backgrounds (Friedman 2013; Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020). At once qualitative inquiry is a valuable tool for understanding the extent to which students may have internalised (or resisted) the individualised, competitive impetus of neoliberal discourse (Nairn & Higgins 2007). Both examples are tied with embedding greater reflexivity in widening participation practice. Students can help point us away from the redemptive role that widening participation policy and hegemonic evaluation practice has cast them, encouraging us to stay with the 'trouble of equity' and interrogate ways that higher education can contribute to a more just society which understands difference as a 'necessary and valuable difficulty' (Burke & Lumb 2024 p. 175, 180).

Failing to integrate such a considered understanding of the challenges underrepresented students can face as they confront the meritocratic logic of neoliberalism is more than academic. It has urgent political resonance in an increasingly unequal society aligned with meritocratic beliefs which blind it to the realities of educational and other forms disadvantage, just as it casts individuals in a dialectic national economic success (Sandel 2021a, 2021b). Neither outcome holds hope to address inequality as that is not the aim of neoliberalism, which is rather to increase the wealth of economic elites through the arbitrariness of market demand.

The political danger of this ideology's lingering influence upon educational policies through mantras such as 'skills through equity' extend further into the risks they pose to the health of democracies worldwide. To the extent that such policies favour technical and scientific disciplines seen as necessary for economic growth, it has encouraged policymakers to view other disciplines such as the arts and humanities as 'useless frills' unaligned to profit-making (Nussbaum 2010). The goals of neoliberalism run counter to the collective exercise of critical thought. As Martha Nussbaum (2010 p. 2) writes, '[i]f this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's suffering and achievements.'

Conclusion

There will always be a need to track progress against access, participation and completion metrics for students from underrepresented backgrounds against the proportional targets set by reviews such as the Accord. These provide governments, institutions and the higher education sector motivation to address equity given the stark social injustices posed by demographic under-representation. However, at the program level, quantitative-based experimental methods should not be pursued at the sake of misunderstanding why people are pursuing higher education as well as being blind to their experience of socio-educational disadvantage. 'Success' in the context of widening participation interventions is not a simple matter of ensuring that students have the 'capabilities' to more equitably access higher education in the pursuit of increased national skill capability. Hidden within such notions of success are potential injuries of students having internalised neoliberal conceptions of meritocracy which devalue subjectivities that are not tied to relentlessly aspirational attitudes and material gain.

Notwithstanding initiatives which seek to make access to higher education more equitable, the hubris of meritocracy demands that students from underrepresented backgrounds out-perform their more privileged social counterparts who cleave to the belief that educational success reflects individual effort on a level playing (Sandel 2021b). If this extra effort is lacking, or if there is an absence of aspiration to attend university at all, meritocratic thinking relies on all too simple measures of success or failure. The same can be said of the long-running economic justification for widening participation in Australian higher education policy, which hinges national economic success on underrepresented students' ability, and willingness, to access an education system historically underwritten by exclusive sentiment. This redemptive casting fails to properly recognise the challenges people from underrepresented backgrounds face in accessing higher education, beyond a perceived lack of aspiration, and risks cultivating a national polity which scapegoats 'non-aspirational' subjectivities for failing to meet global standards of competitiveness. The political consequences of this are clear, not least of which is a failure to arrest growing economic inequality and social marginalisation. Adopting a more reflexive, theory-based and adaptive approach to evaluation has the potential to guide us towards widening participation practice which incorporates a critical awareness of false narratives of neoliberal meritocratic inclusion and genuine appreciation for students' educational challenges and aspirations.

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CASE STUDY

Evaluation for equity and justice in higher education: The Political, the Relational, and the Transformational

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Universities have a long history of "widening participation", attempting to advance social equity and social mobility through access and success within higher education. In England, evaluation has been central to the widening participation agenda for over twenty years, so much so that it has become systematised within higher education providers and is intertwined with the development and delivery of programmes and activities. In this system, normalised evaluation of practice valuing technical expertise, linear thinking, and rationality is dominant. These systems typically focus on questions such as "Did this intervention work?" However, socio-political influences prevail, particularly in systems driven by policy agendas, which can contribute to symbolic and non-use of evaluation that maintains the status quo, inhibiting our ability to advance social equity. In these contexts, it is important to make explicit the value judgments decision-makers hold that affect how higher education providers enact WP policy and its evaluation in practice, so that we can begin to consider alternative perspectives and strategies for change. This paper builds a conceptual framework drawing from political science, organisational theory, and systems thinking to develop our understanding of the widening participation system, including evaluation within the system. Then, guided by the conceptual framework and the English higher education sector as a case study, we illustrate how the use of Critical Systems Heuristics as a critical systems thinking approach can guide practitioners to transition from enacting widening participation policy and its evaluation from a normalised to a normative practice, asking questions including "What makes this the right thing to do?" to embrace complexity, relationality, and practice toward transformation.

Keywords: evaluation; equity; higher education; evidence-based policy; critical systems heuristics

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Introduction

Universities have a long history of "widening participation" (WP), attempting to advance social equity and social mobility through access and success within higher education. While the purpose and motivation for WP in England is continuously debated, the dominant view holds that WP exists to increase social mobility and equality of opportunity to higher education for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (Burke 2016). Alongside debates about how WP policy should be enacted, evaluation has dominated the WP agenda for over twenty years, becoming systematised within higher education providers (HEPs) (Kelly 2024). Throughout this paper, we refer to this as the WP system and argue that the development of the WP system over time means that evaluation has become an organisational functional entity in that system (Dahler-Larsen 2012). In other words, evaluation is part of WP policy enactment and is routinised within higher education providers as they develop and deliver their programs and activities. Driven by the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), evaluation practices valuing technical expertise, linear thinking, and rationality are dominant and normalised (OfS 2019). Due to this focus on evaluation as a technical and rational science, these systems typically focus on questions of "What works?" which prevents actors from reflecting on the normative basis for their decisions: "How do we know this is the right thing to do?"

As the literature on the influences of evaluation within systems has developed, the effects of socio-political factors on evaluation and policy enactment processes have become increasingly apparent. For example, evaluation is prone to capture within organisations and bureaucracies, producing overly positive results and reducing the ability for the evaluation process and findings to speak truth to power (Raimondo & Leeuw, 2021). Captured evaluation can also lead actors to change their practice to fit the expectations of an evaluation, seeking to prove the impact of programs rather than to test whether impact has been achieved, and for whom (Andersen & Pattyn 2025; Dahler-Larsen 2015). In WP, longstanding debates acknowledge the socio-political nature of enacting WP policy, including whether WP should be justice-oriented or mobility-oriented, and driven by practitioner insight and expertise (Burke 2018; Ingram & Gamsu 2022). Existing evaluation literature within WP tends to debate choices of methods for determining the impact and success of WP programmes and activities (Clements & Short 2020; Harrison & Waller 2017; Younger et al. 2018). While these debates are important, we argue that they do not adequately speak to each other or acknowledge the dynamic nature of WP policy enactment, whereby evaluation influences practice and vice versa.

In this paper, we bridge these debates by adapting an existing conceptual framework describing the WP evaluation system in England by Kelly (2024), referring to it as the 'WP System' more generally. We adopt this terminology to reflect evaluations' central role in WP policy development and its enactment. This conceptual framework illustrates the political dimensions that affect how evaluation influences practice and decision-making within HEPs, with personal values, staff job roles, and responsibilities influencing how they respond to the need to evaluate as part of the WP policy enactment process. We use this conceptual framework as a rationale for the use of Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH) to support people affected by, and involved in, WP to surface and negotiate these implicit values influencing their practice. We argue that by adopting CSH, practitioners can better understand and navigate the political and relational dimensions of their WP practice, in turn, enabling them to realise the normative and transformational potential of both their WP practice and its evaluation. We argue for the adoption of critical systems-thinking approaches (in this case, CSH), which incorporates deliberative and democratic principles as diverse actors who affect and are affected by the enactment of WP policy are involved in explicitly defining the values and boundaries of the WP system and its evaluation (Gates 2017; House & Howe 2000). Importantly, this means that we do *not* commit to a particular outcome of such deliberative processes. Rather, we seek to open the door for more expansive opportunities for actors who would otherwise be excluded from decision-making to challenge the status quo and critically reflect on whether existing WP strategies and activities are the right things to do. While we believe in the transformative potential of this process, we are also conscious of our own perspective and position as evaluators, representing only one part of the WP system. Indeed, as we will illustrate throughout the paper, this is precisely why CSH is valuable: to ensure that diverse voices are included in the deliberation process.

The paper is structured into three sections. In section one, we use a conceptual framework of the WP system and its evaluation to explore WP policy enactment among staff with different job roles and responsibilities, epistemic and personal values, and how these dynamic organisational and individual characteristics influence how WP practice and its evaluation are affected by socio-political forces. Section two introduces CSH as a tool that organisational actors who affect and are affected by WP policy can use to surface the socio-political dynamics of WP practice and its evaluation, and explicitly define the values and boundary judgments made about how one ought to widen participation and evaluate it. We illustrate the use of CSH within WP, by drawing from our professional experiences, prior research, and analysis of policy documentation to contrast what the existing value and boundary judgements are, and how explicitly incorporating deliberative and democratic principles with CSH can elicit alternative perspectives around what "ought to be" within the WP system, effectively moving the sector beyond questioning "are we doing things right?" to normatively questioning "what makes this the right thing for us to do?" Section three concludes, highlighting the political and relational dimensions of evaluative practice in these contexts, and how, by applying deliberative and democratic principles through CSH, and drawing explicitly from a critical systems thinking lens, organisational actors can begin to ask questions and seek answers from diverse perspectives that open opportunities for transforming the WP system.

Conceptual Framework: The WP System (and its Evaluation), Values, and Job Roles Influencing Internal Evaluation Practices

The Widening Participation System (and its Evaluation)

The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 frames WP practices within the context of the wider WP system, of which evaluation is embedded. In the evaluation context, since 2009, the internal evaluation of WP programmes has been mandated as a regulatory requirement of providers as part of their reporting to the regulators, the Office for Fair Access (2004-2018), and since 2018, the OfS. This system has been shaped by the policy legacies of the New Labour Government, which strengthened the use of results and performance-based management. The national standards of evidence developed by the OfS are based on this evaluation paradigm and the notion that the sector can use evaluation to determine "what works" within WP to help disadvantaged students access and succeed in higher education (Crawford et al., 2017; OfS, 2019).

The WP system is manifest in HEPs access and participation plans (APPs), which outline institutions ambitions for change, including concrete APP targets (for example, the commitment to increase the share of students from a specific underrepresented group to enrol in their institution), activities they will carry out, their investment to achieve these targets, and an evaluation strategy for these activities (OfS, 2023b). The process of developing the plans allows providers to translate national-level policy for their organisational contexts and provides a shared organisational responsibility for HEPs to deliver their established targets (Rainford, 2021). There is permanence within evaluation in the WP system (Leeuw and Furubo, 2008): activities are implemented throughout the academic year and are subject to monitoring by the OfS at least every four years and at most every year (OfS, 2023b).

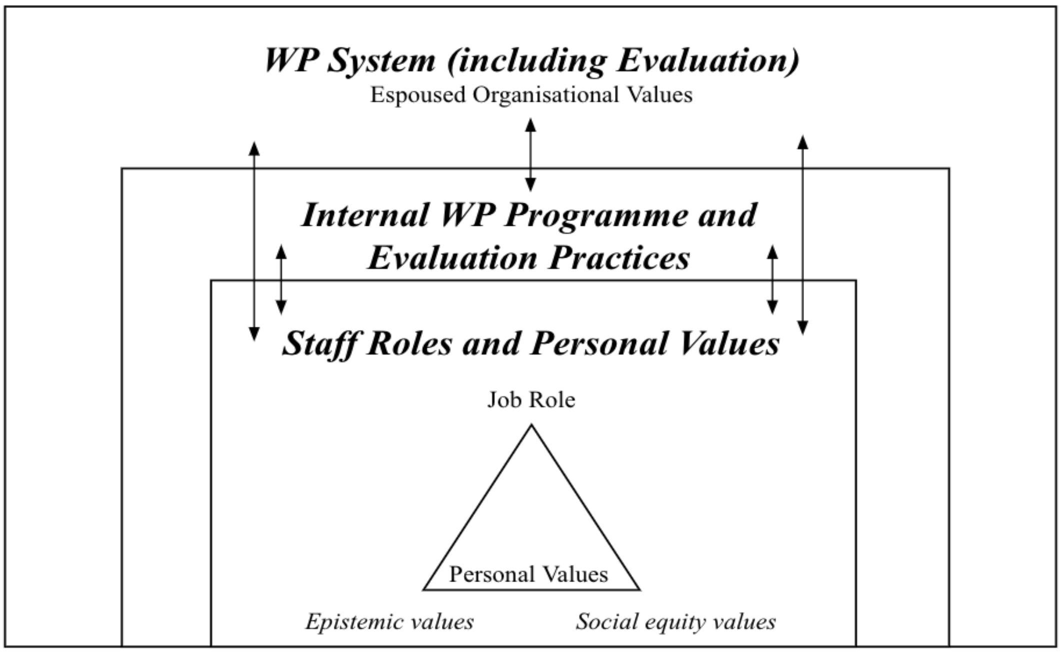

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Influences of Organisational Values, Personal Values, and Job Roles on Internal Evaluation Practices (Adapted from Kelly, 2024)

Since evaluation for the enactment of WP policy has become systematised, it is an "organisational functional entity", and thus the responsibility of staff within and across the organisation (Dahler-Larsen 2012 p. 36). One cannot neatly separate the organisation (the higher education provider) and its enactment of WP policy from its evaluation. Weiss (1973) notably called out the politics of evaluation because social programs are themselves political; therefore, the act of evaluating social programmes is also part of the political process, and likely to affect how decision-makers are influenced by evaluation. Indeed, micro-politics plays out within evaluation processes, as intricate power dynamics are negotiated amongst different partners who affect and are affected by instigating, planning, implementing, and using evaluation (Schwandt 2015). In Figure 1, power dynamics inevitably play out within the arrows that connect each aspect of the system.

Staff Roles and Personal Values

Practitioners' identities, positionality, and values shape how they interpret, make sense of, and choose to enact policy in practice (Maguire et al. 2015; Weick et al. 2005). This process is complex, with each practitioner operating with different values and ways of perceiving policy and resources to achieve their aims (Cunningham & Hermans 2018). For example, in a WP context, Rainford (2021) distinguishes between compliant and transgressive practitioners. Compliant practitioners have fewer resources, less experience, and less agency in their job roles and are more likely to comply with institutional policy. Transgressive practitioners have more experience in understanding the complexities of their work and are more confident in delivering activities in a way that may not fully align with the espoused organisational values. How practitioners operate within their job roles thus affects how they make sense of, interpret, and enact WP policy to achieve their responsibilities and values (Kelly 2024; Stevenson et al. 2010). In England, because evaluation has become systematised within WP and part of the policy enactment process, practitioners are often inhabiting dual roles. They are implementing WP programmes while also acting as evaluators, attempting to assess the process and impact of their practice. How staff navigate these roles involves negotiating power dynamics, including relational power in how staff relate to one another, and in particular, how staff with more agency and resources in their positions include or exclude the values and perspectives of staff with less agency and fewer resources (Stickl Haugen & Chouinard 2019).

Personal values represent an individual's identity, affecting their attitudes and behaviours (Sagiv et al. 2017). Here, we are concerned with epistemic and social equity values as important factors influencing which evaluation approaches are pursued. For example, practitioners and organisations that espouse social mobility as the main aim of WP may be more likely to place the focus of change and thus the criteria for programme success on the individual student (Spohrer et al. 2018). Practitioners and organisations who value achieving social justice by widening participation believe the system should change to accommodate students from disadvantaged backgrounds, changing the unit of measurement to the practices of the institution and the overall evaluation approach (Wisker & Masika 2017). Political power plays out in these processes as certain agendas and beliefs are likely to be more valued over others, such as the OfS epistemic values as described in their standards of evidence (Stickl Haugen & Chouinard 2019), which situate experimental and quasi-experimental approaches as the most rigorous (OfS 2019).

Internal WP Programme and Evaluation Practices

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 posits that internal evaluation practices for WP within HEPs are influenced by the wider WP system, espoused organisational values, and the job roles and values of practitioners responsible for enacting the policy. As actors navigate micro-politics and power dynamics throughout this process, divergences in actual and perceived values from the system, organisational, and individual can lead to the fragmentation of evaluation activities. This is because individuals will modify their behaviours and attitudes to achieve their values (Arieli et al. 2020). For example, Kelly (2024) reports cases of WP practitioners collecting one set of data to achieve their values and job roles, to then collect other forms of data they believe better satisfy the OfS and other senior leaders within their institution. This fragmentation is particularly likely when evaluation within these systems focuses on measuring whether and how WP programmes are working, casting evaluation as a means for practitioners to justify and sustain their programmes. This can contribute to the symbolic use of evaluation – that is, the pursuit of evaluation as an end in itself, without meaningful change or decision-making based on findings; or non-use, with evaluation ignored altogether (Alkin & King 2017). In turn, the transformative potential of evaluation is constrained by the need to prove overall organisational and departmental successes, leaving practitioners to make small-scale changes and adaptations to their programmes.

Building on Critical Systems Heuristics to Guide Practitioners from Normalised to Normative WP Practice

The conceptual framework illustrates how internal WP practices (including evaluation) are influenced by the espoused WP system, characteristic of policy legacies, the espoused values of HEPs, and bottom-up, through the attitudes and behaviours of practitioners working towards their personal values and job roles and responsibilities. Moreover, micro-politics play out throughout the evaluation process as staff navigate multiple dimensions of power dynamics that affect whose values are prioritised. Therefore, rather than centring evaluation as a value-neutral and technical-rational scientific activity, this framework presents WP policy enactment and its evaluation as socio-political and value-laden. We also highlight the threat of evaluation being captured, that is, used to promote and support the organisation, independent of findings (Leeuw & Pleger 2023), as well as the threats of symbolic and non-use, where evaluation is used to justify decisions that have already been made (Alkin & King 2017). Consequently, understanding how evaluation influences WP practice, and, more importantly, how it can be used to *transform* policy and practice, requires centring the political and the relational. That is, centring the policy legacies, political forces, personal values, and job roles and responsibilities of the individuals enacting WP policy.

CSH, as developed by Ulrich (1983), presents a powerful tool for this. At its core, CSH offers a framework in which to understand and examine a given system or context. As Ulrich argues, this requires one to understand the assumed facts and values - what is the case, and what ought to be the case. Centrally, however, Ulrich emphasises that examining the facts and values defining a context must necessarily involve a third component: the determination of *which* and *whose* facts and values are considered, known as *boundary judgements*. On this view, any set of facts and values is "inevitably partial (selective) in the dual sense of representing a part rather than the whole of the total universe of conceivable considerations, and of serving some parties better than others – no proposal, no decision, no action can get it equally right for everyone!" (Ulrich 2005 p. 2).

Based on this insight, CSH applies the method of *boundary critique* (Reynolds 2007; Ulrich 2005; Ulrich & Reynolds 2020), the process of critically and systematically reflecting on the boundary judgments operative in a given context. This process requires surfacing and justifying the legitimacy of the facts and values one includes. As Gates summarises, in the evaluation context, therefore, "CSH calls for evaluators to be critical—continuously calling attention to whose and which sociopolitical values are and should be influencing an evaluation and potential consequences of this for other groups and interests" (Gates 2017 p. 211).

CSH offers three benefits to understanding and acting in the WP system. *First*, as an epistemological framework, CSH re-emphasises the central role of values in defining the WP context, requiring actors to surface and articulate their values. Applying CSH requires considering not just "what works", but also "what ought to be the case", which provides space to move beyond a rational understanding of programmes to taking a normative position. *Second*, CSH provides a process to critically examine boundary judgments. The distinction between facts and values *within* the boundaries of systems also applies *across* possible systems: CSH requires reflecting on what the boundary judgments of a given system *are*, and what they *ought* to be. This way, CSH provides a framework to engage with the sociopolitical questions that shape the WP system, allowing actors to imagine and define alternatives. Practically, CSH draws attention to four areas in which boundary judgments can, and should be, contested: sources of motivations, power, knowledge, and legitimacy (Ulrich & Reynolds 2020). Thus, CSH provides a blueprint in which to understand, criticise, and, in practical terms, transform the WP system and its evaluation. *Lastly*, CSH translates this philosophically rich framework into a practical format. Ulrich's method of boundary critique is summarised in 12 reflective questions that users are asked to discuss (Table 1), presenting an accessible approach.

Table 1: Critical Systems Heuristics Boundary Categories and Guiding Questions (Ulrich & Reynolds, 2020)

Sources of Influence	**Social roles (stakeholders)**	**Role-specific concerns (stakes)**	**Key problems (stakeholding issues)**
Motivation	**Beneficiary**	**Purpose**	**Measure of Improvement**
	Who ought to be/is the beneficiary?	What ought to be/is the purpose?	What ought to be/is the measure of success?
Control	**Decision-maker**	**Resources**	**Decision environment**
	Who ought to be/is in control of the conditions of success?	What conditions ought to be/are under the control of the decision-maker?	What conditions of success ought to be/are outside the control of the decision-maker?
Expertise	**Expert**	**Expertise**	**Guarantor**
	Who ought to be/is providing relevant knowledge and skills?	What ought to be/are relevant knowledge and skills?	What ought to be/are regarded as assurances of successful implementation?
Legitimation	**Witness**	**Emancipation**	**Worldview**
	Who ought to be/is representing the interests of those negatively affected but not involved?	What space ought to be/is available for reconciling differing worldviews among those involved and affected?	What ought to be/are the opportunities for the interests of those negatively affected to have expression and freedom from the dominant worldview?

CSH specifically highlights that any deliberative process is liable to include and benefit some perspectives at the expense of others. As such, CSH makes explicit the questioning of politics and legitimacy in a way that other approaches leave implicit. As a result, CSH complements existing participatory evaluation approaches that seek to create deliberative and democratic evaluation spaces (what Cousins and Whitmore (1998) term 'transformative participatory approaches'), including Theory of Change (ToC), whereby actors question the assumptions of how and why activities generate their intended outcomes.

Using Critical Systems Heuristics to Understand "What Is" in Widening Participation

To illustrate the value of CSH, we now present a reconstruction of the boundary judgments underpinning the OfS's approach to WP and its evaluation. The summary of this discussion – drawing on regulatory guidance, relevant literature, and our reflections as evaluators in the WP space – is presented in Table 2. Additionally, we summarise key boundary tensions in the remainder of this section, highlighting how the system can/ought to change.

For this, it is important to note that the WP agenda is itself not unambiguous or free of contradiction. For well over a decade, scholars have noted tensions in the policy and discourses of WP (Stevenson et al. 2010) or derived discussion of who is to 'blame' for the lack of progress on persistent challenges (Baker et al. 2006). This tension ultimately underscores the value of CSH as a framework for surfacing the (implicit) boundaries of a necessarily partial system. Therefore, while we label our reconstruction as defining the current "is" of the WP agenda, we recognise that the actual system of WP is more complex, multifaceted, and highly contested in both values and facts.

Table 2: "What Is": Critical Systems Heuristics from the Perspective of the Office for Students

Sources of Influence	**Social roles (stakeholders)**	**Role-specific concerns (stakes)**	**Key problems (stakeholding issues)**
Motivation	**Beneficiary**	**Purpose**	**Measure of Improvement**
	"Young people from backgrounds commonly underrepresented in HE" (OfS, 2023b: 3)	"Ensure that all students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education." (OfS, 2023b: 3)	The rate at which young people from underrepresented groups access higher education (OfS, 2024a), complete their degree, and progress into professional or managerial employment (OfS, 2024b)
Control	**Decision-maker**	**Resources**	**Decision environment**

	The Office for Students (via its power to (not) approve provider plans)	Various widening participation activities, *intra*-institutional structural change, and financial resources (sustaining the above or directly in the form of student financial support)	National and government policy/funding of higher education is out of scope
Expertise	**Expert**	**Expertise**	**Guarantor**
	(External) evaluators, researchers	"Robust" evidence, primarily published and/or generated by methods set out in the 'Standards of Evidence'	Systematised research and evaluation, in particular, evidence toolkits, evidence reviews, and (published) research
Legitimation	**Witness**	**Emancipation**	**Worldview**
	Ultimately, the UK government, through democratic processes, alongside media and interest groups (e.g., National Students Union, worker unions, Universities UK)	Approval process, student and sector consultations	Independent evaluation and practitioner networks, e.g., Evaluation Collective, Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) offer contrasting perspectives

Motivation

In the CSH framework, the first dimension of boundary judgments examines "where [...] a sense of purposefulness and value come from" (Ulrich 2005 p. 9). According to the OfS the purpose of WP is to promote "equality of opportunity" for a variety of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups (OfS 2023b p. 2), with the ultimate measure of success being the rate at which young people from underrepresented groups access higher education, achieve good degree outcomes, and progress into professional or managerial employment afterwards. However, many different groups with stakes in WP are known to be motivated by different means. On the one hand, WP has been viewed as a force for advancing collective social justice and equity, as a way of achieving social mobility for individuals, while also being viewed as an opportunity for HEPs to increase their income (Burke 2016; McCaig 2011).

Questioning this motivation can influence how WP is enacted. If a primary driver for WP is to increase students' lifetime income, how students are targeted and supported will be different compared to if the primary motivation is social justice (Burke 2016). This motivation will further influence the chosen indicators and targets of success, and the approach to evaluating. For example, a HEP that is motivated by achieving equity of opportunity might choose to change institutional policy toward contextual admissions, acknowledging the systemic barriers and biases inherent in a grades-based admissions process. A HEP motivated by equality of opportunity may focus on admitting students on 'academic merit', trusting in a fair process (Boliver et al. 2022). An evaluation of the first HEP would likely have indicators for success that focus on the institution changing its admissions process, whereas in the latter example, indicators of success would likely focus on individual-level change concerning students' academic performance.

Control

No matter how many individuals or organisations have different perspectives on what the primary motivation for WP should be, reflecting on who has control over decisions and resources to act on the motivation has further implications for practice. In the current WP system, the core decision-making power rests with the OfS, which can approve or reject providers' APPs (OfS 2023b). In practice, the approval process involves a phase of negotiations between the OfS and HEPs, allowing institutions to make the case for targets and approaches in their context, diluting this power somewhat. This 'freedom within a framework' explains the relative variety of targets and interventions providers use in their APPs (TASO 2022).

The boundary judgment of what constitutes a legitimate problem for HEPs to solve – and what should instead be solved through government intervention – is often a central contention in higher education policy debate. Since the inception of the WP agendas, scholars have lamented the absence of government, challenging where the line between state intervention and individual institutions' responsibilities should be drawn (Baker et al. 2006). This tension is well illustrated by the OfS's recent push to require providers to use their APPs to explain "[h]ow they can make meaningful and effective contributions to supporting schools to raise pre-16 attainment for students who do not have equal opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills required for higher education." (OfS 2023b p. 3). While *post*-16 work has been part of WP for some time, the shift in policy focus to *pre*-16 schooling has renewed sector discussions about the legitimate bounds of what providers can and ought to be expected to do. This contestation can be considered both between providers and the government, as well as between institutions and practitioners. For the former, the key question is if and to what extent HEPs ought to fund work for such younger ages, given both the interests of their funders – that is, of students paying tuition fees – and the perception that such work ought to be funded by schools or government instead (Anthony 2022). For the latter boundary conflict between individuals and institutions, questions about the skills and expertise WP practitioners require to deliver such work effectively, as well as the ability to achieve the necessary collaboration with schools, present areas of conflicting judgments.

Expertise

The question of who counts as a "competent provider of experience and expertise" (Ulrich, 2005 p. 11) remains a central area for contestation in WP policy and practice, with two areas in particular emerging in the literature and sector discussions.

The first are competing views on the credibility of practitioners as evaluators, highlighting tensions between institutions, individuals, and the wider system. Broadly, advocates of the 'internal' approach consider practitioners as the sources of knowledge and expertise. In contrast, those championing an 'external' approach hold that only evaluators and researchers, ideally publishing their work and being situated *outside* HEPs, constitute sources of knowledge (Moores et al. 2023).

Despite the regulator initially championing the external approach (*TASO Annual Conference 2022 - Part 1* 2022), the policy ultimately given to HEPs omits reference to *who* is best placed to act as a source of expertise (OfS 2023b). Instead, the guidance has shifted away from people towards methods and methodologies as guarantors of credibility, suggesting that anyone applying the right methods can contribute expertise.

This presents the second main area of contest in current discourses: what counts as good evidence. Central to current OfS regulation are the Standards of Evidence (OfS 2019, 2023a p. 22). Most controversially, the framework maintains that causal impact can only be evidenced by demonstrating that a change took place "relative to an appropriate control or comparison group who did not take part in the intervention" (OfS 2019 p. 8), limiting the strongest evidence ratings to a small number of experimental and quasi-experimental designs. However, as expansive literature both inside and outside of higher education has argued, such evidence hierarchies tend to fail both relative to their standards – that is, declaring methods as a gold standard even though there are important contextual limitations (Befani et al. 2014; Cartwright 2007; Schulte & Aston 2025) – while simultaneously excluding students and practitioners as sources of relevant knowledge and expertise and fundamentally excluding them from any process of policy deliberation (Anjum et al. 2025; Clements & Short 2020).

Legitimation

Lastly, there is the question of who holds legitimacy for representing the interests of those involved and affected, or those who are indeed not involved and may be negatively affected by the system. Perceptions about who holds the most legitimacy in concern for students most affected and in need of support for WP sets boundary assumptions around how the policy is enacted in practice, and its subsequent evaluation, determining who gets to act or speak on behalf of students, parents, teachers, and society. Critically reflecting on this assumption opens space to critique how WP is practised and evaluated, and for whom, and has "particular value as a means for recognizing and countering processes of marginalization" (Schwandt & Gates 2021 p. 77). In Table 2 we highlight several different worldviews related to "what different visions of 'improvement' are (should be) considered, and how are they (should they be) reconciled?" (Ulrich 2005 p. 11). We highlight several individuals, organisations and networks who each hold a different worldview and vision for how improvement should be considered within WP. For example, the NERUPI framework is praxis-based, valuing the role of practitioner knowledge and insight for driving forward transformation and change (Hayton & Bengry-Howell p. 2016). NERUPI holds practitioners as having a legitimate stake in serving the interests of students in need of WP support. Other researchers, and particularly those based within HEPs, are also working to provide greater legitimacy to students (Austen 2020).

Failure to critically reflect on these boundary assumptions can contribute to symbolic and non-use of evaluation, maintaining rather than challenging the status quo, and serving the legitimacy of the organisation (Leeuw & Pleger 2023), potentially at the expense of the public it is serving. In a study on the influence of the WP system, Kelly (2024) found that while practitioners valued learning more about the lived experiences of the students they served, they perceived their senior leaders and managers to value "simple statistics". This led the practitioners to fragment their evaluation practice so that they could serve their senior leaders with simplified quantitative data and gather qualitative data on the lived experiences of their students to help serve their job responsibilities (Kelly 2024). Although the qualitative data supported them in making small-scale changes to their activities, they mostly produced and supplied positive evidence to the decision-makers up the organisational hierarchy, rarely recognising or questioning if they were doing the right thing in the first place. Opening dialogue amongst people involved and affected by WP around these boundary assumptions and what they view as "what is" and "what ought to be" can thus contribute to improvements and changes to the policy enactment and evaluation process.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have argued that the enactment of WP policy and its subsequent evaluation in England are intertwined and, as such, value-laden and influenced by socio-political factors. Evaluation in the context of WP is thus subject to being captured, legitimising HEPs' WP activity and limiting its ability to challenge the status quo or to critically question the normative basis around whether WP activity in its current form "is the right thing to do". We present CSH as a practical tool that can be used by people involved and affected by WP policy to critically reflect on boundary judgments that are typically implicit in decision-making around WP practice and its evaluation. Akin to how introducing theory of change within WP in England has challenged how practitioners think about their practice (Kelly 2024), we illustrated that embedding CSH within WP can explicitly surface value-judgements and assumptions that challenge the status quo. This is because engaging in CSH surfaces the selectivity of boundary judgments and requires those involved and affected to transparently question and critique these judgments (Schwandt & Gates 2016; Ulrich 2005). This opens dialogue for alternative options (Ulrich & Reynolds 2020). To transform WP practice, this process requires people to engage with WP and its evaluation system from a political and relational perspective.

The Political

The enactment of WP policy and its evaluation are inherently political. From a macro-perspective, it is political because the government of the day defines the bounds and regulatory requirements influencing how the policy can be enacted by staff within HEPs. From a micro-perspective, it is political as a multitude of actors, internal and external to HEPs, with different and sometimes competing values and job roles and responsibilities, are continually making sense of and navigating decisions related to their WP practice and how it is evaluated. Rather than ignore the politics involved in the enactment of WP policy, CSH encourages active participation in democratic and deliberative processes that are inherently political. The discussions to be had within the CSH framework cut across governance of HEPs and their APP development, and within and between HEPs, schools, and other partners who are affected and involved in WP, navigating dimensions of power and perceived expertise.

The Relational

To fully engage in CSH and the benefits it can bring, transforming WP practice from questioning "Did this intervention work?" to "What makes this the right thing to do?" ideally requires the involvement of a diversity of organisational actors operating within HEPs, the OfS, schools, students, and communities. Where this cannot be achieved, it requires those seated at the table engaging in CSH to consider the assumptions and perspectives of people affected but not involved in WP. This makes the practice deeply relational and requires a critical reflection of alternative positions and perspectives.

Comparing the triadic investigation of questions exploring boundary judgements, values, and facts, Schwandt and Gates (2016) compare CSH to several guiding principles of civic studies, including collaboration, humility, and criticising from within. Engaging in these principles requires deliberation and dialogue - an openness amongst partners to intentionally engage in critical reflection. Ulrich explains that "Asking ourselves how the facts that we find relevant, the value considerations we deem adequate, and the context (reference system) that we consider, mutually condition one another is highly relevant for developing a sense of modesty regarding our claims, as well as tolerance regarding those of others who appear to have got their facts and values wrong!" (Ulrich 2005 p. 6). Ulrich is suggesting that by engaging in this critical reflection, our sense of humility and modesty, as well as our tolerance for mistakes, should increase. In other words, CSH provides an opportunity to expand and improve how partners communicate (Ulrich & Reynolds 2020).

The Transformational

In the context of increasing humility and modesty, this, perhaps ironically, brings us to the transformational. We have described how evaluation systems can become captured and help to maintain rather than challenge the status quo (Raimondo &Leeuw 2021). In WP, we illustrate how this can occur when actors fail to explicitly identify and discuss the values underpinning their decisions, and when their values conflict with the espoused organisational values and those of the system defined by regulation. CSH provides a practical solution for making explicit the value and boundary judgements of those involved in and affected by WP. The tool engages actors in critical reflection and dialogue about issues related to motivation, power, expertise and legitimacy, actively pursuing "a new critical competence…[and] an orientation towards emancipation and self-determination" (Ulrich 2005 p. 5). The act of engaging in CSH opens the opportunity for transformation within WP because as a practice it challenges the dominant perspective regarding the purpose, values, and the nature of expertise driving WP policy enactment, and it opens opportunities for considering alternative perspectives.

The current framing of the OfS Standards of Evidence and APP guidance encourages people involved in WP and based within HEPs to define targets, develop solutions through intervention and programmes, and evaluate whether the intervention "worked" to achieve this aim. This perspective places actors involved in WP in a defensive position, holding onto their legitimacy to act in this policy space. Adopting CSH as an additional practice within WP policy enactment would provide a normative basis for WP practice and encourage critical reflection around "How do we know this is the right thing to do?" Thus, we argue, it creates an opportunity for future transformation of WP practice and its evaluation.

We recognise that some of the challenges we identified – tension of values and fragmentation of practice – might not easily be resolved. While CSH calls for dialogue, political realities or power imbalances might prohibit approaches that work for everyone from being adopted. For example, as Schulte and Aston (2025) consider, there might simply be actors who refuse to consider evidence outside the current Standards of Evidence. If these actors have substantial political power (legitimacy), conflicting individual epistemic values would likely be overruled. However, even in that case, we consider that a state where this tension is clearly acknowledged is preferable to the status quo, where tensions often go unacknowledged: at the very least, it allows us to emancipate ourselves from the dominant view, creating a potential for resistance.

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Judgment, flourishing, and the composting of evaluation through Reflective Dialogue

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In an era of ecological collapse, deliberate assaults on knowledge, and deepening inequities, the field of evaluation is still shaped by dominance logics, including positivist, colonial, technocratic, and patriarchal ways of seeing. These harmful frames are present, persistent as toxins in the soil. They distort what counts as knowledge, whose voice is heard, and what forms of flourishing are possible. We call for composting these logics through Reflective Dialogue (RD), a living, relational stance that re-grounds evaluation as an interpretive act of judgment accountable to equity and justice. Drawing on justice-oriented lineages, Indigenous and feminist epistemologies, and traditions of practical wisdom, we position RD as the living soil that sustains evaluative practice.

Through critique, metaphor, and practice-based vignettes, we show how RD interrupts the illusion of neutrality, redistributes epistemic power, and turns denial into nourishment for new possibilities. We contrast old ways of evaluation that collapse judgment into siloed, tidy narratives with new ways that co-create meaning, break the frame, and hold space for discomfort, uncertainty, and transformation. We include an appendix that translates RD into concrete evaluator actions, observable shifts in behavior, and survival strategies for working inside harmful systems and enacting an RD-orientation.

Keywords: reflective dialogue; practical wisdom; equity; judgment; relational practice

You are standing, eyes closed, in the garden of evaluation approaches (Montrosse-Moorhead et al. 2024). Around you are what you've envisioned as vibrant flowers from every tradition, a variety that includes utilization-focused, developmental, participatory, culturally responsive, Indigenous, and systems-oriented. Each represents a way evaluators have tried to help things grow.

You open your eyes, and something's wrong. The blooms are thin. The leaves curl. The roots hesitate. By the official charts, the soil is perfect, the indicators are all green. Yet your body tells you otherwise. This is the ache of living in a world that does not match the one you are told exists.

Look closer. The problem isn't confined to one bed or one plant. It runs through the entire garden. This is "positivism," and "post-positivism" is only its rebranded strain. It defines "health" in its own narrow image, dismisses other ways of knowing what thrives, and actively shapes what can grow at all. Every approach here, no matter how different the foliage, is touched by it.

In the positivist-poisoned garden, tending projects follows prescriptions with fixed indicators, predetermined growth charts, and standardized soil "improvement" plans. Evaluation is reduced to compliance checklists, quarterly metrics, and logic models that cannot be bent without "scope creep." The gardener's job is to measure and report, aligning every plant's progress with an external blueprint, even when the plants themselves strain against it. Community members become "stakeholder inputs," their stories flattened into bullet points. Learning is treated as a deliverable, not a relationship.

You close your eyes again. But this time, not to shut out the trouble. You imagine what the garden could be if the soil were free of its constraints. In this vision, there are no growth charts taped to the gate, no invisible hands measuring every leaf against an imported standard. Gardeners move slowly, pausing to notice, to ask, to tend. Conversations ripple between beds. We learn what the squash has been telling the marigolds, how the rainwater has shifted the flavor of the kale. People come not to extract a harvest and leave, but to share food, stories, and tools for tending. Health is defined together, in the moment, with those who live and eat here.

In this garden, knowledge is not bagged and labeled for shipment. It's exchanged like seeds carried in pockets, traded between friends, and planted in unexpected places. It adapts, cross-pollinates, and thrives in the gaps where "official records" have pretended not to look. Decisions are made with the people who feel their impact in their hands... their tables... their seasons. The work of the garden is not to meet a target, but to sustain life for the long term.

When you open your eyes, you can still feel it. The hum of connection, the looseness of the soil underfoot, the quiet confidence that if one plant struggles, another will reach out its roots to share. This is the garden you want to work in. In fact, it is still there.

Beneath the surface, ephemeral, and hard to observe, another life is working. It is a mycelial network, the vast web of fungal threads through which forests share water, nutrients, and information. Through these hidden pathways, the forest stays attuned to change, redistributes what is needed, and responds before anything is visible aboveground. It's the shared infrastructure that makes growth and survival possible. This is Reflective Dialogue (RD). It is not a theory parked on a shelf, but the living network that links roots, senses trouble, shares nutrients, and begins the slow work of transformation. It's what allows the whole garden, across every approach, to remember how to flourish beyond the limits imposed from above.

This is not another paradigm shift, swapping one dominant form of knowing for another. Such a move still spreads the same toxins, maintained through systems that reward control, suppress dissent, and mask harm as rigor, while actively neglecting the soil beneath. What we need is a generative ecology, where knowledge itself is treated as alive, breathing, and interdependent with us. The garden does not need a new ruler. It needs us to tend the soil together, to strengthen the mycelial connections, and to choose practices that allow everything here to thrive, including ourselves.

Introduction

This paper introduces Reflective Dialogue (RD) as a living, relational practice that can restore the conditions for evaluation to flourish in service of equity and justice. It is written for evaluators, scholars, and practitioners who feel the dissonance between dominant evaluation norms, theoretical and academic platitudes, and the realities they encounter in their work. We argue that RD is not simply another method to add to the garden, but the connective mycelial network that nourishes all approaches, enabling evaluators to act with practical wisdom (Tovey & Archibald 2023), share power, and generate knowledge that is alive, responsive, and grounded in relationship. We use the term "mycelium" here not as a mere metaphor, but as shorthand for the hidden, connective work that makes dialogue, and life, possible. Drawing on both theory and practice, we map RD's enabling conditions, distinguish it from deeply engrained positivist and post-positivist habits of evaluation, and offer concrete ways evaluators can cultivate it in their own work.

It is no revelation to say that all knowledge is mediated, whether in mathematics, where meaning emerges through shared proofs and symbols, or in perception itself, shaped by language, culture, and relation. Nor is it new to recognize that we are not separate from the world we study, but part of it. These truths have been named across centuries of philosophy, Indigenous scholarship, and in the contemporary sciences and mathematics that reveal relation as fundamental (e.g. quantum physics, category theory, systems theory, ecology, social neuroscience, and complexity), yet they remain persistently ignored or suppressed by systems that insist on separating knower from known, method from meaning, and research from life. That suppression is not accidental; it protects structures of control and the illusion of neutrality.

If reading this stirs discomfort, skepticism, or the impulse to move quickly past it, we invite you to pause and stay with us. The unease is part of the terrain we will travel together to see what becomes possible when we don't turn away from it.

To practice evaluation and research through the RD lens is not to innovate, but to remember, recover ways of knowing that have been made to seem impossible, and reassert them as the ground for credible, ethical, and human knowledge-making.

This paper has three purposes:

- To surface the epistemological constraints that limit what evaluation can see, know, and do when it remains rooted in positivist and post-positivist structures and ways of thinking.
- To articulate RD's enabling conditions and core gestures as a practice that resists these constraints.
- To offer concrete ways evaluators can cultivate RD within diverse evaluation approaches.

To support these aims, we begin by situating RD within the philosophical and practical landscape of evaluation, then contrast it with dominant paradigms, illustrate its practice through metaphor and lived examples, and conclude with an appendix of concrete tools and strategies for cultivating RD, even within systems that resist it.

Regrounding Evaluation: Judgment, Resistance, and the Soil of Reflective Dialogue

Evaluation is at a threshold where the roots we choose to feed will decide what can survive. Authoritarianism rises, ecosystems collapse, epistemic trust erodes, and inequities deepen across race, gender, and class. In this moment, our familiar metaphors like tidy trees with ordered branches and theories neatly labeled by author (Alkin & Christie 2023) no longer suffice. Trees remind us of growth and connection, yet their visible order can draw attention away from the soil that makes that growth possible. That soil is the living ground where relation and renewal begin.

The garden, as Montrosse-Moorhead et al. (2024) provide for us, offers us a more plural image. It replaces linear histories with a cultivated space where diverse approaches can coexist. This shift matters as it signals openness to many ways of working and resists the hierarchy implied by the tree. Yet without tending to the soil, even the most diverse garden risks languishing. Diversity in appearance can still mask depletion underneath, where colonial, positivist, and technocratic logics limit what counts as knowledge and whose flourishing matters.

We name RD as the underground network that keeps the garden alive. It is the mycelial infrastructure that allows each approach to draw strength from others, share resources, and adapt together. RD is not another flower to plant but the condition that lets any flower thrive. It is evaluative judgment practiced as phronesis—practical wisdom oriented toward eudaimonia, the flourishing of life. Where positivist and post-positivist habits treat knowledge as a static product to be extracted, RD treats it as a living, relational practice, rooted in the soil we tend together.

Judgment and the Theory Problem: Composting Paradigms, Myths, and Denial

At its heart, evaluation is an act of judgment. Not judgment as the mechanical application of criteria or the performance of procedural neutrality, but judgment as the capacity to discern, deliberate, and decide well in context. Aristotle called this phronesis, the virtue of determining what is good and just in the particulars of a situation. Later, philosophers (e.g. Wittgenstein 1958) reminded us that even rules depend on shared life and meaning, and no set of instructions can dictate their own correct use. Building on this lineage, Schwandt and Gates (2021) argue that evaluation's identity cannot be secured through paradigmatic closure but only through its practice as judgment in action.

Evaluation has long wrestled with what Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) called the "theory problem," or the worry that without a unifying paradigm, the field remains fragmented or immature. Borrowing from Kuhn (1962), they described evaluation as a pre-paradigmatic science still awaiting coherence. But many, including House (1993), have argued that evaluation's pluralism reflects its social and moral complexity rather than its underdevelopment. To demand paradigmatic closure, House warned, is to mistake the field's vitality for disorder.

The label of "pre-paradigmatic" has never been neutral. As Scriven (1967) argued, evaluation was never simply the collection of data. It is, and has always been, about the rendering of judgments of value. Schwandt (2002) reinforces that these judgments are interpretive and dialogic, and Dahler-Larsen (2012) warns that the frameworks we design actively shape the realities they claim to measure. Neutrality is an illusion.

This reframing has consequences. It shifts legitimacy from technical control to practical responsibility and the work of cultivating flourishing amid uncertainty and systemic harm. It also clarifies why RD is not a supplemental method but the living condition of evaluative knowing. It is the soil in which judgment without final rules can take root and sustain itself. Reflective Dialogue resists the pull of rule-bound certainty, keeping evaluators accountable to the complexity of the worlds they engage.

Still, old habits take root. We hear that rigor means control, that neutrality secures legitimacy, that coherence must be achieved through uniformity. Yet what these habits reproduce is not clarity but compliance. The field's anxiety about credibility often turns evaluation into the performance of order—collecting data long after meaning has thinned, valuing precision over interpretation, and mistaking accumulation for care. These are residues of positivism still alive in our soil, what Hirschman (1991) might call the futility thesis. It is the belief that progress cannot count until it conforms to someone else's standard of proof. The cost is not methodological alone; it is moral. It drains vitality from judgment, reducing evidence to what can be measured instead of what must be answered to.

This futility breeds anxiety about legitimacy (Picciotto 2016). Socialized to equate neutrality with credibility (Harro 2000), evaluators often feel trapped between complicity and irrelevance (Boyce et al. 2023; Huff 2025; Reid et al. 2020). The resulting insecurity is not incidental; it is cultivated by the residues of Cartesian and positivist thought that still pervade our evaluative soil.

Scriven's (2013) description of evaluation as an "alpha" discipline captures both the aspiration and the risk of this inheritance. While it recognizes the centrality of reflective judgment, it can also invite hubris, imagining evaluation as standing above the very soils of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy that sustain it. Evaluation does not rise above these conditions; it breathes within them. To claim otherwise is to deny the moral and historical entanglements in which all knowing lives.

Having traced these philosophical residues in our soil, we now turn to the rhetorical strategies that keep them in place, and how our language, habits, and defenses continue to protect the very myths we claim to outgrow.

Naming the Rhetoric of Reaction

The soil of evaluation is not only heavy with residues; it is also patrolled. As evaluators begin to compost the myths of paradigmatic immaturity and the fears they breed, they encounter the weight of resistance from the systems in which they work. The residues of Descartes and Kuhn are not abstract, they are enforced daily through funding structures, institutional review, procurement processes, and professional norms.

Hirschman (1991) reminds us that resistance is rarely blunt obstruction; it works through patterned arguments designed to keep change at bay. His analysis identifies three recurrent rhetorical theses that appear whenever entrenched systems are challenged. In evaluation, each of these moves is easy to recognize once named:

- The perversity thesis — Calls for justice-oriented evaluation are framed as dangerous. Attending to culture, equity, or power will bias results, erode rigor, or harm the very communities we hope to serve.
- The futility thesis — Even when evaluators compost old residues, we are told it will not matter. Politics, funding cycles, or institutional inertia will nullify the effort, so better to stick with the neutral technical report.
- The jeopardy thesis — Efforts to decolonize or democratize evaluation are cast as threats to the hard-won legitimacy of the practice, risking its credibility and institutional foothold.

These rhetorical moves do more than block change, they feed evaluator anxiety, reinforcing the fear that to step outside neutrality is to risk irrelevance or professional ruin. However, for many evaluators, this very adherence to neutrality causes cognitive dissonance as they struggle with feelings of guilt at the extractive nature of their work (Huff 2025). Together, they keep evaluators in the house of mirrors, parading the emperor's wardrobe, insisting that denial is the price of belonging.

Reflective Dialogue does not make these resistances disappear. It names them, composts them, and turns their energy toward growth. By bringing the rhetoric into the open, evaluators can see perversity, futility, and jeopardy not as verdicts on their work but as residues of a system in denial. Once named, they become compost, material that can be broken down and transformed into nourishment for a more just evaluative practice.

Just as some chemicals never truly leave the soil, the residues of positivism persist—mobile, invisible, and resistant to breaking down. They seep into the roots of evaluative practice, carried through training, professional norms, and institutional expectations. Even when an evaluator chooses different seeds, like justice-oriented approaches, participatory designs, culturally responsive methods, those residues can still shape what takes root and how it grows. They do not vanish simply because we've named them; they require ongoing tending and vigilance.

Without active work to identify and address the rhetoric, it re-enters the cycle, subtly reasserting the very myths, anxieties, and constraints we thought we had composted. Having surfaced how resistance and reactivity are reproduced, we can now ask what nourishes change. Turning the soil means tracing the justice-oriented lineages that have long composted these residues in practice.

Turning the Soil: A Justice-Oriented Lineage

If Hirschman shows us the rhetoric that resists change, the question remains: How do evaluators ground their identity and legitimacy in such contested soil? Linnell and Montrosse-Moorhead (2023) argue that evaluation still lacks a coherent professional identity. Many evaluators operate under other titles like researcher, consultant, or analyst, and the field continues to wrestle with whether it is a profession at all. Without clarity, evaluators risk being reduced to technicians who are tasked with producing numbers while being excluded from shaping what counts as value. Additionally, some evaluators choose the type of evaluation work they do based on shared identity with the populations they serve, creating a closer relationship with that population (Boyce et al. 2023; Huff 2025).

This crisis of identity is not simply academic. Picciotto (2016, 2022) has described the field's persistent evaluator anxiety as the fear of being dismissed as biased, losing credibility, or being sidelined by funders and institutions. That fear is fed by the same residues and enforcement mechanisms named above, such as the idea that legitimacy comes only through neutrality, technical control, and adherence to systems that pre-define value.

Yet evaluators have long resisted these conditions, turning the soil through justice-oriented practice. A deep lineage of evaluation scholarship challenges the dominance of positivist, technocratic, and colonial residues in the field. Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE), for example, foregrounds the importance of context, culture, and community-defined values in shaping both the process and purpose of evaluation. Scholars like Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart (2015) and Tovey and Onwuka du Bruyn (2025) have shown that evaluators must engage reflexively with their positionality and the power dynamics embedded in their work. Kirkhart's (2005, 2010) work on multicultural validity insists that validity is cultural and ethical, demanding attention to whose knowledge is legitimized and whose is excluded.

Hazel Symonette (2004) fervently advocates for evaluators to leverage the self as responsive instrument and the importance the evaluator's "inside-out" work (self-awareness) and "outside-in" work (expand diverse skills, knowledge and professional toolkit) to be responsive to culture and context. Jennifer Greene (2006) has advanced democratic and participatory approaches that center dialogue, inclusion, and shared meaning-making, inviting evaluators to move beyond instrumental uses of data toward processes that cultivate deliberation, mutual understanding, and collective insight. Mertens' (2009) transformative paradigm positions evaluation as a tool for advancing human rights and social justice, arguing that evaluators must not only document inequities but work to dismantle them through inclusive, dialogic, and action-oriented approaches.

Indigenous scholars such as Chilisa (2012, 2020), Cram (2016), Waapalaneexkweew (Bowman) and Dodge-Francis (2018), and Wehipeihana (2019) advance methodologies grounded in Indigenous and African ways of knowing that foreground sovereignty, relational accountability, and collective healing while exposing the colonial foundations of Western research paradigms. Their work embodies knowledge as lived, relational, and accountable, which deeply resonates with RD's commitment to redistribute epistemic power and center historically marginalized voices. In practice, this means inquiry that is carried out in relation, through deliberative processes that honor intergenerational impact, attend to spiritual and communal balance, and uphold protocols of respect and reciprocity (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010). Such work shows RD's kinship with Indigenous approaches that treat judgment as an ethical and relational act rather than a detached procedure.

The AES Evaluators' Professional Learning Competency Framework affirms this shift, emphasizing humility, reflexivity, and ethical judgment as core to what evaluators must be able to do. This is not simply a matter of skills but of stance. Reflective Dialogue offers the soil from which evaluators draw legitimacy, not as detached technicians, but as judgment-makers who accept the responsibility of cultivating flourishing in the face of systemic denial.

Reflective Dialogue: Naming the Practice

Reflective Dialogue is the sustained, relational practice of evaluative judgment without final rules, rooted in mutual engagement, reflexivity, and a shared commitment to cultivating flourishing in context. It is not a discrete method or step in a process, but the living infrastructure of evaluation, the mycelial network that connects people, knowledge, and action across differences. Through RD, evaluators surface and negotiate values, interrogate assumptions, and co-create meaning with those most affected by decisions. Such work depends on conditions of trust, relational safety, and a willingness to be changed through dialogue. These capacities distinguish RD from extractive or compliance-driven practice, grounding judgment in shared responsibility and care.

Naming RD acknowledges and legitimizes a form of knowing that many evaluators have long practiced quietly, despite systems that denied its value. Naming does more than label a practice; it reframes the ontology of evaluation itself, revealing that how we talk about our work already determines what we believe knowledge is, who holds it, and how it should move. Naming RD composts the denial around this relational ground, helping evaluators recognize and cultivate with intention what has always moved beneath the surface, like mycelium holding relationships, breaking down residues of fear and neutrality, and creating the conditions where new, just possibilities can take root. Reflective Dialogue is not an addition to evaluation; it is the practice through which evaluation actually happens.

Evidence is where that unseen work first meets the light. Because language carries ontology, how we name evidence shapes what we believe it is for. In *dominance* logics (e.g., positivism, patriarchy, white supremacy), evidence is mobilized to justify, defend conclusions, protect authority, and keep existing arrangements intact. In RD, evidence illuminates. It is the moment when reality meets us back and asks for a response.

Where the scientific method once sought certainty through control — observation, interpretation, verification — RD reclaims the cycle through relation. Evidence, judgment, position, and relation mirror those stages, but composted. Encounter replaces observation, because we meet what appears rather than stand apart from it. Discernment replaces verification, because knowing is a matter of sensemaking, not proof. Reflexivity replaces neutrality, because our positions and histories move with us. Reciprocity replaces conclusion, because we remain in accountable relation to what we have learned.

This is how knowing breathes again within the living soil of evaluation, each movement feeding the next in a regenerative cycle of seeing, sensing, and staying accountable to what appears. RD is a way of being in evaluation that turns denial into soil for flourishing by insisting that knowing is always relational, contextual, and ethical. It is a dynamic, relational process of making meaning together. It calls us to notice what is happening within, while being in honest, attuned conversation with others and the world. It is not simply reflection plus dialogue, but a way of showing up. A posture of presence, inquiry, and transformation together.

Four anchors ground this stance:

1. **Responsiveness, not agenda.** Reflective Dialogue resists the illusion of control. It moves at the speed of trust, not the clock, composting the fantasy of neat order and mechanical rationality.
2. **Co-construction, not extraction.** Dialogue is a shared responsibility. Knowledge in RD is not mined from participants as data, but co-created through mutual meaning-making. This breaks down the evaluator-as-expert monopoly, redistributing epistemic power across difference (Cousins & Whitmore 1998; Chouinard & Milley 2018).
3. **Mutual vulnerability, not performative openness.** It asks us to welcome discomfort as a teacher, composting the futility of neutrality and legitimizing embodied risk as a condition of knowing.
4. **Epistemic humility, not control.** Reflective Dialogue embodies humility and curiosity, letting go of needing to know or be right, and slowing the rush to judgment so collective sensemaking can emerge. It creates space for collective sensemaking and the emergence of more inclusive understandings of what matters and why (Mertens 2009; LaFrance & Nichols 2008; Cram 2018).

Reflective Dialogue does not automatically take shape as a practice. The relational ground is always present, as people are already entangled with one another and with the worlds they inhabit, but this entanglement does not become RD simply because a group gathers or someone invokes the word "reflection." For RD to take form, that ground must be tended with care. Certain conditions help it emerge and hold. These conditions do not create RD; they allow what is already moving beneath the surface to become visible, steady, and generative. In this mycelial ecology, RD decomposes denial, fear, and anxiety into nourishment, weaving networks of trust and care that sustain growth.

Naming RD and its enabling conditions is not about codifying a new paradigm but about re-tending the philosophical ground of evaluation itself. It brings into view the relational, contextual, and ethical commitments that have always animated justice-oriented lineages, offering soil in which those commitments can finally flourish in practice.

Conditions for Reflective Dialogue

Reflective Dialogue depends on the quiet work of decomposing what no longer serves, weaving connections, and redistributing insight so new life can take hold. This means designing evaluative spaces that make time for reflection, invite shared meaning-making, and honor interdependence.

Reflective Dialogue thrives when its ecology holds evaluators in humility, accountability, and care. The following six enabling conditions describe that ecology and what it looks like in practice.

1. **Spaciousness.** Mycelial life grows in the quiet spaces between roots and stones. Reflective Dialogue needs this same room to wander, revisit, and slow down. Spaciousness resists the cultural pressure toward acceleration and closure that too often governs evaluation timelines.

   In practice, this means building pauses into the process where folks can step back, notice what is emerging, and let meaning ripen before deciding what it means. Creating such temporal and cognitive space is an epistemological act that allows wisdom to unfold instead of being forced into pre-determined forms. When evaluators honor this rhythm, reflection becomes part of the work itself rather than something appended after deliverables are complete.

2. **Safety and shared risk.** Healthy ecosystems thrive on balance between shelter and exposure. RD depends on the same dynamic. Safety is not insulation from discomfort but the mutual trust that difficult truths can surface without punishment. Like roots intertwining underground, participants anchor one another through this vulnerability.

   In practice, this means designing spaces where people can speak from unfinished places and hold tension without rushing to resolution. It is being with others in uncertainty rather than managing them toward closure.

3. **Diffusion of expertise.** In a living ecosystem, knowledge circulates rather than accumulates. No single organism controls the flow of nutrients; strength arises through exchange. Reflective Dialogue diffuses expertise through relationship, recognizing lived experience, cultural knowledge, and professional skill as interdependent sources of insight. Authority becomes porous, shaped by mutual recognition rather than possession.

   In practice, this means designing evaluations where interpretation is co-created, not delegated; where community insight is treated as analytic intelligence, not "input"; and where uncertainty is named as part of rigor. Expertise, in this ecology, is less a credential than a connective tissue and an ongoing unlearning of control and re-learning of trust. How we speak is part of that ecology, and plain, relational language lets meaning travel through the network, keeping knowledge alive and reachable rather than sealed inside professional code.

4. **Attunement.** Mycelial threads respond to the subtlest shifts in their environment in moisture, warmth, and light. Reflective Dialogue depends on this same sensitivity. Attunement is the ongoing practice of noticing energy, tone, and silence; of sensing when to pause, when to inquire, and when to let something rest. It is a way of being that treats responsiveness itself as rigor.

   In practice, this means listening for what is unsaid, reading the emotional and relational currents in a room, and allowing those currents to inform judgment. Attunement transforms facilitation into presence and evaluation into care.

5. **Accountability (to relationship).** No organism thrives alone. Just as mycelium sustains trees through mutual exchange, RD depends on evaluators' accountability to those with whom they work. This accountability is ethical and relational, not procedural. It calls evaluators to stay answerable and let their judgments be shaped by those who live with their consequences.

   In practice, this means maintaining dialogue beyond the final report, returning to communities to share interpretation, and ensuring findings travel back in accessible, useful forms. Accountability is not closure but reciprocity; it keeps judgment alive as a conversation rather than a verdict.

6. **Permission to break the frame.** Mycelium does not stop at garden borders; it follows nutrients where they lead. Reflective Dialogue flourishes when evaluators take similar risks, stepping outside predefined agendas when the ecology of a project demands it. Breaking the frame is not rebellion for its own sake; it is responsiveness to what is real and unfolding in the moment.

   In practice, this might mean pausing a meeting to attend to an unspoken tension, redesigning a question mid-study, or extending a conversation that unexpectedly surfaces insight. This is phronesis in action, the practical wisdom to sense when the soil itself is calling for attention.

Together, these six conditions form a mycelial ecology. Beneath the surface, RD decomposes denial, fear, and neutrality into nourishment, weaving networks of trust and care that sustain new growth. Knowledge, like mycelium, is never static. It is always moving, adapting, and reshaping through our dialogue with one another and with the more-than-human world. To ground these ecological conditions in everyday evaluation practice, Appendix A maps them onto tangible evaluator behaviors and design choices. It shows how these philosophical commitments become visible in the gestures, decisions, and relationships that shape real projects.

Many evaluators who claim a more traditional, positivist stance do so from a trained, deep, genuine commitment to accuracy, transparency, and fairness. Reflective Dialogue shares these commitments but challenges the assumption that neutrality or detachment are the paths to achieving them. It does not reject systematic observation or disciplined method; it dethrones them and situates them within the living conditions of context, relationship, and ethics as an inextricable part of knowledge. In doing so, RD retains the valuable lessons and knowledge from conventional approaches while transforming the parts that limit or actively subvert flourishing.

It is important to recognize how philosophical groundings of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology show up in evaluative choices. Table 1 below translates these commitments into their everyday expressions.

Table 1. Composting Traditional Evaluation Assumptions through Reflective Dialogue

Philosophical Domain	Traditional Evaluation Assumptions	Reflective Dialogue Re-Grounding
Ontology (What is real?)	Reality is objective, separable, and measurable; evaluators stand outside it.	Being is relational; evaluators are irreducibly entangled with communities, histories, and the more-than-human world. We are not above, we are in.
Epistemology (What counts as knowledge?)	Knowledge is discovered through neutral, technical methods; evaluator is expert/arbiter.	Knowledge is dynamic, co-created, and contextually situated; evaluators suspend expertise and co-construct meaning.
Axiology (What is valued?)	Neutrality and objectivity are highest values; justice, equity, and relational accountability are "bias."	Justice, care, humility, and accountability to relationship are central; neutrality is composted as denial.
Methodology (How do we inquire?)	Predetermined designs, rigid agendas, and emphasis on control and closure. Reduction of words to tokens and humans to numbers.	Flexible designs and adaptive, dialogic processes that move at the speed of trust; permission to break the frame and welcome discomfort.

These shifts are not theoretical, they are ecological. Each cell of the table loosens the compacted soil of evaluation, showing how philosophical commitments become living relations. When evaluators move from detachment to connection, from certainty to curiosity, the ground itself changes. Judgment begins to move differently, drawing breath through dialogue, relation, and care.

Tilling the Contaminated Soil: Old Ways and New Ways of Being

Reflective Dialogue asks evaluators to inhabit a posture that resists the habits of neutrality, technical rationality, and compliance that have long been treated as the foundations of our field. These habits promise legitimacy but enact exclusion, sealing off the relational, emotional, and contextual dimensions of knowing. What once began as a pursuit of rigor has hardened into residue, an epistemic sediment made of denial, fear, and the false safety of procedural judgment.

At the beginning of this paper, we imagined a garden whose soil had been saturated with persistent toxins, PFAs that linger unseen and alter the life of everything they touch. In evaluation, those toxins are the residues of an insistence that legitimacy rests in neutrality, that knowledge can be detached from relationship, and that judgment can be reduced to compliance with rules and criteria. This contamination has compacted the soil of our practice. The air is stale, and life can grow only in constrained and distorted ways.

Tilling this contaminated soil does not mean chipping away at the surface or purging the past. It means staying long enough to compost what has hardened and metabolize the residues of control and fear through relational life. Reflective Dialogue offers this slow, mycelial ecology, where evaluators work with what is already alive beneath the surface, including humility, shared risk, attentiveness, and accountability to relationship. Through these conditions, the soil begins to loosen. Breath returns.

In practice, this tilling looks like refusing the comfort of neutrality when it silences; questioning metrics that masquerade as meaning; and designing spaces where discomfort and contradiction can become data for reflection rather than grounds for dismissal. Each gesture opens the ground for new chemistries of trust, curiosity, and courage to circulate.

Over time, the contaminated ground changes. The toxins remain part of its history, but they lose their hold as life reclaims them. This is the regenerative work of RD, re-grounding evaluation in living soil, capable of sustaining relational judgment, phronesis, and the courage to act.

The following Case Contrasts that follow are hypothetical examples drawn from our own stories we've seen and heard in our own work and from friends and colleagues. These contrasts are meant to show how the same moment can unfold within the depleted soil of the old way or the tended soil of RD.

The Data That Harmed

Toxic Soil: An evaluation framed around "achievement gaps" produced predictable charts and graphs. The framing was deficit-laden, reducing students and families to what they lacked, and parents and students of color bravely named it as such. The evaluation became a house of mirrors reflecting only absence, reinforcing the very inequities it claimed to illuminate.

Tended Soil: In RD, evaluators slowed down and acknowledged their complicity. They entered dialogue with families to co-create an addendum that reframed the data as evidence of systemic inequity, not individual failure. This act drew from accountability to relationship and permission to break the frame. The final product disrupted neutrality's stain and carried seeds of justice, planting new ways of seeing into the institutional record.

Technician or Witness?

Toxic Soil: Early-career evaluators, hired as "objective" technicians, produced numbers that were used to praise harmful programs as "evidence-based." They felt the harm but had been taught to keep quiet. Speaking out felt like professional suicide.

Tended Soil: Through RD, they named their fear with colleagues and claimed their role as judgment-makers accountable to communities, not just contracts. Drawing on shared risk and suspended expertise, they wrote a statement circulated quietly among stakeholders that challenged the program's legitimacy. The act re-anchored their professional identity in relational soil, refusing complicity in harm.

Findings Buried Alive

Toxic Soil: An evaluation revealed that housing funds were being withheld from immigrant families. The sponsoring agency buried the report, and evaluators, trained to defer to authority, archived it and moved on. The knowledge was entombed. No change followed.

Tended Soil: In dialogue with advocates, evaluators composted futility into courage. They anonymized stories and shared them through trusted community networks. This was attuned holding and adaptive growth in action, protecting participants while refusing to let the truth vanish. Though the official report remained buried, the findings nourished grassroots organizing, spreading unseen like mycelium under the surface until conditions were right for action.

These examples show us the tension we must navigate between neutrality and judgment, compliance and care, safety and risk. Table 2 on the page that follows offers a close-up of this evaluative soil through the three examples, tracing how these tensions live in practice and what becomes possible when we begin to till them through Reflective Dialogue. RD does not deny the tension; it teaches us how to work the soil at its base, loosening what has been compacted so that new forms of understanding and accountability can take root. This is both philosophical and practical work.

To support evaluators in taking this stance, Appendix A offers concrete guidance and actions that nourish RD's mycelial soil and habits that deplete it. These are not checklists or rules but touchstones for judgment in motion, as well as reminders of the gestures that keep the evaluative ecology alive and the conditions that can slowly close its breath.

This is not simply a methodological choice; it is a stand in the soil of our practice. Reflective Dialogue cannot be done alone. It calls evaluators into collective courage, to risk together, hold one another accountable, and bring into view the judgments that have always lived beneath our methods. The soil has been hardened by dominance logics (e.g. positivism, colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, imperialism, etc.), and no single evaluator can break it apart. We till it together, loosening what has been compacted and turning over what no longer serves, seeding the conditions for evaluative work that is alive, responsive, and rooted in our shared responsibility to each other.

Table 2. From Toxic to Tended Soil: Shifts in Evaluative Judgment

Case Contrast	**Toxic Soil**	**Tended Soil**	**Ontological Shift**	**What RD Surfaces**	**Possibilities Even Under Constraint**
The Data That Harmed	Evaluation framed around institutional categories (“achievement gaps,” “underperformance”) that appear neutral but reproduce deficit logics.	Evaluators begin by questioning inherited language and co-framing inquiry with families, students, and teachers to define what “learning” and “belonging” mean locally.	From assuming separable, measurable entities to recognizing knowledge as relational and historically situated.	That constructs carry institutional residue; naming them is itself an ethical act.	Within state-mandated metrics, evaluators annotate reports to disclose framing limits and offer community-derived terms.
	Data interpreted as evidence that certain students “underperform.”	Data interpreted as evidence that systems under-resource and constrain opportunity.	From locating deficiency in people to locating responsibility in structures.	How analytic choices distribute blame and reify inequity.	Evaluators still meet analytic deliverables while embedding systemic interpretations and recommendations for structural change.
	Evaluator positioned as objective technician maintaining neutrality for credibility.	Evaluator positioned as relational sense-maker accountable to those represented in the data.	From procedural detachment to ethical participation and co-implication.	Evaluator complicity in meaning-making; judgment as moral labor.	Professional norms of neutrality remain, but evaluators model transparency and shared accountability in accompanying narratives.
	Report written in institutional language that satisfies funder templates and closes inquiry.	Report contains co-authored sections or appendices with participants, documenting interpretive dialogue.	From static deliverable to living, revisitable document.	That evaluative products can either seal or extend dialogue.	Even within rigid formats, evaluators include reflective addenda or community commentary to keep sense-making open.
	Process aims for efficiency, certainty, and closure.	Process allows spaciousness, reflection, and adaptation as understanding deepens.	From control to cultivation.	That learning needs time and care.	Even within fixed timelines, evaluators can build in reflective pauses or post-report dialogues.
Technician or Witness?	Evaluators hired as “objective” technicians to deliver evidence supporting existing programs; professional worth tied to compliance and productivity.	Evaluators understand their expertise as relational and ethical, grounded in the consequences of what their findings enable or conceal.	From professionalism as procedural compliance to professionalism as relational integrity.	That neutrality functions as protection for the evaluator and as insulation for systems of power.	Within contract obligations, evaluators can still name tensions between objectivity and responsibility and model ethical reflection in team spaces.

	Data produced to verify effectiveness rather than question harm; evaluators' discomfort remains private.	Evaluators bring discomfort into dialogue with peers, reflecting on how evidence participates in harm and what it means to stay silent.	From silence as professionalism to vulnerability as rigor.	That courage and care are shared, not heroic; accountability can be collective.	Evaluators build small peer-reflective groups within institutions to process moral risk together while meeting deliverable deadlines.
	Accountability flows upward to funders, supervisors, or contractual authorities.	Accountability expands outward to participants, communities, and consequences of findings.	From vertical accountability to horizontal and ecological accountability.	That evaluation operates within networks of impact extending beyond the client.	Even within rigid reporting lines, evaluators can document external stakeholder perspectives or append community feedback.
	Ethical codes interpreted as compliance checklists ensuring procedural propriety.	Ethical reflection practiced as ongoing discernment about power, consequence, and relationship.	From ethics as rule to ethics as living inquiry.	That codes are starting points, not endpoints; integrity must be enacted situationally.	Evaluators can use required ethics statements to introduce reflexive notes on positionality or unresolved tensions.
	Professional advancement measured by efficiency, neutrality, and deliverable satisfaction.	Professional advancement re-imagined as growth in discernment, humility, and responsiveness.	From evaluation as technical service to evaluation as moral practice.	That flourishing in practice involves practical wisdom exercised under uncertainty.	Evaluators cultivate mentoring and reflective supervision practices that honor care alongside competence.
Findings Buried Alive	Evaluation findings suppressed or rewritten to align with organizational interests; knowledge treated as property of the sponsor.	Findings regarded as part of an ongoing relational responsibility; evaluators remain in dialogue with affected communities even after deliverables are submitted.	From knowledge as possession to knowledge as stewardship.	That data have consequences beyond deliverables, and silence is itself a form of action.	Within nondisclosure or ownership agreements, evaluators anonymize narratives or share de-identified learnings through trusted networks.
	Evaluators defer to authority when reports are buried; moral discomfort rationalized as "not my decision."	Evaluators acknowledge discomfort as signal, not liability; they consult peers or communities to discern relational obligations.	From deference to authority to discernment within relationship.	How institutional fear and dependency suppress ethical agency.	Evaluators establish backchannel reflection spaces to consider safe, ethical pathways for honoring suppressed truths.
	The official record presents partial or sanitized truths; the story ends at publication.	Evaluators sustain parallel records (e.g., reflexive memos, oral accounts, or community briefings) that hold the fuller meaning of the work.	From closure as compliance to continuation as care.	That truth-telling is temporal and collective; knowledge must live somewhere.	Even when the formal report is fixed, evaluators seed dialogue that keeps findings alive in other forms (meetings, teaching, advocacy).

	Harmful systems continue unchallenged because findings are buried in bureaucratic archives.	Suppressed insights circulate informally through communities, becoming soil for advocacy, learning, and reform.	From stagnation to composting.	That decay and silence can be reworked into future nourishment.	Evaluators can accompany community partners as thought-partners rather than formal authors, supporting action without violating contracts.
	Evaluator safety depends on invisibility and quiet conformity.	Evaluator safety reimagined as mutual care and distributed courage.	From isolation to interdependence.	That resilience and flourishing depend on relational networks of support.	Within risk-averse institutions, evaluators form alliances that quietly sustain moral imagination and shared witness.

Looking Ahead: Flourishing Beyond the Present Soil

> *There's nothing unreal about the ability of ideals properly formed to guide us toward improving the world, and there is nothing less practical than allowing bad actors and unjust systems to limit your hopes and your aspirations.*
>
> (Brown, 2020)

These words remind us that realism and idealism are not opposing forces but mutualistic ones, entangled companions in the work of evaluation. Reflective Dialogue holds that same tension. It is a disciplined hope of staying in relation with what is real, even when that reality resists our control. As evaluators, our task is not to prove the world as it is but to stay accountable to what it might yet become. Practicing RD is how we learn that balance, returning again and again to dialogue, humility, and relation. Our articulation of RD is not the endpoint of an argument but the starting condition for the next phase of evaluation's life. If we accept that evaluation is not neutral, not rule-bound, and not separate from the systems in which it works, then the question is no longer whether we will change, but how we will choose to compost what no longer sustains life.

Looking ahead, we imagine evaluation as a practice unafraid to meet the crises that will continue to define the decades to come (e.g. climate disruption, mass migration, algorithmic governance, widening inequality) without retreating into technical neutrality. We see evaluators as courageous facilitators, cultivating relationships across communities, sectors, and disciplines, able to adapt and redistribute resources in real time. Yet connection alone is not enough. RD also calls evaluators to act as discerners and asserters of value, to name what matters, hold tension in dialogue, and guide collective judgment toward what sustains life. We anticipate methods and frameworks that are porous rather than prescriptive, capable of braiding Indigenous, feminist, decolonial, and other justice-oriented wisdoms into responses that are local, situated, and alive.

The soil we tend now will determine what grows long after our own hands are gone from it. Our task is to plant in ways that leave future evaluators a living ecology, rich enough to support new roots we cannot yet imagine, resilient enough to resist capture by the next wave of dominance, and generous enough to keep nourishing what matters. In this way, RD becomes the shared inheritance for a future of evaluation oriented toward equity, justice, and flourishing in all its forms.

> *When we return to the garden, the soil is looser underfoot. The air carries the hum of roots speaking, threads moving unseen. The blooms are still imperfect, but they lean toward one another now, sharing what they have. This is how the garden will outlive us, by tending the living ground together, season after season. The work will ask us again and again to stay with what is unsettled and resist the urge to turn away when the soil feels hard or the air feels thin. This is part of the tending. If we keep walking this terrain together, remembering discomfort as opportunity, the garden will keep learning how to flourish.*

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Appendix A: Engaging Reflective Dialogue in Evaluation Practice

Reflective Dialogue (RD) is a living, relational stance that evaluators inhabit. It depends on an ecology of conditions, sustained gestures, and embodied moves that keep the practice alive in the face of pressures toward speed, mastery, control, and detachment.

The following synthesis offers four layers of guidance:
1. Orienting Conditions
2. Evaluator Gestures
3. RD-Oriented Practices and Observable Shifts in Behavior
4. Working Within Harmful Structures – Survival & Advocacy Advice

(1) Orienting Conditions: Returning to Relation in Reflective Dialogue

The six enabling conditions described in the manuscript (spaciousness, safety and shared risk, diffusion of expertise, attunement, accountability to relationship, and permission to break the frame) describe the ecology in which Reflective Dialogue can breathe. They show what evaluative practice looks like when reflection circulates as part of the work itself. Yet every ecology shifts. Over time, habits of control, efficiency, and certainty reassert themselves; the soil begins to compact.

The following ten orienting conditions, preceded by a metacondition that names the free-flowing nature of this work, outline how evaluators return to relation when that happens. They are stances of re-attunement, ways of loosening the ground again so humility, accountability, and care can keep circulating through the work.

0. **Undomestic-ability** – This is the metacondition. Reflective work, when real (not performative), carries a refusal. It resists capture. When we step into this work, we enter relation with what exceeds us—other people, context, the more-than-human world, and our own limits.
1. **Being-with (not doing-to)** – Relate without manipulation, extraction, or fixing. Accompany rather than control.
2. **Meaning (not mastery)** – Linger in the not-yet-known. Let questions stretch without collapsing them into tidy answers.
3. **Humility and risk** – Show up with partial truths, vulnerability, and willingness to be changed.
4. **Relational responsibility** – Hold awareness of what you bring and how you carry what others offer.
5. **Kairos – moving in time (not on time)** – Let the work unfold at the pace of trust rather than the clock.
6. **Embodiment** – Attend to breath, posture, and sensation as part of the knowing.
7. **Silence** – Treat stillness as compost, letting meaning ripen before words return.
8. **Power** – Notice asymmetries in voice, safety, and legitimacy. Act to redistribute space and protect risk-taking.
9. **Wonder** – Make room for awe, paradox, and play alongside rigor.

10. **Practice, not arrival** – Return again and again; RD is sustained through repetition, not mastery.

(2) Evaluator Gestures

The gestures below name what an RD-oriented evaluator tends to in their practice, and what they consciously compost. They are living touchstones for judgment in motion, grown from the enabling conditions named in this paper and span four interdependent dimensions: (1) internal stance, (2) relational practice, (3) technical practice, and (4) system navigation.

What RD-oriented evaluators cultivate	What they compost / refuse
(1) Internal stance	
Interrogate their own positionality and how it shapes the work.	Pretend to be neutral or detached from the systems and communities in which they are entangled.
Hold humility and curiosity as defaults; expect to be changed by the work.	Over-identify with expertise or authority, assuming their knowledge outweighs community knowing.
Tend their own resilience to remain present and responsive across the project's life.	Burn out in service of deliverables, collapsing reflective capacity under rushed timelines.
(2) Relational practice	
Co-create the purpose, scope, and design of the evaluation with those most affected.	Impose pre-determined agendas or frameworks that shut down collaborative sense-making.
Build capacity for dialogue so all participants can engage as meaning-makers.	Tokenize participation, using "input sessions" without integrating what emerges.
Center lived experience alongside other data, giving it full epistemic weight.	Collapse diverse voices into a single tidy narrative, erasing dissent and nuance.
(3) Technical practice	
Adapt methods to context, culture, and moment, welcoming emergence.	Apply cookie-cutter tools without regard for context or consequences.
Embed reflection throughout the process, not just at the end.	Rush interpretation or treat findings as static, closed conclusions.
Surface tensions and hold them without forcing premature resolution.	Mask or sidestep conflict to maintain a false sense of harmony or control.
(4) System navigation	
Negotiate with funders, leadership, and institutions to protect the integrity of RD.	Hide from political realities that shape what can be known and done.
Make transparent how judgments are formed, including uncertainties and shifts in direction.	Use inaccessible, exclusionary language that alienates those the evaluation is meant to serve.
Stay engaged beyond the final deliverable to support interpretation, adaptation, and use.	Cut ties at project close, leaving no space for the afterlife of findings.

(3) RD-Oriented Practices and Observable Shifts in Behavior
This section shows how RD can be enacted at each stage of an evaluation. It contrasts conventional moves with RD-oriented practices and highlights observable shifts that signal a living, relational, and justice-oriented stance.

Stage / Element	Conventional Evaluation Move	RD-Oriented Practice (Foundational Acts)	Observable Shifts in Behavior / Action
1. Before Engagement	Respond to RFP or internal request by drafting scope from funder's stated needs.	Begin with inquiry into context, history, and existing knowledge; create intentional dialogic space to ask what matters most to those directly affected.	Evaluator spends time in community or organizational spaces before scoping; asks "What's already known?"; brings multiple stakeholders into initial conversation.
2. Entry & Relationship Building	Establish contact with leadership and formal gatekeepers; move quickly to contracts and timelines.	Build relationships across roles, treating humans as knowledge wealth; clarify values, expectations, and decision-making norms together.	Evaluator introduces themselves personally, shares their stance, listens for power dynamics, adapts entry pace to relational readiness rather than fixed deadlines.
3. Defining Questions & Purpose	Frame questions in terms of funder priorities and measurable outcomes.	Co-shape questions through facilitated dialogue, holding space for multiple definitions of success and emergent lines of inquiry.	Evaluator facilitates participatory design sessions; documents different stakeholder aims; allows questions to evolve before finalizing.
4. Design / Method Selection	Select methods for efficiency, comparability, and rigor-as-precision.	Choose methods that support relationship, context, and meaning-making; adapt tools to cultural and situational needs.	Evaluator proposes methods with options; co-designs instruments with stakeholders; adjusts tools midstream based on feedback.
5. Data Collection	Gather data through standardized instruments; prioritize completeness and consistency.	Use approaches that invite dialogue, story, and co-interpretation; collect only what adds value to collective understanding.	Evaluator offers participants multiple ways to contribute; incorporates observation and conversation; avoids redundant collection when existing data suffices.

6. Sensemaking & Analysis	Analyze data independently; synthesize into a single narrative that fits reporting requirements.	Hold collaborative sensemaking sessions; surface multiple perspectives and tensions; name uncertainties openly.	Evaluator schedules joint interpretation meetings; shares raw data excerpts; resists forcing consensus; includes divergent interpretations in outputs.
7. Reporting	Deliver a polished, final report as the authoritative account.	Treat reports as imperfect snapshots of knowledge on the move; present findings in iterative, reviewable formats.	Evaluator shares early drafts for input; issues brief updates at key decision points; frames conclusions as provisional and adaptable.
8. Follow-Up & Knowledge Return	Conclude contract with final report submission; move on to next project.	Stay in conversation beyond deliverables; support adaptation and reuse of findings; return knowledge in accessible, community-owned formats.	Evaluator schedules follow-up calls; shares findings in plain language formats; co-hosts events to discuss use; tracks how insights evolve over time.

(4) Working Within Harmful Structures – Survival & Advocacy Advice
Reflective Dialogue-oriented evaluation often unfolds inside systems built on dominance logics. These systems reward proof-chasing, control, and efficiency over relationship, context, and justice. Here's how to keep RD alive in such contexts and how to advocate for a different way.

- **Model the Change:** Act as you want evaluation to be, slow where possible, relational in every exchange, reflective in every decision. Let your practice itself be an argument for a different kind of science and evaluation.
- **Name and Reframe:** Name the constraints without letting them define the whole work. Say, "The funder requires X, but here's how we can also capture Y." Translate RD practices into language that positivist audiences accept (e.g., call "dialogic sensemaking" a "participatory analysis workshop").
- **Negotiate Space:** Build RD activities into project timelines and budgets from the start. Tie relational practices to outcomes that matter to the system.
- **Layer the Work:** Deliver the required metrics while also embedding co-interpretation, narrative, and context. Treat formal deliverables as vehicles for RD, pairing lived experience with traditional outputs and use each deliverable to open new questions for continued dialogue.
- **Protect Relationships:** Never sacrifice trust for speed. If deadlines force shortcuts, tell stakeholders why and revisit later to repair. Treat relational capital as non-negotiable infrastructure for any evaluation.

- **Use Their Language Strategically:** If a setting demands "rigor," define it inclusively. Frame rigor as depth, diversity of evidence, and transparency, not just precision. Present RD findings as "complementary" to quantitative evidence, not in competition with it.
- **Leverage Existing Knowledge:** Push back against unnecessary data collection by pointing to credible existing sources, especially community-held knowledge. Document why duplicative "proof" harms efficiency and trust.
- **Be Transparent About Limits:** Say when data is incomplete, when context has shifted, and when certainty is impossible. Frame uncertainty as an ethical stance, not a weakness.
- **Build Allies:** Identify community members and leaders who can champion RD internally. Share small wins and stories that demonstrate the practical value of dialogic approaches.
- **Keep the Door Open:** End every deliverable, meeting, and report with an invitation for further dialogue. Treat every product as part of a living record, not the final word.
- **Keep Practicing, Often and Openly:** Treat every project, meeting, or deliverable as a rehearsal for a different kind of evaluation. Even small acts of reflection, like five minutes of shared noticing, or a question that invites meaning rather than proof, keep the rhythm of RD alive inside systems that reward control. Regular practice is resistance; each repetition composts dominance logics into soil where new possibilities can grow.
- **Stay Vigilant and Flexible:** Treat every phase of the work as dynamic. Scan for changes in relationships, context, and politics that could threaten or open space for RD. Shift tactics quickly when needed, while holding fast to the values that anchor your practice.

What counts? Who counts?
Ethical evaluation in access and participation

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Abstract

In England, evaluation of access and participation work has become a regulatory expectation in higher education (HE), with the goal of producing 'learning' to influence practice. As demand for the product of evaluation has grown, guidance for evaluators has focused on methods, with limited reference to evaluation ethics. This is despite research pointing to the importance for who is included in evaluation and for how evidence, knowledge and different values are distributed. Where ethics guidance exists, it focuses on defining ethical evaluation practices and securing ethical approval in an HE context. There is little space for the everyday ethics in navigating the power structures of institutions, the pressures of marketized HE, or the sense of responsibility that can come from inviting people's stories.

This paper explores the co-researched experiences of thirteen evaluators working in this context and how they navigate ethical challenges, looking beyond individuals determining ethical conduct to considering the powers that enable or constrain it. We argue for evaluation ethics that considers evaluation as a process, not product, and situates the evaluator in a network of responsible parties. We also point to the value of relationships in creating space for ethical considerations that can support evaluation for social justice.

Keywords: ethical dilemmas and conflicts; widening participation; evaluation practice

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Introduction

Evaluation is not a neutral endeavour. The work of evaluators can exert influence over policy, social programming, and learning, and the conduct of evaluations can shape how the activities subject to evaluation are valued (Onyura et al. 2023). Unsurprisingly, the ethics of evaluation, including norms of ethical conduct and the weight given to different ethical concerns, has therefore been of interest to evaluators and evaluation scholars for several decades (e.g. Schwandt, 2017; Picciotto, 2021). Despite this, there are not consistent frameworks or agreed norms for ethical evaluation, nor consistent training or resources for evaluators to draw on. Instead, where they exist, there are multiple organisational and professional guidelines with limited formal training or familiarisation to support these. These guidelines can also be ill-equipped to tackle the ethical issues currently facing evaluation as a profession, as they make little reference to context, focusing primarily on the ethical practice of the evaluator (Picciotto 2021).

Evaluation as a professional practice has a widely agreed intent to contribute to public good and social change (Greene 2005). However, it has faced challenge to and critique of its effectiveness in this role, particularly in a context where evaluation has become highly politicised and a market good (Picciotto 2021). In access and participation work, evaluation has been situated by state regulators and commissioners as a techno-rational approach to identify the economic and social value of higher education participation, often within narrow parameters. Even where individual evaluators or institutions may hold different values, they frequently operate in environments where a new public management approach to evaluation is entrenched, impacting on methodological choices, resources, and who evaluation is permitted to serve (Gordon, Lumb, Bunn & Burke 2022). In this environment, discussion of evaluation ethics becomes ever more important as part of the professional practice of evaluation, and for establishing the value(s) of evaluation for equity. As noted by Thomas Schwandt, ‘The field cannot simply posit that evaluation serves a social good without making it clear what it understands that to be.’ (2018 p. 234).

Access and Participation Evaluation in England

As in many other countries, access and participation (AP), or action to widen participation and success in higher education, has been a policy of successive governments in England for over 20 years as part of a range of policies to increase social mobility. Participation in higher education (HE) has both individual benefits in terms of a graduate premium on salary (Anderson & Nelson 2021) and broader societal benefits through increasing human capital and contributing to economic growth (Bowl et al. 2018). However, these benefits are unevenly distributed, with persistent differences in terms of applications, enrolment, completion and degree outcomes from HE between social groups (Social Mobility Commission 2024). As part of addressing this inequality, the HE regulator for England, the Office for Students (OfS) requires HE institutions to produce and have approved an ‘access and participation plan’ (APP) that sets out ‘interventions’ to reduce gaps in outcomes between different social groups e.g. closing gaps in rates of HE completion between mature and young student groups. In addition to setting out specific actions for activity, higher education institutions (HEIs) are also required to make commitments to evaluate their activities and to publish evaluation findings in some form (Moores et al. 2023). This forms part of an ambition by the regulator to create a 'higher education evaluation library', where evaluations can be shared to 'support the sector to improve the impact of its equality of opportunity activities by drawing on the best evidence' (Office for Students 2024).

This requirement to share evaluation, implemented from 2024, has placed greater internal and external scrutiny on evaluation practice, including ethical practice. Some HE institutions have responded by attempting to integrate or align AP evaluation into institutional research ethics structures, where these exist. Additionally, research ethics guidance targeted at AP evaluators was published in 2022 by TASO, the affiliate 'what works' centre for developing evidence on equality gaps in HE. However, the context of AP evaluation presents some specific practical and ethical challenges that set it apart from other evaluation contexts and from research, which have largely not yet been addressed by the sector or regulator (Moores et al. 2023). These include the professional identity of AP evaluators, their embedded positions within organisations, a limited understanding and resourcing of evaluation within the sector and varying organisational structures and governance.

In contrast with some other settings for research on evaluation practice, AP evaluation is still an emergent field, with limited consistency of roles, stakeholders, and organisation types that might support a coherent professional identity as 'evaluators'. AP evaluators can be based (and usually embedded) in a wide variety of settings, primarily higher and further education institutions and third sector organisations, as well as in private (including self-employed) providers of education and/or evaluation services (Kelly 2022; Squire 2022). These organisations can have different regulatory oversight, mostly (but not exclusively) split between the Office for Students (HE providers), the Charity Commission (registered charities), and the Department for Education (education providers). There are relatively few dedicated evaluation roles, with evaluation responsibilities sitting with evaluation specialists, data analysts, academic staff, senior leaders, outreach deliverers, and marketing professionals. Few of those carrying out evaluation in these contexts have formal training in evaluation or research. In the past two decades, several organisations supporting AP evaluation have emerged, ranging from membership organisations for AP professionals (e.g. NEON, FACE) to organisations focused specifically on AP evaluation (e.g. NERUPI, the Evaluation Collective). Since 2019 there has also been a regulator-funded body for AP evaluation, TASO, which provides training and guidance, as well as commissioning evaluation and literature reviews. TASO's focus is on developing 'robust, causal evidence' (TASO 2024) and their orientation towards positivist social science and a focus on methods reflects the Office for Student's concern with the 'quality' and volume of 'evidence'. Although these organisations have contributed to the development of a growing and networked community of evaluators in AP work, there is some distance to go in professionalisation or formalisation of an AP evaluator role (Moores et al. 2023).

Previous research on ethical evaluation practice has highlighted the importance of context for how evaluators identify and view ethical concerns and on the strategies that they use to navigate these (e.g. Onyura et al. 2023; Alexander & Richman 2017). The structures and cultures of organisations and stakeholders can play a crucial role in ethical practice, as can professional identities (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). As AP evaluation moves from limited evaluation practice to a widespread expectation of evaluation that will inform change, consideration of the contexts that may inform ethical practice are essential if evaluation is to contribute to our understanding of not only whether we are 'doing it right' but also whether we are doing the right things and what makes it right (Schwandt & Gates 2016).

Our Research

This research took place between October 2024 and March 2025, during a period when many AP evaluators and their organisations were adapting to new regulations around evaluation and publication of evaluation findings noted above. Initiated and designed by myself, a researcher-evaluator in a medium-sized HE institution, it involved a further 12 participants from different HEIs and third sector organisations whose roles largely involved AP evaluation. The group of 12 was selected from a larger group of individuals who expressed interest to reflect a variety of role types, organisations, seniority, and experience in AP evaluation. The format of this research was designed to encourage sharing among peers facing similar professional challenges, in the spirit of solidarity and professional learning, while also allowing space for deeper personal reflection on challenges that related to our own values and professional identities. As an evaluator working in this shared context, I could not separate myself from this work or interpretation, so I tried to build in multiple opportunities for others to lead discussion and offer their own interpretations, as well as processes that supported reflexive analysis.

We came together initially to discuss the ethical challenges we faced and identified several areas we felt were most interesting and important to us as a group. I then formulated questions around our priorities, which were used as an interview guide for each of us to complete a 'self-interview' – a solo recorded interview, responding to prompt questions and anything else we wanted to discuss (Keightley, Pickering & Allett 2012). I carried out an initial analysis of all interviews, including my own, using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019). We came back together for a full day to share and discuss initial themes and focused on identifying the factors that influenced ethical challenges arising and how we managed these in context. This led to identification of several domains that we felt influenced our ethical deliberations and practice. Using these domains and associated discussions, I conducted a secondary analysis to refine and reframe themes. It is this secondary analysis that is discussed here.

What is an 'Ethical Issue'?

As literature indicates that evaluators vary in how they identify and manage an issue as 'ethical' (e.g. Alexander & Richman 2017; Stame 2018), we kept our definition of ethical issues deliberately broad, to include any area of our work where we had considered how to apply ethical principles, or where we were concerned that these may be threatened. These included many common issues discussed in research ethics guidance, such as gaining informed consent, transparency, researcher independence, and confidentiality. However, rather than being about the deliberations in determining how the ethical principle should be applied, many of our discussions focused more on how to ensure our ethical decisions could be upheld in our professional contexts and our personal responsibilities for this. We were often improvising and drawing on the resources within our context to develop our own resolutions and, frequently, to manage a lack of resolution. Our dilemmas were familiar across our different work contexts, but we were finding different ways to manage these, both in terms of taking action and in terms of emotional work to respond to scenarios where we were assessing our values and those of others. Through this research, we explored the practical experience of bringing ethical deliberations into our work and, although some of our discussions were very positive, many more focused on challenges and frustrations.

Literature on ethical practice in the context of professions, including psychology, evaluation and nursing, distinguishes between two types of ethical issues – true ethical dilemmas and 'mixed' dilemmas (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). In a 'true' ethical dilemma, there is a perceived conflict between two or more ethical principles, such as balancing the right for those impacted to feed into an evaluation with the additional burden this can place on marginalised individuals and communities who may be the focus of interventions. In a 'mixed' dilemma, the issue arises from circumstances that make it difficult to honour ethical principles, for example when a stakeholder wishes to selectively report on evaluation findings. In considering ethical evaluation as a practice, the distinction between true and mixed dilemmas can be particularly important, as evaluators may have guidelines or codes of practice that support consideration and even resolution of some of the first type but rarely have formal and consistent 'approved' practices to support them in resolving the second. Evaluation, particularly for evaluators who are concerned with equity, presents specific ethical challenges around beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. Not everyone has resources to commission evaluation, meaning that what is evaluated and where decision making power is concentrated is frequently uneven, and the rights of stakeholders to participate or determine the terms of their participation are also uneven. In evaluation, it is also often the case that the outputs of evaluation can influence resources that have material consequences for the livelihood of staff (evaluators included), stakeholders, and intended beneficiaries of activities (Onyura et al. 2023). These areas particularly came up in our discussions, with questions raised about where our responsibilities as evaluators lay – to our organisations, our colleagues, to evaluation as an 'ideal', to participants, or to society or marginalised groups more broadly.

The principle of beneficence offers one example of how the ethical issues we identified relate to ethical principles, to types of 'dilemmas', and to our contexts. In our discussions and interviews, we spoke about beneficence in evaluation design, through using collaborative approaches that might encourage participants to be 'agents of their own development' (Rogers 2016 p. 203). We spoke about intent for evaluation to inform practice locally and on a national scale, benefitting participants and/or underrepresented groups in HE. We also discussed balancing the burden of evaluation with expected benefits and designing evaluation tools accordingly. These were largely true dilemmas, as we considered how to ensure application of the principle in evaluation design and considered what 'goods' could be generated, including more complex questions around *who* should benefit and *how much* good was sufficient. In these areas, we were often guided by our personal and professional values, as well as institutional and sector expectations, to identify what we considered to be a good outcome and whose outcomes we prioritised. Some of us prioritised the good of producing evidence that might benefit participants and disadvantaged groups through allocation of resources and enhanced intervention design. Others prioritised working with current marginalised students, seeing potential good in student empowerment and in including student values in assessment of interventions. These sorts of ethical dilemmas were seen as challenging but largely resolvable, although we questioned the appropriateness of our making ethical judgements independently of any sector-specific discussion.

For most of us, our persistent ethical issues were mixed dilemmas, where we found our intent to *do good* challenged by cultures, hierarchies and systems where other goods were prioritised or aims were ambiguous. We discussed being pushed by senior managers towards using methods that carried greater status with funders or regulators but delivered fewer benefits to participants. We identified challenges in cases where evaluations were delivered by non-evaluators, whose choices could lead to exclusion of participant populations, alteration of participant experience, and impact on validity and reliability of data collected, thereby affecting the benefits intended by evaluators in their design. We held a common concern about application of findings, with evaluation reports ignored, suppressed or disregarded in decision-making processes, thereby limiting influence of findings on practice. Our concerns about our capacity to 'do good' as evaluators then spilled into other ethical principles, such as autonomy, as we questioned whether we were being deceptive in informing participants that their contributions would be used to develop interventions, when we ourselves lacked confidence in the utilisation of evaluation within our organisations. In these cases, we felt that, despite being able to identify and assess the principle of beneficence, we were unable to apply it in practice.

The ethical issues we identified, both true and mixed, in relation to beneficence can be framed in practical terms with practical solutions. For example, considering strategies to ensure that evaluations are better engaged with in our organisations. In many cases, we and other evaluators are already applying strategies to meet these challenges. However, to consider these only as practical concerns ignores the need for discussion and transparency around our values, morality, and purpose(s) as individuals and as a sector. It also neglects the necessary recognition of the hierarchies and cultures we work within and their impact on social justice, including on evaluation as a potential mechanism for equitable development and for challenging inequity (Masvaure et al. 2024). The challenges we identified were not isolated issues but often systemic and predictable patterns without agreed principles for resolution. They were not issues addressed by any process of ethical review or by professional guidelines within our sector. Identifying and naming our issues as ethical is therefore not only about defining these issues but also about noting the absences of ethics in AP evaluation and their importance for the function of 'assessing value'. Considering these as ethical issues can lead us to ask crucial questions about whose interests and values are represented in evaluation (Stame 2018).

Shaping the Everyday Ethics of Access and Participation Evaluation

It became apparent through our interviews and conversations that ethics was a consistent, though largely unacknowledged, presence in our everyday practice. Like evaluators in other contexts, the cultures and structures of our organisations were critical influences in ethical behaviour, shaping the issues that we identified and the resources we had available to respond to these (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). However, while structure and culture helped to describe our contexts and identify similarities, the crucial factors that determined ethical conduct were power and influence, both our own and that of others. This paper focuses on two interrelated themes that we identified as shaping our everyday ethics: understanding of evaluation and authority. These themes highlight relationships of power within our contexts and lead us to consider how things might need to be different if we are to evaluate ethically for access and participation. Crucially, they also present an opportunity for us, as evaluators, to examine what it means to value and to take an ethical stand that aligns with the ambitions of evaluation to serve a social good.

What we understand evaluation and its purpose to be

> There is also stuff about power, yeah, the relationships that I have with colleagues and how they see evaluation in the institution and what they want it to do, and they want it to say the right thing – which is 'this works', or 'this doesn't work exactly as we planned, but it's still great'. And [#thinking noises] getting people just to understand what it even is, what evaluation even is.

Many of our ethical issues appeared related to how evaluation was understood within and outside our organisations, and what we, and others, felt its purpose to be. Evaluation could be variously interpreted as a regulatory or funding requirement; a learning opportunity; an appraisal; a piece of research; or business and market intelligence. Often all interpretations existed within an organisation, though there was usually a dominant narrative that influenced resourcing and governance. Mismatches between how evaluators, their organisations and/or other stakeholders understood evaluation, both in its overall purpose and as a process, raised ethical issues for evaluators. These issues included: concerns about use of participant data or reported outcomes for purposes not intended in evaluation design, such as appraisal of staff or for promotion of activities; lack of engagement with 'negative' outcomes or unintended consequences; alterations to evaluation methods and processes during delivery; not undergoing ethical review processes or ignoring agreed procedures; and not using outcomes of evaluation in financial or programme decision-making.

Mainstream understanding of evaluation, particularly as understood in public policy and education, has been built on precepts of "value-free" positivist social science, where credible judgements are those that do not take a values-based stance or, where they do, test outcomes against the values of the commissioner (Stame 2018 p. 440). This understanding appeared to be widespread within our organisations, with evaluations and evaluation activity frequently viewed as a means to achieve institutional goals around reputation, funding, or meeting regulatory requirements. This might be explicit in decisions by senior leaders but could also be seen in contexts where resources and professional expertise were concentrated in marketing, fundraising, or regulatory functions of an organisation. Evaluators were sometimes co-located with these functions, meaning that their roles were expected to contribute to recruitment, fundraising or student outcome targets and not challenge the validity or benefits of these.

Where the dominant view of evaluation was as a tool to 'prove' the positive value of an activity or organisation, sometimes as part of an accountability process like reporting to funders or other stakeholders, issues considered to be ethical by evaluators were viewed by others as pragmatic decisions that would enhance the benefit of evaluation. For example, the design of evaluation and use of evaluation outputs to tell 'good news' stories about an activity:

> I think in terms of the most immediate and consistent ethical dilemmas is the desire for positive or success stories. So, I feel that the kind of learning or insights sometimes takes a backseat in terms of the kind of gathering of information.

In some cases, we attributed this prevailing attitude to the pressure of markets, where universities and third sector organisations can assume that a 'negative' evaluation will damage their reputation and ability to attract students or funding. This then shaped institutional priorities and the interests of those commissioning or reviewing evaluation, as they were seeking information and outcomes that would support a positive reputation or secure other market advantages.

Whatever the perceived purpose of evaluation, the focus of non-evaluators within our organisations appeared to be the output of the evaluation and hence little attention was paid either to process of evaluation or to the underlying ethics of the intervention being evaluated. This position, of evaluation as product or auditing tool, was vastly different from our perspectives as evaluators who were more concerned with the potential of evaluation to support learning and accountability. These two facets of evaluation, although debated in terms of the balance between them and the scope for these being transformational (Picciotto 2018), are core to many evaluator's conceptions of the purpose and values of evaluation. They are also core to how we, as a group, tended to describe the potential for evaluation to do good. Maintaining and enhancing these aspects of evaluation was often core to what we considered our ethical practice, as we tried to ensure our evaluations were used to hold our institutions accountable for delivering on their commitments to more equitable student outcomes and that learning about the experiences of interventions informed more equitable design and delivery. This was particularly highlighted by our reflections on things that supported ethical evaluation in our context, which included governance processes, evaluation training, and relationships with colleagues that supported learning conversations.

> I think I've been able to sell evaluation to quite a few teams as a constant learning process, and particularly teams that have young staff members who are still learning about their roles…they want to make what they do better and so they see the benefit of evaluation as being this learning process, this engagement process, and that – when people have expectations like that, you can do so much more.

For those of us in HE institutions, part of the drive towards a focus on compliance and evaluation products was felt to originate in the requirement to produce evaluation to meet regulatory requirements. This was not necessarily considered an issue in terms of the requirement itself, but on organisational interpretations of what it meant to meet the requirement:

> I think that there is a regulatory tension in the sense of box ticking. There are, with certain requirements and expectations, things that have to be done from that external stakeholder, and sometimes there is, certainly within the university, there is a 'Do we have to do this?' or 'How can we present the façade to say that we have complied with this when we do it with as little money and as little commitment as possible'.

This was similar in third sector organisations, with the expectation of evaluation leading to reports for funders that would support continued funding. Learning was not seen as a necessary or even desirable outcome and accountability was primarily seen as providing positive confirmation.

Where the purpose was to produce 'an evaluation', rather than 'to evaluate', this could also skew resources towards evaluating projects where it was felt that positive outcomes could be demonstrated, or where there was internal or external scrutiny on outcomes. This did not always align with the activities themselves felt would be most beneficial for organisations to evaluate.

> We are kind of gathering, we are evaluating individual's experiences rather than looking at systemic issues.

Some evaluators felt that the approach to evaluation taken by their organisations, and within AP evaluation more broadly, confined evaluation to an activity aligned to specific projects which do or do not 'work'. In doing so, this limited the potential for evaluation to explore the complex contexts in which activities took place or the systemic issues that underlay the need for those activities.

Picciotto (2017) identifies three ethical foundations for evaluation that concerns itself not only with *doing things right* but also *doing good:*

1. 'Merit' or the verification of compliance with pre-determined standards and norms and the efficacy of the intervention;
2. 'Worth' or assessing how well the intervention design meets stakeholder preferences and concerns, including the consequences of activity and for whom;
3. 'Value', which integrates merit and worth in a meta-evaluation through integration of stakeholder perspectives and a public-interest lens.

In AP evaluation, evaluators find themselves confronting systems and cultures which are interested primarily in merit and see evaluation as similar to an audit function. Where evaluations were designed and delivered with consideration for worth and value, which was still often the case, these were not always recognised by internal stakeholders, who might disregard elements of the evaluation that were not merit focused due to their value going unrecognised. This merit focused approach takes for granted that the goals of an intervention and means of achieving these are sound and ethically valid and only tests or confirms links between inputs and outputs without consideration for ultimate results. For evaluators seeking to evaluate more equitably, considering what we evaluate, how, and considering whose interests are valued, the prevailing understanding of evaluation within our institutions presents a significant challenge. Particularly concerning for us is how that understanding then combines with sources of authority to validate a merit focused approach to evaluation ethics.

Authority

The question of who has authority to make decisions and enforce control over AP evaluation is a complex one, as there are often multiple decision-making parties and power structures that legitimate the authority to determine what is evaluated, in what way, and for what purpose. There are also different forms of authority, with evaluators holding some authority through their roles as experts and hierarchical authority enacted over evaluators by organisations and individuals within them. In HE particularly, there is a complex relationship between autonomous HE institutions with authority over recruitment, curriculum, staffing, and mission, and an external regulator with authority to enforce standards in the interests of the state and, as per the OfS mandate, students. This complication also extends to TASO, as the sector body for AP evaluation, which is both an independent charity and primarily funded by the OfS. This mass of authorities was experienced by evaluators as direct instruction or more implicit pressure within organisations, which was then justified in reference to external authorities. Evaluators themselves rarely had authority beyond their expertise or, on occasion, delegated authority through their involvement in mandatory organisation processes or regulatory requirements.

A common, though not universal, challenge was senior colleagues and peers using their authority to make decisions about the design, implementation, dissemination or application of evaluations. This could happen at any stage, from attempts by delivery or senior management teams to 'cherry pick' evaluation participants or data, to evaluators feeling pressure or receiving specific instruction to only report on positive outcomes. This could leave evaluators frustrated and uncertain about the ethics of the evaluation overall:

> And that is not to say that having steerage from senior colleagues is unethical or a particular negative. I do think it provides particular lenses that maybe mean findings aren't disseminated as widely across an institution as possible. So, they only go to key principal stakeholders, which again I think is not unethical, but I think is deliberately opaque.

At earlier stages of evaluation, some of us faced challenges in feeling pressured or even required to pursue specific evaluation methodologies because these were favoured by senior leaders or felt to carry more weight with funders and regulators. In general, this was not rooted in the guidance published by the OfS or TASO, which states the importance of multiple evaluation approaches, but based in a broader understanding of 'good' evaluation as aligning with a positivist social science and causal approaches. The level of interest and status shown to these methods was felt by many institutions and even evaluators as a requirement or responsibility with ethical dimensions:

> …like my responsibility as an evaluator is to generate this evidence. And if the evidence that we're being told that we need to get is causal evidence I then have to push for…comparison groups and things like that, knowing that is at the detriment, potentially, to current students at the moment.

This idea of evaluation as generating (mostly quantitative) evidence has acquired status and authority in AP work, in part through its adoption by bodies holding legal and moral authority within the sector, including third sector organisations and the Office for Students. Many of the organisations that have promoted the importance of evaluation in access and participation are those aligned to 'what works' approaches, seen as politically neutral and therefore appropriate for evaluation in the public sphere (Squire 2022). Despite several evaluators and evaluation-based organisations advocating for different approaches (e.g. The Evaluation Collective), this perception appears to remain dominant amongst senior leaders in third sector organisations and universities, with limited consideration for the ethical implications of applying 'what works' approaches.

Within our organisations, this external validation of 'value-free' quantitative social science approaches, combined with structures of accountability that focus on compliance, has created environments where evaluators feel unable to fully consider or apply ethical principles to their evaluation work. This can be ambiguous, where evaluators feel uncertainty or unease about whether they are applying ethical principles appropriately, such as being able to conduct processes of ethical review or be suitably competent in methodologies used:

> A major dilemma I have been facing in my work, it is just often not really feeling prepared or adequately trained to carry out some of the work that needs to happen. So, by this I mean that there has been a lot of pressure to start using new methodologies, new ways of working, do types of work that we've never done before - ethics applications being one of them but also just in terms of needing [to] produce these causal evaluations that we haven't necessarily been working on before. And definitely increase the output.

In other instances, evaluators found their ethical decisions overruled by colleagues, both senior and peer in other departments:

> Anyway, needless to say I lost the argument because I don't have the power to insist that we don't do that.

Despite frequently feeling that we did not have the authority to determine key decisions or actions in evaluation practice within our organisations, ethics guidance produced by TASO and many other practice standards contain explicit or implicit assumptions that 'the evaluator' is responsible for ensuring ethical conduct (TASO, 2022). Ethical conduct is framed both as a required standard within any evaluation but also a professional standard for being 'an evaluator'. Unsurprisingly, many of us felt that we were falling short and questioned whether there should be greater alignment between authority in AP evaluation and responsibility for ethical deliberation and conduct.

Opportunities for resistance?

The ethical issues that we identified are not unique to AP evaluation, nor is the absence of ethics within common conceptualisation and practice of evaluation. We are not alone in facing challenges in attempting to maintain worth and value as foundational in our own and wider evaluation practice, in contexts where these elements are not recognised or supported. Recognising this and beginning to articulate our challenges as both professional *and* ethical, has been an important part of this research on a personal level. In addition to identifying themes like those above, this research also highlighted the significant emotional and relational work involved in managing ethical issues, and the need for connections that support this work.

> I think trying to take the ethical responsibility on your own is quite a lonely place. So, there is a need for shared confidential forums, as it were, and support. Because you are leaving people on their own in institutions to do these things when they are surrounded by an awful lot of other pressures.

AP evaluation has both similarities and differences to other evaluation contexts in how evaluators identify and address ethical challenges. The still emergent context of AP evaluators, many of whom have limited training and experience in evaluation, means that we do not share agreed professional guidelines or professional identity as evaluators, which can act as a reference point when identifying and resolving ethical challenges (Leone, Stame & Tagle 2016). However, even where they exist these guidelines are not without challenges, and evaluation more broadly is not yet fully established as a profession in most contexts (Picciotto 2017). This means that we are also not alone in needing to undertake an 'extensive reconstruction of professional ethical behaviour' (Schwandt, 2018b). The challenge, as outlined by the examples of issues above, is considerable, but AP evaluation has some notable prior research and practice to add to the considerable practical and theoretical work of evaluators and researchers. Although we work in an environment where evaluation is orientated towards positivist social science and the expectation that evaluators should only be concerned with “what is” and not “what ought to be” (Stame 2018), there is scope for ‘transgressive’ approaches. Rainford (2019), outlines how practitioners within HE institutions in England enact AP policy with reference to their personal values and histories, navigating power structures and constraints to meet the needs of students. Although agency may be limited in some cases, engagement with external networks and supported reflexive practice appear to be important factors in enabling practitioners to take positions that challenge institutional norms and consider the ethics of practice. In AP evaluation, these professional networks already exist, as does the appetite from evaluators to consider the purpose and practice of evaluation.

> I think that it is important to remember the root of the purpose of the work that is being done, and yeah, advocate and promote for the student experience being at the heart of it, and seeing evaluation through that lens, rather than does this meet the criteria for us putting it in our APP submission

Addressing what we individually and collectively see as the purpose of evaluation and questioning how power shapes these purposes can provide one of many starting points for a much-needed reflective conversation. Conversations about and with ethics need to become part of our ongoing professional practice if we are to create spaces for transgression in a context that resists the learning and accountability that are core to evaluation. The inconsistency of ethical processes and the neglect of interest in ethical concerns within our organisations raises serious concerns for evaluation as a project for equity. At worst, makes it subordinate to political interests that work against social justice. More than one of our small group remarked that the evaluation work they were doing ‘wasn’t what they signed up for’. We cannot put off considering ‘what ought to be’.

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Critical Evaluation through the lens of Indigenous Data Sovereignty

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This paper advances a critical evaluation approach to student equity in higher education, framed through the lens of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS). Rooted in emancipatory foundations, IDS provides a paradigmatic and practice-based model for transforming extractive data practices to community-led, ethically grounded evaluation. The IDS CARE Principles—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics—offers a concrete framework for participatory, culturally accountable, and justice-oriented evaluation. The paper offers an illustrative application of how these principles can be operationalised in evaluating university initiatives that support students from refugee backgrounds. While IDS offers valuable guidance, it is grounded in the specific rights, histories, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. These principles must not be appropriated or used to replace Indigenous-led evaluation by non-Indigenous actors. Rather, this paper draws on IDS for evaluation in broader equity contexts to promote relational accountability and evaluator reflexivity. It centres evaluation on the lived experiences of those most affected and calls for a redistribution of power as a pathway to systemic change—advancing justice for the very communities that student equity policies and programs are intended to support.

Keywords: critical evaluation; Indigenous Data Sovereignty; CARE Principles; student equity; higher education; participatory evaluation; evaluation ethics; social justice; refugee-background students; justice-oriented evaluation

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Introduction

Higher education institutions are deeply embedded in the social, political, economic, and cultural life of the student communities they serve (Connell 2019). Over the past four decades, Australia's student equity policy frameworks—*A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training [DEET], 1990), the *Bradley Review* (Bradley et al., 2008), the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al. 2012), and the *Australian Universities Accord* (Department of Education (Cth), 2024)—have promoted increased participation of under-represented students, including low socioeconomic status (SES), regional and remote, and Indigenous communities.

In response, significant public investment has been made through equity programs such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and related funding pools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). These initiatives aim to improve access and support for underrepresented students. However, while enrolment has increased, outcomes have not kept pace. Many student support programs remain unevaluated or poorly targeted, and rely on categorical definitions of disadvantage that stigmatise and fail to capture the complexities of student experience (Sellar et al. 2011).

A key issue is the lack of a critical evaluation culture. Universities rarely assess the effectiveness of their student equity programs, and when evaluations are conducted, findings are often withheld due to sector competition (Gale & Parker 2013). Moreover, there is no formal government requirement for universities to evaluate student support services, even when funded by public equity programs. Recent legislative changes require universities to have policies in place to support students (Commonwealth of Australia 2023), but still do not mandate evaluation of whether these supports are taken up by students or effective in improving participation, completion, or transition out.

This paper argues for a shift from access-focused approaches toward a more critical, justice-oriented evaluation of student equity policies and support services. Equity practice must move beyond enrolment targets to account for the diverse needs and aspirations of students. It must embed student agency, voice, and belonging, and recognise that universities are not neutral service providers, but moral and political institutions (Connell 2019; Patton 2011). At the heart of this argument is the understanding that evaluation is not simply a tool of institutional accountability, but a means of interrogating the underlying values, assumptions, and power dynamics embedded in equity policies (Mertens 2009; Schwandt 2015). A critical evaluation framework should serve not only the interests of institutions and funders, but the students whom these policies are meant to support. In doing so, it affirms student equity as a question of social justice, not just educational access or economic utility.

Defining Critical Evaluation

Ernest R. House was among the first prominent evaluation theorists to argue that evaluation should be grounded in principles of social justice (Patton 1997). He recognised that evaluation is never a neutral process—it is inherently political, shaping decisions about who benefits, who is excluded, and how resources are distributed. In higher education, where student equity programs are intended to support disadvantaged groups, both policy and evaluation processes influence whether those intended benefits are realised—or whether inequities are inadvertently reinforced.

A social justice-oriented evaluator makes judgments informed by values such as fairness, equality, and concern for the common good. As Patton (1997; 2011) argued, this orientation shifts the role of the evaluator from a neutral arbiter of merit to an agent of social transformation. Evaluation becomes not merely an instrument for assessing outcomes, but a political and ethical act that can be mobilised to support equity and dismantle structures of exclusion. Other scholarship on transformative and culturally responsive evaluation (e.g. Mertens 2009; Greene 2005; Schwandt 2015) reinforces this view, highlighting the moral responsibility of evaluators to ensure that evaluation processes are inclusive, participatory, and attentive to power imbalances. Critical evaluation confronts these power dynamics.

Despite the intent of public funding to promote student equity in higher education, structural barriers continue to limit the influence and participation of underrepresented groups. Programs are often designed by institutional actors without meaningful input from the communities they aim to support—such as students from low socio-economic, Indigenous, disability, first-in-family, or refugee backgrounds. This disconnect is exacerbated by the neoliberal, corporatised governance of universities, where decision-making is centralised, and professional development resources are predominantly Eurocentric. Support is often framed in paternalistic terms or grounded in deficit assumptions. As a result, equity programs frequently reflect the values and assumptions of dominant groups, while overlooking the lived experiences and knowledge of those who experience systemic exclusion. This exclusion not only limit access to support services but also cause harm through practices such as stigmatisation and labelling—for example, by categorising students as “at risk.” Without robust, context-sensitive evaluation, these programs risk reinforcing the very disparities they are intended to address, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage in student outcomes and retention.

This paper argues that critical evaluation must be justice-oriented and grounded in ethical commitments to inclusion and transformation. Justice involves expanding people’s substantive freedoms, and evaluation is a site where individuals and communities exercise their agency and participate as knowing subjects in shaping their own lives (Freire 1970; Sen 1999). Evaluators must not only assess program effectiveness but also interrogate whose voices are included, whose interests are served, and how inequality is being reproduced or disrupted. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds should not be seen merely as beneficiaries of support services but as agents capable of contributing to the transformation of their educational journeys. Justice-oriented critical evaluation thus demands tools and frameworks that reach beneath surface-level indicators—attendance rates, satisfaction scores, or participation counts—to explore the decision-making rules, accountability structures, and power asymmetries that determine who can speak, act, and be heard. This perspective positions evaluation as a site of ethical and political responsibility—a means to challenge entrenched structures and to advance student agency, voice, and belonging. As Schwandt (2015) notes, evaluative judgment is inescapably value-laden, and the task of the evaluator is to navigate that complexity with reflexivity, humility, and a commitment to justice.

This paper proposes that principles of data sovereignty, particular those of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) can inform a paradigmatic approach to critical evaluation. The next sections introduce data sovereignty and IDS, outlining its emancipatory foundations, core principles and frameworks, and exploring how it has been applied in practice, particularly in ways that align with the values and practices of critical evaluators. The following section illustrates how IDS could be applied in evaluating refugee student support in higher education. The paper concludes by reflecting on the ethical and practical application of IDS principles to guide critical evaluation practice meaningfully.

Data Sovereignty

Data sovereignty refers to the right of individuals or communities to govern the collection, access, use, and sharing of their data in accordance with their own laws, ethics, and governance systems (Carroll et al. 2022; Ernstberger et al. 2022). Data sovereignty has emerged as a critical concept in response to the widespread centralisation of digital data and the asymmetrical power it creates between data subjects and holders. Traditionally, user data in Web 2.0 environments has been stored and managed by centralised platforms, leaving individuals and communities with minimal agency over how their data is accessed, used, and monetised (Ernstberger et al. 2022). The shift toward Web 3.0 aims to redress this imbalance through decentralised systems that re-establish user control. Central to this movement are three interrelated components: decentralised identity, decentralised access control, and policy-compliant decentralised computation. Each of these components contributes to a broader architecture aimed at reasserting user control over digital data in a secure and verifiable manner. Together, these allow individuals to not only control access to their data but also to ensure that any processing adheres to their specified terms (Ernstberger et al. 2022).

The first component, decentralised identity, refers to systems in which users independently manage their digital credentials without dependence on centralized authorities. These systems are typically underpinned by cryptographic mechanisms such as public/private key pairs and are supported by verifiable registries, such as distributed ledgers. In this model, users hold and present verifiable credentials—like proofs of age or residency—through secure digital wallets, enabling pseudonymous interactions while maintaining privacy and authenticity. Such infrastructures align with emerging standards like Decentralised Identifiers and Verifiable Credentials, allowing users to maintain granular control over how their identity attributes are disclosed and to whom (Ernstberger et al. 2022).

The second component, decentralised access control, extends user control from identity to the governance of data accessibility. It enables individuals to define and enforce dynamic, fine-grained permissions governing who may access their data, under what circumstances, and for which purposes. This approach utilises advanced cryptographic schemes such as attribute-based encryption and secret-sharing protocols. Enforcement can be delegated to decentralised systems, including smart contracts and trusted execution environments, ensuring that access rights reflect the user's explicit consent and comply with applicable legal or ethical frameworks. Decentralised access control thus not only enhances privacy and security but also enables transparency and auditability in data-sharing processes (Ernstberger et al. 2022).

The third and final component, policy-compliant decentralised computation, ensures that the processing of data—whether for analytics, machine learning, or other computational purposes—is conducted in strict adherence to user-defined policies. Crucially, this occurs without necessitating disclosure of the raw data itself. Technologies such as secure multi-party computation, homomorphic encryption, and trusted hardware are employed to enforce policy compliance throughout the data processing lifecycle. These techniques allow for verifiable computation while protecting data confidentiality and integrity, and they are increasingly essential for building trust in decentralized ecosystems. By embedding policy constraints directly into computational workflows, this component ensures that data use remains accountable, lawful, and ethically sound (Ernstberger et al. 2022).

Collectively, these three interrelated components articulate a coherent and technically grounded vision for data sovereignty. They move beyond traditional paradigms of data control by redistributing authority from centralised platforms to individuals and communities, thereby enabling self-determined governance of identity, access, and usage in the digital domain.

Calzada (2021) further critiques the prevailing metaphor of "data as the new oil," which conceptualises data as a passive, extractable resource, and instead advocates for a reconceptualisation of data as inherently relational and embedded in social practices. In his articulation of "People-Centred Smart Cities," Calzada (2021) proposes data co-operatives as an institutional model that promotes community governance and peer-to-peer data sharing. Data co-operatives aim to reclaim digital rights and counteract the effects of surveillance capitalism by fostering trust and social capital within communities. Through these cooperative models, data becomes a collective asset governed by the very people who produce it, rather than being commodified by external entities.

The policy and governance dimensions of data sovereignty have gained increasing prominence, particularly as jurisdictions around the world respond to growing concerns over digital surveillance, data breaches, and corporate exploitation of personal and collective information. Legal instruments such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) are frequently cited as landmark efforts to codify data rights and promote accountability. These frameworks foreground principles such as informed consent, transparency, and the right to be forgotten, thereby marking a significant shift toward user-centric governance in the digital sphere (Hellmeier et al. 2023).

However, despite their strengths, these regulatory approaches operate largely within an individualistic paradigm that emphasises personal data protection rather than addressing the broader structural asymmetries in global data infrastructures. They tend to overlook issues of collective rights, the centralisation of data capital among corporate platforms, and the unequal distribution of value generated through data use. As Williamson et al. (2022) argued, such state-centric or market-oriented frameworks may provide procedural safeguards, but they do little to enable meaningful community agency over how data are produced, interpreted, and applied.

Thus, while legal mechanisms like the GDPR and CCPA represent important steps toward securing data rights, a growing body of literature calls for more expansive technopolitical frameworks that embed collective rights, cultural values, and community governance into the design and implementation of data systems (Calzada 2021; Ernstberger et al. 2022). These perspectives find resonance in the Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) movement, which has emerged as a powerful critique of dominant data regimes and a proposition for alternatives grounded in the rights of Indigenous peoples to govern their own data in accordance with their customs, laws, and worldviews. The literature increasingly underscores the need for governance models that go beyond procedural compliance to embed principles of equity, self-determination, and cultural integrity as underscored in IDS. The IDS movement offers a model of data governance that is both technically robust and politically transformative.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) movement

Emancipatory Foundations of IDS

IDS is a parallel but distinct discourse to data sovereignty. It is rooted in the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples to govern the data related to their peoples, territories, knowledge systems, and resources. IDS is grounded in an emancipatory vision of justice that reclaims Indigenous peoples' authority over knowledge, governance, and representation. At its core, IDS repositions Indigenous peoples as active agents and epistemic subjects in the production and governance of data, rather than as objects of research or state administration. As Kukutai and Taylor (2016) argued, Indigenous data sovereignty is premised on the inherent and inalienable rights of Indigenous nations to determine how data relating to their lives, communities, and territories are collected, owned, and applied. Rainie et al. (2019) extended this perspective by framing IDS as the assertion of collective and individual rights to access, interpret, and control data concerning Indigenous lands and peoples. This transformation—from passive data subjects to active co-governors of knowledge—constitutes a profoundly emancipatory act, one that challenges the epistemic and political hierarchies embedded within colonial data regimes.

The justice orientation of IDS is further evident in its critique of colonial and technocratic data regimes that have long rendered Indigenous peoples visible only through deficit frameworks. Walter et al. (2020) argue that even in the era of Big Data and Open Data, dominant infrastructures continue to disregard Indigenous agency, knowledge systems, and worldviews. This critique is emancipatory insofar as it exposes the structural power relations that shape data governance and calls for their transformation. Theoretical developments by Carroll et al. (2023) and Carroll, Duarte, and Liboiron (2024) emphasise that data sovereignty is not a technical question but a political one, grounded in epistemic justice and the redistribution of authority over knowledge production. In this sense, IDS aligns with broader decolonial movements that seek to dismantle the epistemological dominance of Western data practices and affirm Indigenous modes of relational accountability, collective benefit, and responsibility.

Finally, IDS reframes data not as neutral artefacts but as relational and strategic resources for Indigenous flourishing. The Lowitja Institute (2023) underscores that readiness for IDS is essential to redressing power imbalances in data ecosystems and ensuring that data serve Indigenous priorities rather than institutional control. From this perspective, data sovereignty becomes both a manifestation and a mechanism of justice—enabling Indigenous nations to rebuild governance structures, exercise political and cultural autonomy, and envision self-determined futures. When Indigenous peoples are custodians of their data ecosystems, they can ensure that knowledge production, policy, and innovation are aligned with their cultural values and aspirations. This form of data sovereignty reinforces the legitimacy and authority of Indigenous governance structures, enabling them to effectively plan, advocate, and lead in areas such as health, education, land management, and resource use. Hummel et al. (2021) contrasted this with European conceptions of data sovereignty, which tend to be technical and state-centred, whereas Indigenous approaches emphasise relational accountability and governance rooted in land, language, and culture. These models are not only rights-based but embedded within broader frameworks of community-led resilience and cultural continuity. Thus, IDS is not merely a technical concern—it is a foundational element of Indigenous nation-building and resurgence. Through its emancipatory foundations, IDS embodies the intertwined principles of sovereignty, self-determination, and self-governance, affirming that control over data is inseparable from the right to live, know, and govern on one's own terms.

IDS Principles and Frameworks

IDS is articulated most clearly through the CARE Principles—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics—which explicitly centre Indigenous Peoples' collective interests in data governance (Carroll et al. 2020). These principles extend beyond the individual rights emphasised in instruments like the GDPR and instead foreground relational accountability, cultural relevance, and ethical responsibility.

Collective Benefit recognises that data should be used in ways that benefit Indigenous communities collectively, rather than serving individual or external interests. It emphasises the return of value to the community, including improved wellbeing, capacity-building, and self-determined development. For example, in the First Nations Aging Study (Mulder et al. 2022), data were mobilised not just for academic purposes but to inform local health planning, policy, and service provision—demonstrating the principle of collective benefit in action.

Authority to Control asserts Indigenous Peoples' inherent rights to govern data about their people, communities, and resources. This principle includes rights to determine how data are collected, accessed, stored, interpreted, and used. In Williamson et al. (2022), cultural burning programs are governed by Indigenous-led protocols that control environmental data use, ensuring traditional ecological knowledge is protected and respected.

Responsibility speaks to the reciprocal obligations of data users to ensure that data practices uphold Indigenous rights and values. This includes transparency, accountability, and building respectful relationships with communities. The Indigenous Research Capability Building Program at the Australian National University, for instance, supports non-Indigenous collaborators to learn and adhere to Indigenous ethical frameworks, ensuring responsibility is embedded in collaborative research (Carroll et al. 2020).

Ethics focuses on the need for data governance frameworks to reflect Indigenous ethical principles, which are often grounded in relationality, respect, and holistic wellbeing. This principle moves beyond procedural ethics to encompass community values and cultural protocols. The application of CARE by Māori communities, as documented by Carroll et al. (2022), highlighted how ethical data practices are embedded in cultural knowledge systems and local governance.

Together, these principles foreground a paradigm shift in data governance: from extractive, institutional control to community-led stewardship. They support Indigenous self-determination by ensuring that data ecosystems are not only technically secure but also socially and culturally accountable. These principles are informed by national and regional initiatives, such as the US Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network, Maiam nayri Wingara (Australia), and Te Mana Raraunga (Aotearoa/New Zealand).

As Carroll et al. (2020) explained, CARE complements rather than replaces the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) of Data Sovereignty but does so by focusing on people and purpose rather than only technical standards of a data governance framework. The CARE Principles offer a values-based alternative, emphasising ethical use, community leadership, and Indigenous rights. Carroll et al (2020) argued that consultation is not enough—CARE requires relationships built on respect, reciprocity, and trust.

Moreover, IDS frameworks such as OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) - developed by the First Nations Information Governance Centre - assert a broader set of entitlements over data, encompassing not just access and consent but also governance, interpretation, and the right to define data's meaning and relevance within Indigenous contexts (FNIGC 2014; Mulder et al. 2022). This approach responds directly to the history of extractive research and data colonialism, in which Indigenous knowledge systems and community-generated data were often co-opted without consent or reciprocity (Walter & Suina 2019).

The OCAP® framework is the cornerstone of Indigenous data governance in Canada. It asserts that First Nations have the inherent right to control all aspects of data that affect their people, which includes how data are collected, protected, used, and shared. The Chiefs of Ontario, in partnership with ICES, have used OCAP® principles to establish a data governance agreement that requires permission from First Nations leadership before accessing community data (Walker et al. 2017). This governance structure ensures that data are used to serve First Nations' policy goals and are interpreted in ways that reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and priorities. OCAP® was pivotal in shaping the First Nations Aging Study, which integrated both administrative and qualitative data, including community-held stories and teachings, to produce findings that were actionable and policy-relevant. The study also implemented knowledge translation strategies that respected Indigenous languages and leadership, supporting the broader goals of sovereignty and self-determination (Mulder et al. 2022).

In Australia, the Maiam nayri Wingara (MnW) Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective has developed a similar community-driven framework. MnW's platform is built on the assertion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to govern data about themselves and their communities (Maiam nayri Wingara, 2018; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). MnW's initiatives include the development of the Indigenous Data Sovereignty Communique and the articulation of principles aligned with CARE and OCAP®, tailored for the Australian context (Carroll et al. 2020). These principles advocate for Indigenous decision-making in data governance and have influenced national research policies and ethics codes, including the AIATSIS Code of Ethics and contributions to national Indigenous voice frameworks (AIATSIS 2020; Walter 2021).

MnW's focus is on ensuring that data infrastructure, policy, and research genuinely support Indigenous aspirations and cultural integrity, advancing sovereignty not only over data but also over the narratives and institutions that shape Indigenous futures. This project demonstrated how OCAP® principles (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) can be expanded to include "Action" (OCAPA), affirming that data sovereignty must be tied to tangible outcomes and self-determined priorities (Mulder et al.

2022). The study employed community-engaged knowledge translation and embedded local languages, Elders' knowledge, and policy advocacy, illustrating how IDS can transform research into tools for community resilience, policy influence, and self-determination.

Empirical Illustrations of IDS

A number of Australian case studies illustrate the practical embodiment of self-determination, sovereignty, and self-governance in data-intensive domains and highlight how IDS can be integrated into national policy and research infrastructures. For example, Williamson et al. (2022) documented environmental governance practices in Australia that operationalise IDS. These include Indigenous-led cultural burning programs where local knowledge and environmental data are integrated to manage landscapes sustainably and reduce wildfire risks. Such initiatives exemplify how IDS empowers Indigenous communities to assert jurisdiction over land and resource management by combining traditional knowledge with contemporary data practices. The Indigenous Research Capability Building Program at the Australian National University supports Indigenous scholars and communities to undertake and govern their own research. This program emphasised Indigenous methodologies and data governance protocols that align with cultural values and community aspirations (Walter & Suina 2019). Sparke and McMillan (2022) examined Indigenous research sovereignties and highlight how Māori scholars in Aotearoa/New Zealand assert control through Indigenous-led research strategies, often rooted in whakapapa (genealogy), whenua (land), and mātauranga (knowledge systems). These frameworks centre community benefit and intergenerational knowledge transfer, reinforcing Indigenous governance through place-based epistemologies. Carroll et al. (2020) documented the implementation of the CARE Principles by Māori and Native American nations to safeguard Indigenous data in health and environmental projects. These communities apply CARE to ensure data governance practices are guided by collective rights and ethical stewardship rather than solely by institutional or state interests.

The First Nations Aging Study (FNAS) in Ontario, Canada (Mulder et al. 2022) offers a compelling illustration of Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty in research governance. Rather than treating First Nations as passive recipients of externally imposed inquiry, the study was co-led by the Chiefs of Ontario and grounded in full partnership with First Nations communities. Development, in this context, was not reduced to the provision of services or resources but extended to the capacity of communities to define, shape, and govern the structures through which those resources are managed. The study affirmed that genuine transformation requires meaningful participation, recognising communities as knowledge holders and decision-makers in the design, conduct, and governance of research.

From its inception, the FNAS research agenda was defined by community priorities that reflected lived experiences of ageing, frailty, and culturally safe healthcare. A First Nations Data Governance Committee oversaw all data access and research protocols, while a Knowledge Circle of Elders, language speakers, and frontline health workers co-designed the study, guided qualitative methods, and validated findings. These structures were not symbolic but substantive—embodying relational accountability, flexibility, and reciprocity. The project integrated Indigenous knowledge systems with quantitative analyses of administrative health data through a formalised data governance agreement and built enduring institutional capacity, including the establishment of a permanent research position within the Chiefs of Ontario. Importantly, its findings informed provincial health strategies and early COVID-19 responses for Elders. The authors argue for expanding OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) to OCAPA—adding *Action*—to link data sovereignty with community-led impact (Mulder et al. 2022).

Funnell et al. (2020) similarly demonstrate how Indigenous data sovereignty principles can transform research practice. Using administrative data to examine end-of-life experiences in Indigenous communities, their project adapted community-based participatory research approaches to ensure that Indigenous voices, governance, and epistemologies remained central. Indigenous partners co-formulated research questions, guided analysis, and shaped dissemination processes. This approach challenged institutional control over secondary data, repositioning Indigenous communities as custodians of meaning and co-producers of knowledge.

These dynamics are also evident in the case study by Elias et al. (2004), which documents how Manitoba First Nations redefined health research and data governance by institutionalising OCAP® within major initiatives, including the First Nations and Inuit Regional Longitudinal Health Survey. Initially, federal agencies implemented participatory frameworks such as participatory action research in paternalistic ways, prompting resistance from First Nations leaders who demanded full governance authority and community-defined models. Through sustained negotiation, they secured Indigenous control over the survey, established the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs Health Information and Research Committee, and founded the Manitoba First Nations Centre for Aboriginal Health Research. The Manitoba case reveals how Indigenous nations have transformed data regimes from within—turning research and education into tools of collective empowerment, decolonisation, and long-term self-governance.

Together, these cases exemplify how Indigenous Data Sovereignty operationalises the principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and self-governance. They demonstrate that participatory structures, when authentically enacted, transcend extractive or transactional models of research by embedding Indigenous authority throughout all stages of inquiry—from agenda-setting to dissemination and application. Participation here is not procedural; it is constitutive of justice and legitimacy. Understood in this way, evaluation and research become relational, ethical, and political acts that centre agency, challenge institutional hierarchies, and create the conditions for communities to determine not only the outcomes of knowledge production but also the terms upon which those outcomes are pursued.

Relevance of IDS in Evaluation of Student Equity Initiatives

The principles underpinning IDS offer a transformative framework for reimagining how data are used in evaluating student equity programs in higher education. While IDS emerges from the specific histories and political struggles of Indigenous peoples, its core tenets—self-determination, community governance of data, and ethical stewardship—speak directly to the challenges faced by under-represented student groups who are often subject to extractive, deficit-oriented data practices.

In many equity initiatives—particularly those targeting students from low socioeconomic background, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, living in regional, rural or remote areas, first-in-family, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students —evaluation practices tend to frame students as passive recipients of support. Institutional metrics such as enrolment, retention, and completion rates dominate, serving reporting or performance imperatives rather than reflecting the lived experiences, aspirations, and cultural strengths of the students themselves. This mirrors one of IDS's central critiques: that data systems frequently serve institutional or state interests rather than those of the people to whom the data relate. As Kukutai and Walter (2015a) argue, data are a site of power, and decisions about what is counted, how it is counted, and who interprets it are inherently political (Walter & Suina 2019; Carroll et al. 2020).

Statistical and administrative data in higher education are typically held within institutional systems that lack community oversight. Students seldom have a say in how their data are collected, interpreted, or used, and rarely participate in shaping the design of the programs and evaluations that define their success. This reproduces the hierarchies identified in IDS scholarship, where centralised data infrastructures reinforce institutional authority and marginalise community voices (Kukutai & Taylor 2016; Carroll et al. 2020).

Applying IDS to student equity therefore entails a shift from extractive and technocratic approaches toward participatory and justice-oriented ones. The IDS CARE Principles—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics—provide a coherent framework for this shift. *Collective benefit* ensures that evaluation outcomes are meaningful and useful to student communities, not merely instruments of institutional compliance. *Authority to control* recognises the right of students and their communities to shape what is measured, how it is interpreted, and who benefits from the findings. *Responsibility* underscores the importance of reciprocal, respectful relationships between institutions, evaluators, and student communities, while *ethics* demands practices grounded in justice, cultural safety, and mutual respect rather than minimal compliance. When student voices guide evaluation criteria, when data governance includes community-led oversight, and when findings are returned in culturally meaningful ways, the evaluation process becomes not only more ethical but also more effective. IDS rejects extractive or technocratic approaches to evaluation. Instead, it foregrounds participation, control, and voice as necessary components of justice. In doing so, it reframes evaluation not as an external judgment but as a collaborative and self-determined process—one that reflects the dignity, values, and aspirations of the communities involved.

This framework invites institutions to reconceptualise student equity evaluation as a process of shared governance. For example, evaluation of support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should not be limited to retention or completion rates but should also reflect Indigenous-defined indicators of success such as cultural safety, identity, and connection to community. Similarly, evaluations involving refugee or low-SES students should co-develop indicators with students and communities, ensure transparency in data use, and address institutional power dynamics that shape what counts as knowledge or success.

In short, IDS calls for a relational model grounded in respect, reciprocity, and shared agency—shifting the focus from *what institutions measure about students* to *what students and their communities value, define, and control*. In this way, IDS provides both a moral and methodological foundation for transforming equity work in higher education from a bureaucratic exercise into a genuinely participatory and justice-oriented practice.

Evaluating Refugee Student Support Through Indigenous Data Sovereignty: An Illustrative Application

Refugee-Background Students' Access to Higher Education

Access to higher education for refugee-background students in Australia is profoundly shaped by visa status, producing a tiered system of inclusion. Refugees with permanent humanitarian visas (e.g. Refugee, Special Humanitarian, or Protection visas) are treated as domestic students and have access to Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs), HELP loans, Medicare, and social welfare. By contrast, those on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs), bridging visas, or awaiting asylum decisions are classified as international students, required to pay full tuition fees and excluded from financial support. For many who have completed their schooling in Australia, these policies make university study effectively unattainable. This fragmented system reflects policy misalignment between migration and higher-education frameworks, where visa status determines educational entitlement rather than equity need (Molla 2021; Détourbe & Goastellec 2018). It exemplifies what White (2017) calls the "banality of exclusion" and what Coram (2009) describes as institutionalised disregard disguised by meritocratic fairness.

In response, some universities have introduced fee-waiver scholarships for asylum seekers and temporary visa holders, often driven by advocacy from groups such as Refugee Education Australia. While commendable, these initiatives are discretionary and reach only a small number of students (Murray & Gray 2021). Moreover, they focus almost exclusively on access rather than persistence or success, neglecting the financial, academic, and psychosocial supports required for meaningful participation (Ramsay et al. 2016).

The broader advocacy landscape reinforces this service-delivery model. Programs such as the Refugee Education Special Interest Group (SIG) established through Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA), Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN), and the Refugee Council of Australia aim to improve coordination and "best practice" support. Yet their language of advocacy "for and on behalf of" refugees risks reproducing paternalistic logics, speaking *about* rather than *with* students. The framing of "best practice" further homogenises refugee-background students with other culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts, obscuring the specific consequences of displacement, precarious visa status, and exclusion.

Even well-intentioned initiatives, such as SIG webinars that encourage students to "find their voice" in scholarship applications, individualise structural inequities by implying deficits of motivation or preparedness. Likewise, staff-training modules that emphasise the "different needs" of refugee students can re-inscribe them as problems to be managed rather than knowledge-holders with resilience and community resources (Harris et al., 2015; Lenette, 2016).

Such assimilationist and deficit narratives reappear in explanations of limited participation, retention, or employment outcomes that emphasise trauma or individual shortcomings, deflecting attention from the structural barriers that shape refugee-background students' educational experiences. Some scholars instead call for capability-expanding policies that recognise prior learning, support transition, and ensure opportunities for success (Molla & Brook, 2019). Yet most institutional funding still targets access pathways rather than retention, progression, or employment (Mestan 2022).

This brief overview illustrates how higher education policy and practices position refugee-background students as subjects for integration rather than agents of transformation. Their prior education, multilingualism, and community knowledge are acknowledged only superficially, often celebrated rhetorically but rarely embedded in institutional practice. Consequently, access and participation remain contingent on institutional discretion rather than systemic entitlement. While staff involved in student support may act with goodwill, they are often complicit—albeit unintentionally—in reproducing deficit and assimilationist logics by speaking for refugee students rather than enabling them to speak for themselves. These practices reinforce paternalistic modes of inclusion that sustain, rather than challenge, the structural inequities they seek to redress.

These systemic inequities highlight the need for a justice-oriented rethinking of how refugee-background students are represented, supported in higher education, and how these support initiatives could be evaluated. Integrating principles from IDS offers a pathway toward more ethical and participatory approaches. IDS reframes data and evaluation as shared spaces of governance, insisting that affected communities—not institutions—should define what constitutes meaningful success, what evidence matters, and how findings are used. Applying this logic to refugee-background student equity requires co-developing evaluation frameworks that centre student voice, ensure community oversight of data use, and return results in ways that are culturally meaningful and beneficial. In doing so, evaluation shifts from an instrument of compliance to a practice of justice—supporting self-determination, belonging, and the collective capability of refugee communities within higher education.

Applying IDS CARE Principles

The IDS **CARE Principles - Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics -** offer a practical framework for reimagining evaluation with refugee-background students. Applying these principles re-centres power, accountability, and meaning-making within the communities to whom the data relate. In refugee-background student contexts, this means that evaluation must not only measure outcomes but also serve as a mechanism of empowerment, reciprocity, and protection.

Collective Benefit ensures that evaluation produces tangible, community-defined value rather than serving institutional compliance. **Authority to Control** recognises the right of refugee students and their communities to determine what is evaluated, how data are used, and under what conditions. **Responsibility** highlights the evaluator's obligation to act with transparency, reflexivity, and sustained accountability to participants. Finally, **Ethics** demands a commitment to dignity, cultural safety, and the active prevention of harm. Together, these principles shift evaluation from a bureaucratic process of institutional measurement to a collaborative practice of justice.

The following table maps how each CARE principle could be applied to an evaluation of refugee-background student programs. It outlines the underlying assumptions, provides explanations for these assumptions, and suggests how each principle can be operationalised through data collection, analysis, and dissemination. These practices are guided by values of participation, co-governance, and respect with the aim of addressing structural barriers, challenge racism, and mitigate the risks associated with deficit-based data narratives.

Table 1: Application of CARE Principles to Evaluating Refugee-Background Student Initiatives

CARE Principle	**Assumptions of the Principle**	**Explanation of assumptions**	**Application of principle in evaluation practice**
Collective Benefit	Evaluation should create tangible benefits for the community, not just for institutions.	Evaluation should inform improvements in services, support advocacy, and align with the aspirations of refugee-background students.	Data Collection: • Participatory methods such as student-led focus groups. • Ethnographic methods offer a rich, ethical approach to understanding the activities, actors, and context within a community. Evaluators incorporate these methods both in the preparatory phase—by engaging with the community of students from refugee-background before implementing the evaluation—and during the evaluation itself, to ensure that interpretations are grounded in lived experience and cultural context. Data Types: • Community-defined indicators of inclusion, wellbeing. • Co-create metrics of success beyond enrolment/completion (e.g., confidence, social participation). Disaggregated & Contextual Data: • Collect data on intersecting factors such as visa status, education history, and focused on contextual and cultural history of displacement, settlement location to tailor analysis. Dissemination: • Findings shared in accessible formats and languages, co-owned by communities.
Authority to Control	Control includes decisions about what is evaluated, how, and for what purpose, as well as consent and data access	Refugee-background students and their communities have the right to determine how data about them is used.	Governance: • Refugee-background student advisory group guides the evaluation. Methods: • Co-design of surveys/interview/observation protocols with students Data Use: • Consent-based sharing and restricted secondary use.

			• Protocols for Data Access: Develop MOUs that stipulate student community-led review of data requests. Metadata: • Include provenance, purpose, and usage conditions tied to students' community-defined protocols.
Responsibili ty	Evaluators and institutions have a duty to be accountable to the communities involved. Evaluators must engage in critical self-reflection and remain aware of how their own cultural backgrounds, values, and institutional affiliations shape their perspectives, interactions, and the knowledge they produce.	Responsibility entails ongoing communication with communities involved in the evaluation. Evaluators develop cultural competence and recognise their own cultural biases towards students from various backgrounds. Evaluators ensure transparency in all stages of evaluation.	Data Analysis: • Emphasis on refugee-background students' interpersonal and cultural-institutional aspects of family lives and interconnection of the individual, social, and educational processes. • Inclusive sensemaking workshops with students and their communities. Methods: • Evaluator's reflexive practices and positionality statements. Transparency: • Clear communication of how data is used. Data Management & Accountability: • Shared data infrastructure with audit trails. • Community-led ethics boards review all stages of evaluation. • Ongoing reporting to students and their communities on how data influenced program changes.
Ethics	Evaluation must be guided by principles of respect, dignity, and do no harm, rooted in cultural safety.	Ethical evaluation recognises power imbalances and ensures evaluation processes protect rights, safety (cultural, psychological, political), and narratives of students and their communities.	Ethics Review: • Community ethics protocols respected. Data Handling: • Anonymisation and protection from misuse. Dissemination: • Avoiding deficit framing and ensuring positive storytelling. • Protective Practices: Implement safeguards to avoid data misuse (e.g., framing refugee-background students or their communities as burdens on systems).

			Collective & Individual Interests: • Ensure students' privacy rights are balanced with their community interest in supportive and non-stigmatising data use.

Operationalising the IDS CARE principles requires embedding community partnership throughout every stage of the evaluation lifecycle. Co-design must move beyond symbolic or performative inclusion toward genuine collaboration. A persistent challenge is that co-design is often reduced to post hoc consultation, where refugee-background students are invited to provide feedback on pre-determined frameworks rather than participate in shaping them (Ferrero et al. 2020; Harris et al. 2021; Lenette 2019). Such practices risk tokenism—treating participation as a procedural requirement rather than a genuine exercise of voice and agency. Students may be included to satisfy diversity objectives or to validate institutional designs but are rarely given the scope to articulate their own priorities, define success, or challenge the underlying assumptions that structure evaluation. When co-design is reduced to reaction rather than creation, it reinforces rather than transforms existing hierarchies.

Authentic co-design, by contrast, requires engaging refugee-background students and community partners from the outset to jointly determine aims, indicators, and methodologies. Participatory techniques such as storytelling workshops, narrative inquiry, and participatory mapping allow students to articulate what meaningful inclusion and success look like in their own terms, ensuring that evaluation frameworks are contextually grounded and culturally responsive.

Community governance is central to this process. Establishing advisory or governance structures that include refugee-background students, alumni, and advocates provides continuous oversight and shared decision-making authority. These structures can be formalised through Memoranda of Understanding or governance charters that specify responsibilities around data access, interpretation, and dissemination. Such arrangements safeguard against institutional appropriation of student narratives and uphold accountability to those most affected by the evaluation.

Ethical and culturally safe consent processes are also fundamental. Consent materials should be linguistically and culturally accessible, reflecting the diversity of literacy levels and experiences of bureaucratic mistrust among refugee-background communities. Consent should be understood as a relational process—negotiated and revisited over time—rather than a single administrative step at the point of data collection. Participants must retain the right to withdraw or to redefine how their data are used, consistent with the IDS principle of authority to control.

Relational accountability and reflexivity further reinforce the integrity of evaluation. Evaluators must engage critically with their own positionality and institutional affiliations, acknowledging how their assumptions shape interpretation and power relations. Regular feedback loops and sensemaking workshops enable participants and community representatives to review and validate findings, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in lived experience.

Dissemination must also prioritise reciprocity and co-ownership of knowledge. Findings should be returned to communities through accessible and dialogic formats—such as collaborative presentations, translated summaries, or visual storytelling—that facilitate advocacy and strengthen institutional responsiveness. Dissemination, in this sense, is not the endpoint of evaluation but an ongoing relationship built on transparency, respect, and mutual benefit.

Transformative Potential of IDS

The proposed application of the IDS **CARE Principles** directly addresses the paternalistic and assimilationist practices that have long characterised institutional approaches to refugee-background students. As discussed earlier, initiatives framed around advocacy "for and on behalf of" students, or training programs that emphasise their "different needs," risk reproducing hegemonic relationships of care and control—speaking *about* rather than *with* students, and positioning them as objects of intervention rather than agents of transformation (Harris, Marlowe & Nyuon, 2015; Lenette 2016). Likewise, "best practice" frameworks often homogenise refugee-background students with other culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts, obscuring the specific conditions of displacement, precarious legal status, and systemic exclusion that shape their educational experiences (Molla 2021; Détourbe & Goastellec 2018). The CARE framework, developed through the Global Indigenous Data Alliance, provides a principled means of reversing these dynamics by grounding evaluation in collective benefit, relational accountability, and self-determination (Carroll et al. 2020).

By embedding **Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility,** and **Ethics** into evaluation practice, institutions can move beyond paternalistic advocacy toward genuine partnership. The principles foreground the redistribution of voice and authority, ensuring that refugee-background students define the priorities, parameters, and purposes of evaluation. This approach reframes evaluation as a dialogic and participatory process—one in which refugee-background students are co-creators of knowledge and governance rather than recipients of institutional benevolence. In doing so, the CARE framework not only challenges the hegemony of institutional knowledge production but also operationalises self-determination and epistemic justice as practical dimensions of evaluation (Kukutai & Taylor 2016; Walter & Suina 2019).

The application of the CARE principles encourages evaluators to engage deeply and respectfully with refugee-background students and their communities—to listen, learn, and approach knowledge production as a reciprocal process. It cautions against the tendency to stereotype or homogenise experiences, reminding evaluators to recognise both commonalities and diversity within and across groups. This can be achieved through diverse and flexible data collection methods that capture shared patterns while also attending to difference. Mixed-method and longitudinal approaches, coupled with participatory sense-making, enable evaluators to understand how experiences of displacement, resilience, and belonging evolve over time. Such approaches affirm epistemic diversity and recognise that refugee-background students contribute distinct ways of knowing, narrating, and interpreting their educational journeys (Carroll et al. 2020; Walter et al. 2020).

In practice, applying IDS CARE principles reinforces values of self-determination, respect, and reciprocity. These values strengthen relationships between evaluators and stakeholders, repositioning evaluation as a collaborative and empowering process rather than an extractive one. Through this framework, the hierarchical and paternalistic logics of "helping" or "managing" refugees are replaced by practices that cultivate autonomy, dignity, and shared accountability. In this way, the CARE principles transform evaluation from an institutional tool of oversight into a mechanism of relational justice—one that validates lived experience and restores authority to those whose stories have too often been mediated by others (Walter & Suina 2019; Kukutai & Walter 2015).

Ultimately, this discussion underscores that evaluation is not a neutral or technical exercise but a political and ethical act that reflects the distribution of voice, recognition, and power within educational systems (Schwandt 2015). Embedding IDS-informed principles within evaluations of programs for refugee-background students enables a shift from compliance-driven accountability toward transformative justice—where data and evidence serve as instruments of self-determination, community advocacy, and collective empowerment (Carroll et al. 2020; Kukutai & Taylor 2016).

Conclusion

Historically, representation of under-represented students in the higher education sector has been based on extractive data practices that often fail to reflect students' own values, cultural contexts, or their conceptions of wellbeing and educational success. This paper has drawn on the concept of Data Sovereignty, and specifically the Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) CARE principles to advocate for evaluation approaches that involve students and their communities directly - allowing them to define how and when data should be used to benefit them.

While concepts like consent, anonymisation, and privacy are used in mainstream data governance, IDS perspectives introduce additional rights—such as the right to define one's own identity, the right to associate, and the right to reclaim data narratives. These rights reflect a desire not merely to protect data, but to transform the colonial frameworks that continue to shape the contemporary experiences of Indigenous communities. These ideas also hold relevance for other equity student groups. As illustrated in this paper, students from refugee backgrounds often experience similar forms of institutional exclusion and cultural homogenisation, even within initiatives that are intended to support them. Data users, including evaluators, have a responsibility to create space for these rights to be recognised and supported throughout the evaluation process.

The rationale for IDS—centring data as a tool for self-determination, resisting deficit discourses, and reclaiming authority over knowledge—thus has direct application in higher education student equity programs. It challenges universities to move from performative equity to transformative justice by embedding sovereignty, cultural safety, and ethical data governance into their evaluation practices. This not only makes evaluation more meaningful and empowering for students from disadvantaged backgrounds—it also repositions data as a site for liberation rather than control.

IDS perspectives offer guidance to critical evaluation for social justice particularly when rooted in the following elements. First, agency-focused approaches that foreground the structural inequities shaping educational participation and outcomes. Second, recognition that discrimination and inequality are systemic, not individual failures—affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds despite formal access gains. Third, acknowledgement that evaluation is a political activity—shaped by the assumptions, identities, and power held by institutions providing the support and evaluators themselves. Fourth, understanding that knowledge is not neutral—it is socially and culturally embedded, and evaluators must reflect on whose knowledge is prioritised and for what purpose.

Critical evaluation, then, is not simply a technical process of measuring outcomes—it is an ethically charged, socially embedded, and potentially transformative practice. Knowledge production can either reinforce existing inequities or serve as a resource for collective empowerment. The real transformative potential of evaluation lies not in collecting more data, but in applying it to challenge structural inequalities and inform meaningful change in policy and practice. The ethical principles embedded in IDS—particularly those within the CARE framework—can and should inform evaluations across all contexts where groups are positioned at the margins. Ownership and control are inextricably linked to broader conversations about rights, interests, and power of those shaped by these structural conditions. Questions of access and use must be informed by whether the data in question is understood as exclusive, shared, or community-held.

In closing, it is important to acknowledge that IDS is grounded in the specific histories, rights, and ongoing experiences of Indigenous peoples, particularly in settler-colonial contexts such as Australia. As such, drawing on IDS principles in evaluation practice requires cultural sensitivity and a clear recognition of their origins. These principles should not be used to replicate or appropriate Indigenous evaluation models, nor should they be applied by non-Indigenous evaluators in place of authentic Indigenous-led evaluation. The proposition of this paper to engage IDS principles in broader evaluation contexts of student equity in higher education is intended to strengthen evaluation practice by promoting critical reflection, respect, relational accountability, and justice. In doing so, evaluation can evolve beyond a tool of measurement to become a transformative process of shared learning, empowerment, and systemic change.

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Waves of evidence: A novel approach to the collaborative enquiry of equity in higher education

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This paper introduces diffractive collaborative enquiry, a methodological innovation that addresses urgent practical challenges in higher education research and evaluation. By enabling real-time collaboration across heterogenous research projects *in medias res*, our approach overcomes traditional barriers of misaligned timelines and incompatible methodologies for joint analysis that typically delay university responses to student needs. Bringing together three distinct ongoing research projects at the University of Oxford—academic skills development, diversity of student experience, and mental health—we demonstrate how diffractive reading practices can generate actionable insights within the complexities of a collegiate system without extensive prior planning or waiting for evidence to emerge from completed projects. Our approach also examines how different datasets interact, illuminating connections between academic preparedness and institutional belonging. By maintaining productive tension between different data sources and perspectives rather than seeking consensus, our framework creates pathways for a more holistic understanding that supports responsive, equitable systems capable of interrupting the reproduction of institutional inequities. This work offers a transferable model for complex organisations seeking to leverage diverse ongoing research, evaluation and reporting for timely decision-making that promotes educational justice by addressing systemic barriers and centring the needs of underrepresented students.

Keywords: diffractive analysis, higher education, university, collaboration, mixed methods, inequality, academic skills, mental health

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Introduction

Higher education continues to face significant challenges in ensuring equitable outcomes for disadvantaged students (Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2015; Burke & Lumb 2024), especially in collegiate systems like the University of Oxford, where support services and academic initiatives are fragmented across administrative layers (Palfreyman & Tapper 2014). The University of Oxford's (2025a) Access and Participation Plan (APP)[1] provides a strategic roadmap for addressing persistent gaps in access, participation, retention, and degree attainment for students from underrepresented groups. Of note are disparities in attainment between Black and White students, students with and without a disability, and students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Although the University of Oxford's awarding gaps are smaller than the sector average, the institution has set ambitious targets to increase attainment for underrepresented undergraduate students to 94% by 2028/29 (see APP). It is important to note that the University chose to explicitly state a position that aspires to the objective of genuinely improving outcomes for disadvantaged students rather than just statistically reducing disparities: 'We do not want to close gaps without improving outcomes, as it is the absolute improvement that we really want to achieve. We therefore decided it was most appropriate to set targets for absolute improvements.' (APP paragraphs 24 to 26).

Focusing only on the APP, however, limits a more complete understanding of student experience. Indeed, the University of Oxford (2025b) recognises the necessity of a holistic perspective, acknowledging 'strong links between a student's educational opportunities, feeling part of social groups … and ongoing positive mental wellbeing' (para. 1), and its initiatives frequently highlight the importance of addressing diversity gaps during and after entry. While gender-related challenges are not in the APP, they are targeted by individual researchers and programmes within the institution (Advance HE 2022). Similarly, despite falling outside the APP's scope (domestic "home" undergraduate students' risks to equality of opportunities),[2] international students comprise 46% of the student body at the University of Oxford (2023) and research demonstrates that international students experience significant exclusion from equity, diversity and inclusion frameworks, suggesting they would benefit from comprehensive appraisal in access and participation initiatives (Tavares 2021).

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[1] Access and Participation Plans (APPs) are regulatory documents required by the Office for Students for all English universities charging higher tuition fees. These legally binding plans set out how institutions will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented student groups across the student lifecycle—from pre-entry outreach through to graduate outcomes. Each APP includes specific numerical targets for reducing gaps in access rates, retention, attainment, and progression to employment or further study between underrepresented groups and their peers. Universities must detail evidence-based interventions, investment commitments, and evaluation strategies to achieve these targets, with progress monitored annually.

[2] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-of-opportunity-risk-register/

The UK Higher Education Context

In the UK context, the contemporary landscape of widening participation in higher education was shaped significantly by Tony Blair's 1999 government target to increase young adult participation to 50% , which led to considerable diversification of the student profile across cultural and social backgrounds (Loddick & Coulson 2020). This policy shift necessitated universities to adapt their support structures and develop new roles focused on student learning and academic skills development (Hilsdon 2011; Universities UK 2017).

The UK higher education sector has witnessed a significant shift in its approach to evaluating access and participation work over the past decade. Prior to 2018, widening participation was overseen by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), which required institutions to produce Access Agreements focused primarily on outreach activities and financial support packages. The creation of the Office for Students (OfS) as the new regulatory body for higher education in England marked a fundamental change in regulatory philosophy. The OfS introduced statutory Access and Participation Plans (APPs) that require institutions not only to set ambitious targets for improving equality of opportunity but, crucially, to evaluate their interventions using increasingly rigorous methodologies.

The OfS established the Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) in 2019 as part of this new regulatory infrastructure, tasked with supporting the sector to build robust evidence about "what works" in widening participation. However, the regulatory approach has faced critique from within the sector, with concerns raised through strong sector networks about the tension between standardised evaluation requirements and the contextualised, relational nature of widening participation work (Biesta 2007). In response, the OfS has increasingly emphasised regular dialogue with institutions and sector bodies, marking a shift towards more collaborative regulatory engagement that seeks to balance accountability with the recognition that effective practice emerges through ongoing conversation rather than compliance alone.

Collaborative Barriers in Higher Education Research

Despite its importance, collaborative research and evaluation faces significant barriers in higher education. Individual colleges, departments, and research labs typically develop and implement projects independently, leading to a fragmented understanding of effective practices across the institution. Projects are often initiated at different times, making *a priori* collaboration difficult. Once started, incompatible responsibilities, objectives, theories, standards, schedules, and methodologies can lead to irreconcilable differences that impede cross-project collaboration.

When similar projects are implemented across departments and colleges, differences in local context and assessment methods can still make it challenging to meaningfully synthesise findings. Data governance requirements can also create barriers by restricting sharing of personal data, particularly when collaboration has not been stated in participant-facing materials beforehand. These barriers can be sidestepped by adhering strictly to secondary analyses that aggregate findings across multiple completed studies (e.g. meta-analysis). However, this creates considerable lag between identifying areas for enhancement and implementation that can span years, preventing timely interventions for critical issues.

Traditional top-down approaches to research and evaluation, meanwhile, often focus narrowly on identifying straightforward, generalisable interventions that can be implemented across all contexts—an approach which can overlook nuanced, context-dependent differences in educational practice, and may fail to capture how power dynamics shape student experience, instead reinforcing deficit narratives that locate problems within students rather than institutional structures (Boliver 2017; Burke & Lumb 2018). There is thus a need for finding novel approaches to quickly integrate findings from multiple, concurrently active projects with diverse aims and methodologies, while preserving the complexity of student experiences. Here we introduce diffractive collaborative enquiry as a methodological innovation that demonstrates how evidence from varied projects can be read through one another using diffractive co-analysis to generate unique and multifaceted insights.

Theoretical Framework for *Diffractive Collaborative Enquiry*

Representative Co-analysis

Co-analysis has emerged as a vital tool within participatory research, enhancing the established collaborative practices of co-design and co-creation. This approach is grounded in fundamental principles where knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between researchers and those with lived expertise that integrate 'theoretical and methodological expertise with … real-world knowledge and experiences into a mutually reinforcing partnership' (Cargo & Mercer, as cited in Vaughn & Jacquez 2020 p. 2). As Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) emphasise, co-analysis must enable 'genuine and meaningful participation' where stakeholders have 'the ability to speak up, to participate, to experience oneself and be experienced as a person with the right to … have the expression valued by others' (2020 p. 5).

Here we build upon this and other participatory methods employed at the University of Oxford, including iterative student review of research outputs and theory of change workshops (Centre for Teaching and Learning 2024, 2025), as well as co-analysis listening circles where policy partners, education professionals, academics, and students collaboratively analyse primary data (Department of Education 2024).[3] By appointing a circle of project representatives and considering them as both experts and co-analysts, we leverage participatory methods and adapt them to a collaborative process where real-time evidence is used, for instance, to guide policy decisions, namely scientific panels (e.g. Ruckert et al. 2025). Rather than apply a traditional consensus-based model, however, we suggest representatives engage in diffractive co-analysis.

Diffractive Enquiry

In physics, diffraction describes how waves bend and spread to form complex interference patterns. Drawing on Haraway (1997) and Barad's (2007) conceptualisation of this phenomenon, and Mazzei's (2014) application of diffraction as a metaphor for analysis in educational research, we illustrate how diffractive analysis can reveal previously obscured patterns in student experience. As Mazzei argues, diffraction moves us beyond 'a reduction of data using a series of concepts' toward something more rhizomatic that 'keeps analysis and

[3] https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/project/what-matters-to-students-embedding-student-voices-in-evaluations-to-improve-student-outcomes/

knowledge production on the move' (2014 p. 743). In lieu of coding data into themes, analysts process narratives by 'plugging in,' which describes reading data, theory, participatory input, and personal experience through each other to produce 'a different relationship among texts' that 'create something new' (2014 p. 743).

This diffractive approach is particularly useful when traditional coding might miss important patterns, when seeking to understand how practices produce outcomes rather than just describing them, and when material conditions matter as much as meaning. While reflection implies mirroring and sameness, diffraction highlights patterns of difference. Bohr's complementarity principle is crucial here, as seemingly contradictory findings become necessary for a more insightful understanding of complex phenomena (Barad 2007). Thus, in the context of co-analysis, we view diffraction as a form of discussion and enquiry, where the aim is not to synthesise different perspectives into a unified whole, but to embrace productive tensions that emerge when diverse datasets and points of view interact, creating 'interference patterns' that enable 'thinking in the round'.

Aims

By rejecting the notion of evaluation as apolitical or objective, and instead recognising the deeply embedded ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions of evaluative practices, our diffractive collaborative enquiry approach aligns with calls for justice-oriented evaluation that foreground marginalised experiences and voices (Gordon et al. 2022). While we focus on disparities among undergraduates in the University of Oxford's collegiate system as a proof-of-concept to complements the Access and Participation Plan (APP), the framework we propose has broader implications for understanding and enhancing support across different student populations, including among graduate and international students. Our primary aim is to contribute both methodological insights and practical policy recommendations for improving student experience by developing a process for placing research in dialogue in complex higher education environments—not only to advance theoretical understanding, but also to inform institutional practice, contributing to the UNESCO (2021) Sustainable Development Goal 4 vision for inclusive and equitable quality education.

Method: Case Study Across Three Projects

As a case study for the application of diffractive collaborative enquiry, our work brings together representatives from three research projects at the University of Oxford. Each project has its own methodologies, data boundaries, and institutional milieu, and through co-analysis we aim to show how different projects, perspectives, and practices interact to create new patterns of understanding that would remain invisible to single-project analysis. Our approach also recognises an inherent tension in higher education support. While institutions must help students adjust to academic expectations, this process can inadvertently amplify disadvantage when it positions some students as perpetually 'catching up.' Well-intended policies designed to support underrepresented students may paradoxically reinforce deficit narratives by marking certain students as needing remediation. This process of categorisation, even when undertaken with equity goals, can reproduce the very marginalisation it seeks to address by positioning certain students as lacking or deficient rather than recognizing how institutional structures create barriers. As Alejandro (2018) demonstrates in her analysis of how efforts to address Western dominance in academic disciplines can inadvertently reproduce the Eurocentrism they seek to challenge, well-intentioned initiatives risk essentialising difference and reinforcing hierarchies they aim to dismantle. A diffractive enquiry, then, is poised to reveal how this tension manifests differently across student populations, allowing us to identify pathways for support that enable growth without stigmatisation.

Summary of Projects

The *Academic Skills Development Project* (Centre for Teaching and Learning 2025),[4] examines how academic literacies development impacts student outcomes across the collegiate university. Using most significant change methodology[5] and college-based evaluations, the project conceptualises academic skills as complex social practices embedded in power relations. Funded by the Access Fund,[6] the project emphasises participatory approaches that address systemic barriers rather than reinforcing deficit narratives.

The *Diversity of Student Experience Research Project* (Centre for Teaching and Learning 2024),[7] investigates learning experiences of students from diverse backgrounds through multiple complementary streams: staff-student inquiry, a feedback channel, student diaries, and participatory pedagogic action advisory groups implementing a grassroots theory of change approach. The project moved away from targeting individual 'deficits' to examine systemic barriers, adopting the principle of 'nothing about us, without us.' Student participants, including DPhil literature reviewers, received compensation through the Diversity Fund.[8] Beyond financial recognition, the project embodied an ethics of care through protocols designed to support vulnerable students and provide responsive emotional support as part of its enhanced ethical framework.

The *Nurture-U Project*[9] is a multi-centre research effort that aims to find better ways to support the mental health and wellbeing of university students. Guided by a stepped-care, whole-university framework, the project emphasises individual need and institutional circumstances. At the University of Oxford, student outcomes are tracked and evaluated quantitatively via a university-wide survey (Marshall et al., 2025) and qualitatively in focus groups with staff and students. This project is supported by a UK Research and Innovation and UK Medical Research Council grant (MR/W002442/1).

Research Ethics Committee approval was granted at University of Oxford for the Academic Skills Project (St Peter's College: R85055/RE006; Trinity College: R94025/RE001.01), Diversity of Student Experience Project (R85055) and Nurture-U Project (R60998).

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[4] https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/academic-skills-development-project
[5] For an overview of this method in Higher Education, see https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TASO_Most-significant-change-briefing.pdf
[6] https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-1-of-2020
[7] https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/diversity-of-student-experience-project
[8] https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/the-diversity-fund
[9] https://www.nurtureuniversity.co.uk

Conversations Across Data: Building Our Collaborative Method

After inviting project representatives, informal conversations began on September 11th, 2024, through emails that revealed shared interests despite distinct perspectives. Hau Ming Tse joined Elizabeth Rahman, in representing the Diversity of Student Experience Project, Joris de Henau spoke about the Academic Skills Project, and Kevin Matlock spoke to the Nurture-U Project. While de Henau contributed literature on academic skills, Rahman proposed a working definition of educational inequality that included wellbeing to refine scope drawn from Matlock's and de Henau's work. Our first roundtable sparked recognition of unexpected dataset overlaps, though we grappled with how these might productively produce insight. Matlock proposed an 'active meta-synthesis', acknowledging the complexity of bringing together quantitative and qualitative approaches.

By November 4th, we had discussed what it means to 'stand in someone else's shoes' when examining others' data. Tse questioned whether secondary analysis might be 'too labour intensive' while Matlock expressed concerns about time constraints. These tensions shaped our methodology, pushing us to balance rigor with manageability. December meetings revealed tensions between project aims and publication aspirations, as well as a concentric circles model accommodating differences and convergence points whereby aspects of student experience rippled outward though our distinct methodological approaches. Throughout this process, we maintained what Matlock called 'conversational flow' rather than seeking consensus. Our different datasets, from Rahman's qualitative observations to Matlock's large-scale quantitative data, created opportunities for what de Henau described as 'counterpoints' that reveal hidden patterns.

Academic skills development was deemed the ideal starting point for demonstrating the value of diffractive collaborative enquiry because the collegiate structure offers unique opportunities for personalised academic support, though it also requires thoughtful coordination to ensure consistent resource access. Acknowledging that working-class students face challenges beyond enrolment—including cultural exclusion and negative stereotyping within elite institutions that persist well after admission (Reay 2021)—de Henau (2025) noted that targeted academic support at the college level has been shown to enhance students' performance, confidence, and sense of belonging. Rahman, building on Evans et al. (2015), then suggested diffraction might reveal how support systems function as complex social practices embedded in power relations that disproportionately impact students from marginalised backgrounds.

From here, we built upon each other's analyses in waves by focusing first on the local college environment and working outward toward the institutional and psychosocial environments. To allow more opportunities for discussion, this process was later conducted in reverse from broad to narrow. In each wave, a different project representative took the narrative lead, and the next followed up with a dialogic response and counterpoint. Throughout this process, we considered examining multiple disparities outside the Access and Participation Plan's (APP) scope, but ultimately focused our analysis on academic skills, support needs, and resources. This decision reflected practical constraints and our commitment to demonstrating how different analytical approaches could illuminate even seemingly straightforward topics in unexpected ways. The tension between our institutional roles, internal project needs, external perspectives and methodological approaches became productive forces shaping our collaboration, ultimately leading to the development of our diffractive collaborative enquiry model (Figure 1).

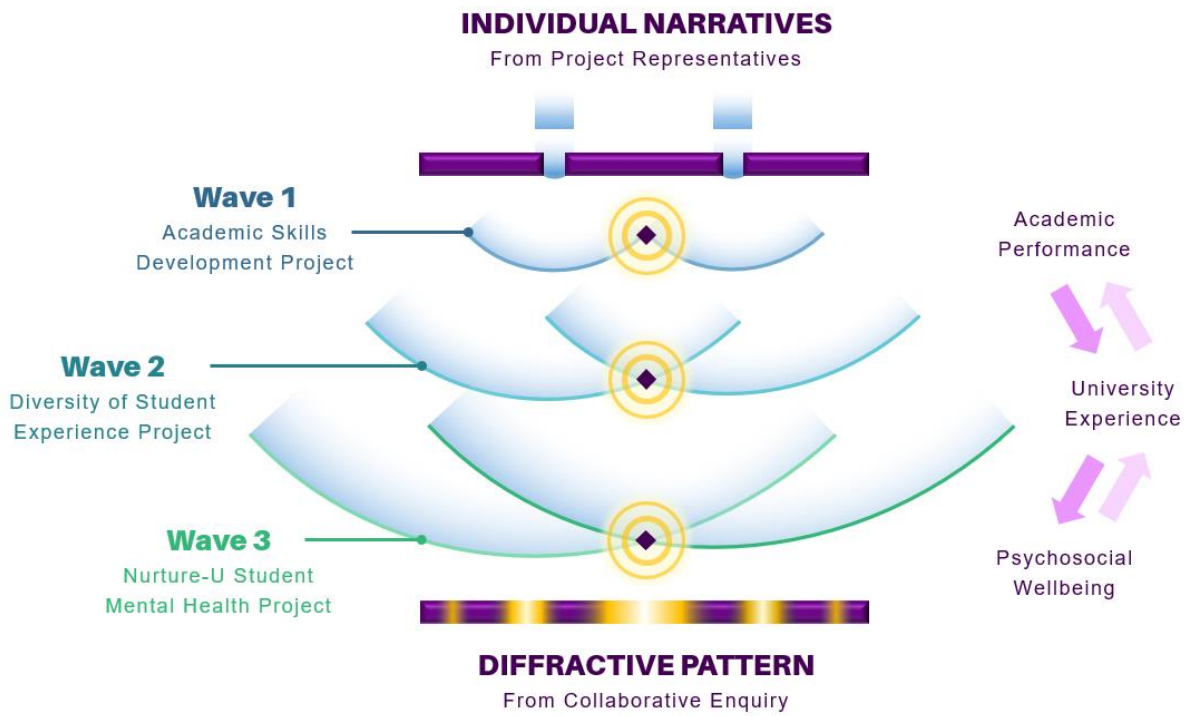

Figure 1. Diffractive Patterns in Cross-Project Enquiry: Understanding Student Experience

Inspired by the physics of wave diffraction, this figure visualises our method of diffractive collaborative enquiry, illustrating how student experiences can be understood through cross-project analysis. At the top, distinct narratives from project representatives diffract into concentric waves that represent progressive levels of student experience: Academic Performance (first wave), University Experience (second wave), and Psychosocial Wellbeing (third wave). Intersections (diamonds) and interference patterns (yellow circles) represent how insights from different projects interact and ripple across levels to produce a distinctly new pattern of understanding (bottom).

Results

Wave 1a – Academic Skills

We begin by examining academic skills development at the college level, focusing on how structured support impacts students' academic confidence and sense of belonging. The 3-day intensive academic writing course provided at St Peter's College represents an established approach to developing writing skills within a collegiate system, combining group instruction with individualised mentoring. Through the Academic Skills Development Project, researchers examined how such support impacts students transitioning from uncertainty to confidence. A key student narrative reveals how academic inequities manifest as interlinked challenges of skill development, confidence, and institutional belonging. Their reflection that ‘if I had been in [a] better school I would not have started from [an] underperforming position’ crystallises how educational disadvantage creates compounded barriers and illuminates the double-bind of academic support; while necessary for success, accessing such support can reinforce students' sense of non-belonging (i.e. identifying as someone needing support becomes another barrier to overcome). The student articulated connections between technical ability and psychological wellbeing, noting frustration about their ‘lack of confidence, not only … in ability but in output.’ This emerged in early writing where they found themselves ‘regurgitating what I had read’ rather than developing their own voice.

As the student gained technical proficiency through structured support, they developed confidence to ‘put my own spin [on the argument],’ though concerns about ‘marking being subjective’ persisted, suggesting institutional structures create uncertainty even as individual skills improve. This pattern of interconnected academic, psychological, and belonging challenges among students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds has been extensively documented across elite university contexts, with research demonstrating that initial cultural mismatch and confidence deficits often intensify rather than resolve throughout students' university careers (Phillips et al. 2020; Jack & Black 2024; Sutton Trust 2018). This interplay between academic ability, confidence, and systemic disadvantage reflects how ‘academic literacies are not merely neutral skills but are deeply embedded in the values, epistemologies and cultural practices of academic disciplines’ (de Henau 2024 p. 9).

Wave 2a - Diversity of Experience

We extend our analysis to examine the intersection of academic preparedness, mental wellbeing, and institutional belonging across a range of student experiences, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. In the Diversity of Student Experience Project, a participant in the Staff-Student Enquiry stream articulates how support ‘comes at a high personal cost given power dynamics and fears of being seen as a bother’, which creates barriers to accessing help. The Diary stream captures this challenge temporally, revealing how student experiences fluctuate throughout the term in response to institutional interactions. This connects to findings from the Student Feedback Channel where students reported having to ‘teach themselves skills that others had already been given a chance to master’, a process that was both 'humiliating' and 'exhausting.'

The Black Student Advisory stream illuminates how these challenges manifest uniquely for students with intersecting marginalised identities. One student describes having to 'take extra classes, meaning [they] felt behind' while simultaneously managing the ‘cognitive dissonance of being in an institution which has legacies of racism.’ A revealing pattern emerges around institutional support. One responder to the feedback channel notes: ‘A general lack of support for academic development ... was particularly acute for those students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.’ This connects to a Black student’s observation that while they felt ‘prepared to apply’ through outreach activities, they were left feeling ‘as if [they] had no support in this new experience’ once enrolled.

Wave 3a – Nurture-U

We introduce here quantitative analyses of data from the Nurture-U project (Table 1), providing statistical patterns that both confirm and complicate the narratives emerging from the previous waves. Regarding academic preparedness, analyses of survey data from more than 1,100 students align with narratives from other projects. Using ANOVA to compare scores on the Satisfaction subscale of the College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (CSSWQ; Renshaw 2018) shows that perceptions of performance and achievements at university differ quantitatively by ethnicity (p=.004, η^2_p=.012). Tukey multiple comparison tests for this effect reveal that Black students are significantly less satisfied with their academic performance than White students (p=.03) and those from other ethnic backgrounds (p=.047), apart from Asian students who had a level of satisfaction comparable to that of Black students. Viewing ethnicity as a cultural construct, it's plausible this effect might differ by country of origin. Nonetheless, quantitative data do not support an interaction effect with domestic status. Rather, domestic students are less satisfied with their performance at university than international students regardless of ethnicity (p<.001, η^2_p=.014).

Conversely, parent education level (a useful proxy for socioeconomic status, particularly in an educational context; Crozier et al. 2008; Rindermann & Ceci 2018) shares no statistical relationship with university satisfaction. This diverges from student narratives in projects from other waves, suggesting unpreparedness may manifest in other ways. Indeed, when asked to rate the degree to which mental health interferes with academic performance in Nurture-U, negative impacts become visible (p=.04, η^2_p= .006); where both parents do not have undergraduate degrees (inferred socioeconomic disadvantage), students report greater interference than those where at least one parent has a postgraduate degree (inferred socioeconomic advantage; p=.04). Similar findings arise for domestic status, where interference is lower for international students, (p=.002, η^2_p= .008), but no main effects or interactions are detectable for ethnicity. Together, these patterns largely confirm narratives from other projects surrounding academic unpreparedness, but suggest root causes may be different for Black students than for socioeconomically disadvantaged and international students, with the former being related more closely to an awarding gap and the latter attributable to interference from mental health concerns.

A second dimension of institutional non-belonging is a lack of support. In contrast to comments on the Black Student Advisory stream about feeling unsupported, Nurture-U survey data on belongingness (feeling included and liked at university as assessed by the CSSWQ connectedness subscale) show no differences for ethnicity, domestic status, or parent education level. However, this measure's breadth, particularly its inclusion of peer social interaction, may obscure impacts, as extracts from Nurture-U focus groups paint a starkly contrasting picture.

When it comes to seeking mental health support, focus group students report they 'struggle a bit with Oxford [because] it all feels a bit disconnected ... particularly between the college and the department' and are hesitant to approach staff because 'that would be putting a big burden on them'. Staff confirm these worries, with one member of staff highlighting 'conflicting demands from all sides' as a barrier to providing support, noting the 'institution sort of sabotages itself by making everyone too busy'. Thus, narratives describing a lack of support for underrepresented students suggest it may be less a function of social activity or general belongingness (hence the lack of statistical differences in survey data), and more a consequence of students facing barriers to accessing institutional support, with narratives from participants in Nurture-U focus groups and interns at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (Grieve et al. 2023) describing difficulties navigating institutional complexities and concerns about staff burden. This dialogue between quantitative and qualitative results reflects complex negotiations of identity and expectations rather than simple gaps in performance and belonging.

Table 1. Significant Effects in Nurture-U Survey Data (n = 1179)

Outcome	Student Characteristic	F	df_1	df_2	p	η^2_p
Academic Satisfaction (CSSWQ)	Ethnicity	4.4	3	1124	.004	.012
	Domestic Status	16.4	1	1177	<.001	.014
	Gender	4.8	2	1168	.008	.006
	Gender x Domestic Status	4.8	2	1168	.003	.009
	Disability	10.3	1	359	.001	.028
Mental Health Academic Interference Rating (0 to 4)	Domestic Status	4.8	2	1168	.008	.006
	Parent Education	3.2	2	1145	.04	.006

Note: Rows reflect findings from one-way ANOVA, apart from interactions (e.g. gender x domestic status), where two main effects and an interaction term were entered into the same ANOVA model

Abbreviations: CSSWQ, College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire

Interlude: Evidence in Conversation

After propagating once through our diffractive method, we pause to reflect on the pattern of results across projects. When students describe their 'normalised struggle' whilst simultaneously experiencing ethnic differences in performance satisfaction, we see what Barad (2007) identifies as *material-discursive intra-actions*, where narrative and statistical evidence mutually inform our understanding of how disadvantage operates. Conversely, the apparent contradiction between an absence of statistical evidence alongside powerful narratives of disconnection evokes complementarity where seemingly opposing findings are each necessary for understanding student experience.

In this case, belonging manifests differently across institutional spaces and measurement tools. The Diversity of Student Experience Project provides crucial evidence of how belongingness unfolds over time, revealing that even students who report academic confidence experience moments of profound non-belonging when confronting specific tasks. As one diarist documents: 'I genuinely cried in week one, purely because I kept reading and re-reading the same passage—and I couldn't understand it.'

The relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and academic unpreparedness creates particularly complex patterns. While survey data from Nurture-U suggest that mental health interferes with academic performance more strongly for domestic students than for international students (p=.002, η^2_p= .008), similar levels of interference were found across ethnic groups regardless of country of origin. This pattern materialises differently, however, when read through wider research literature. For instance, compared to domestic students, international Black students tend to come from more privileged backgrounds and possess forms of cultural capital that align closely with elite institutional expectations (Webb 2022). The relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and ethnicity (Li 2024) opens questions about how other forms of marginalisation might reveal similarly complex patterns. Consequently, following this interlude we work backward through the diffractive process, while reading established patterns alongside experiences of gender and disability to generate new possibilities for understanding institutional navigation and support needs.

Wave 3b - Nurture-U

Extending the quantitative analysis of Nurture-U survey data to other marginalised groups reveals additional complexity. Like ethnicity, satisfaction with performance at university differs by gender (p=.008, η^2_p=.006), but not domestic status. Yet, the emergence of a unique interaction not present for ethnicity (p = .003, η^2_p= .010) leads to a radically different interpretation for gender. Tukey tests show lower satisfaction among domestic women but only in comparison to international men (p<.01); women and men with matching domestic status are otherwise similar, suggesting country of origin plays an important role in understanding gender parity. The opposite pattern appears for gender diversity, however, where differences are purely non-domestic, with international gender-diverse persons feeling less satisfied than international women (p<.03) and men (p<.01).

Satisfaction with academic performance is also lower for those with a disability (p=.001, η^2_p=.028). Unfortunately, underrepresentation of international students with a disability in the sample makes interactions untestable. Although it is difficult to say for certain whether a more complex relationship exists, the relative absence of international students with a diagnosed disability is, perhaps, itself indicative of disproportionate disadvantage for this group. Like ethnicity and parent education, gender and disability show no differences as independent effects in the context of belongingness at university, nor is there an interaction between gender and domestic status.

Again, the breadth of the belongingness measure may conceal nuanced impacts, as Nurture-U focus group data suggest, at least for disability, some students face pronounced difficulties in university life. An extract from a student with lived experience highlights the structural barriers that contribute to academic dissatisfaction, noting an institutional 'reticence to provide adequate [disability] adjustments out of the fear of making Oxford too easy'. This same student also describes a multi-layered and unpredictable relational environment, where many 'department technical staff … [and] my current PI are enormously supportive', but a few administrators and others tasked with providing accommodation 'have said some really offensive things about my disability'. While not readily apparent in quantitative trends, for this particular student, invalidating moments from a small number of staff have resulted in a pervasive disconnection, one that has led to 'avoiding my college like the plague'. These narratives further solidify the notion that feelings of not belonging are not general, but rather likely a specific consequence of being unable to access institutional support.

Wave 2b – Diversity of Experience

Narrations of day-to-day experiences captured in the Diary stream of the Diversity of Student Experience Project reveal oscillating patterns of belonging throughout the term. One humanities student documents periods of connection followed by isolation: 'I attended my tutorial which was very insightful ... when tutors are flexible and understanding it immediately takes the stress off, it humanises the (at times) very daunting Oxford system'. This temporality of belonging rarely appears in static measures but significantly impacts overall academic integration. Socioeconomic disadvantage materialises differently across contexts, including imposter syndrome: 'Seeing a 57 on my collection score affirmed in my head I do not deserve my place here'. This moment captures the risk of assessment creating stigmatising identities.[10] The challenge for institutions is how to provide meaningful feedback and support, without inadvertently confirming students' fears about their legitimacy.

The Student Feedback Channel reveals varied experiences among international students. Some note feeling excluded during discussions, with one postgraduate observing professors ‘normally tend to select the same profile of people (white, native speaker, male).’ Women in male-dominated subjects report unique challenges, with one undergraduate sharing: ‘I have struggled with the lack of female tutors in my subject, and have noticed the material difference that having a female tutor in one of my subjects has made in how I feel more encouraged to engage with the subject.’ Others highlight how small-group teaching helped overcome language barriers, where international students’ experience varies substantially based on teaching context and representation. Students from historically marginalised nations note how diverse teaching content significantly impacts their sense of belonging: ‘Expanding the curriculum to include more case studies and examples from various global contexts, especially from the Middle East and regions experiencing conflict, would be immensely valuable.’ Perspectives from these projects enhance our understanding of how cultural background and historical context influence academic engagement beyond administrative domestic/international categorisations.

Where quantitative Nurture-U data show disability correlating with lower academic satisfaction, the feedback channel illuminates accessibility barriers: ‘A lack of accessibility training and provisions throughout campus and my college has made me realise that, in the ways that I am not like a typical Oxford student, I am more of an inconvenience than an asset.’ Both streams highlight institutional flexibility as critical. A diarist notes when a tutor was ‘understanding with my disabilities,’ it significantly improves engagement, while channel respondents emphasise how flexible practices make difference less salient. This suggests institutional responsiveness might moderate the relationship between demographic factors and satisfaction identified in the quantitative analysis.

Wave 1b – Academic Skills

We end with reflections from the Academic Skills Development Project, in particular an impact study on the introduction of an Academic Support and Development Lecturer (ASDL) by Trinity College. The ASDL provides one-to-one consultations, workshops, and drop-in sessions focused on developing academic writing, critical thinking, and study strategies complementing the tutorial teaching system. One Trinity student’s narrative creates new interference patterns when read through a student narrative from St Peter's College (in the context of an intensive writing course, see 1a). While the latter highlights the perspective of a British state school student navigating academic transitions, the former, an international student, reveals how structured academic support transforms technical capabilities, academic identity and belonging.

Student narratives build on accounts from peer reviewers, demonstrating how academic skills support can bridge what a survey of 17% of the Trinity College student population reveals to be a 21-point gap between those reporting general academic confidence (88%) and those reporting task-specific capability (67%). Through dialogue with the ASDL, the Trinity student developed academic writing

[10] This aligns with broader research examining how evaluation practices and institutional structures shape both academic outcomes and students' sense of belonging in higher education. See, for example, O'Shea et al. (2018) on first-generation students' experiences of belonging.

as an iterative process of critical thinking and argumentation, rather than following prescribed formulas: 'The ASDL explained the questions I should ask myself; this changed the whole logic... I understand the model now; it is fine, [though it] takes a long time to incorporate.' This co-constructed understanding reflects the ASDL's academic literacies-based approach, creating a temporal dimension of academic development that mirrors oscillating experiences of connection and disconnection documented in the Diversity of Student Experience Project.

The explicit instruction in academic conventions that transformed the Trinity student's writing diffracts through our findings about institutional belonging. While 75% of students at Trinity College report feeling part of their college community, this drops to 62% for university-wide belonging. The Trinity student's experience suggests how college-based academic skills development—particularly one-to-one support—can bridge these spheres, making them 'feel like part of a larger institution'.

The tension between structure and flexibility emerges as a key pattern when viewed through the lens of academic literacies as contested social practice (Lea & Street 1998). Reading student narratives through these multiple waves of evidence crystallises academic skills development as fundamentally intersectional, shaped by students' multiple marginalised identities and their navigation of overlapping institutional structures. These stories reveal how domestic status, neurodiversity, and gender affect how students access support. For instance, in peer discussions, students highlight an international neurodivergent student who noted that college staff generally 'don't understand me and my brain,' but found the ASDL 'one of few staff who understand my disability.' Gender and disciplinary context intersect this student's description of how ASDL support helped her 'translate mathematical understanding into clear written explanations' in a male-dominated field, creating what peer reviewers called 'a voice that you feel you can actually use.'

For international students, our research reveals complex navigation of both linguistic and cultural academic conventions, reflecting the gap between college belonging (75%) and university-wide belonging (62%). When diffracted through our broader findings about mental health, belonging, and accommodation, this final wave reveals how local responses to specific demographics must evolve towards recognising interlocking systems of marginalisation at the institutional level. These patterns point toward practices that support students' complex identities while maintaining the strengths of college-based provision, a vision of academic skills development as both personally and institutionally transforming.

Discussion

Diffractive collaborative enquiry was developed as a novel method for enabling real-time co-analysis across projects and institutional boundaries. As a case study, we employed this approach to examine student experiences through multiple waves of evidence across three research projects—academic skills, diversity, and mental health—to identify persistent insights or 'standing waves' that emerge when different perspectives create interference patterns. Some areas, like differences for Black students and students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage or disability, were selected to align with the University of Oxford's (2025a) Access and Participation

Plan (APP), while others, like gender and country of origin, extended beyond the APP to support broader institutional equity goals. Below, we discuss specific findings for underrepresented university students and general recommendations.

Standing Waves: Persistent Patterns in Student Experience

Co-analysis in this cross-project case study suggested that when quantitative survey data indicate lower academic satisfaction among Black students and greater mental health interference with academic performance among socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and qualitative narratives describe students having to ‘teach themselves skills that others had already been given a chance to master,’ it reveals what critical race theory would recognise as institutional barriers masquerading as individual challenges; where disadvantage is not merely the result of individual prejudice but embedded within institutional structures and practices (Delgado, Stefancic & Harris, 2017). Moreover, patterns of difference in academic preparedness, and complex relationships between gender identity and country of origin, point to intersectionality as a key consideration.

Our enquiry further demonstrated that whilst survey data for international students as a whole indicated higher academic satisfaction overall, this pattern shifted notably in the narratives of students living in the United Kingdom from historically marginalised nations, where cultural differences emerged as primary challenges. This speaks to what postcolonial theory identifies as the hidden curriculum of elite institutions (Whitehead 2025). Similarly, the absence of statistical differences in belongingness for students with a disability juxtaposed with powerful narratives of disconnection demonstrate how traditional metrics can mask systemic inequities. A potential avenue for addressing these concerns arose in narrative evidence, where academic skills support was effective for increasing both academic skills and belonging, specifically feeling ‘part of a larger institution’ through engagement with staff.

Ultimately, our *ad hoc* circle of representatives brought together professional services staff and academics to read different project datasets through one another in real time, producing what Mazzei (2014) calls ‘unpredictable and productive emergences’ (2014 p. 742) that highlight how institutional structures simultaneously support and constrain students in different, often difficult to measure, ways—a pattern of intersection and difference across research projects that emerges through this approach and unveils persistent barriers like nodes in a standing wave.

Broader Application: Equity-Based Higher Education

Navigating the Support Paradox

Diffractive collaborative enquiry identified patterns of difference between research projects that resonate with what Rahman and Cochrane (2023) describe as taking 'a critical, post-colonially informed stance to knowledge production, asking how knowledge is produced and whose knowledges are validated.' These findings surface a tension within higher education support structures; mechanisms designed to address inequity may, in certain cases, inadvertently reinforce the disparities they seek to ameliorate. Students navigate a complicated dynamic, benefiting from support while worrying about how accessing such support might affect their sense of belonging within the institution. Accordingly, we suggest several approaches that might help institutions navigate these tensions:

- *Normalise Support Structures*. Integrating academic development opportunities as a standard practice available to all students, rather than positioning them as interventions for specific groups, may reduce potential stigmatisation while maintaining effectiveness.[11]
- *Recognise Diverse Strengths*. Acknowledging the varied perspectives, experiences, and capabilities that students from different backgrounds contribute could help reframe support from addressing deficits to building on existing strengths.
- *Embed Development Within Disciplines*. Incorporating skill development within disciplinary teaching and assessment practices, rather than as separate programmes, might allow for more contextualised and less isolated forms of support.[12]

Methodological Considerations for Future Practice

Our experience developing diffractive collaborative enquiry raises important questions about how higher education might approach multi-modal research and evaluation. The initial independence of our projects appeared to offer certain advantages, particularly in maintaining methodological diversity and avoiding premature convergence of findings. However, the deliberate effort to co-analyse these streams diffractively revealed patterns that would likely have remained hidden within individual projects. Therefore, by way of application, we suggest institutions consider:

- Supporting independent, methodologically diverse research initiatives while creating regular opportunities for teams to discuss and explore overlaps and contradictions across projects
- Establishing forums where productive tensions between data sources can be examined without pressure to resolve into unified findings
- Developing sustainable approaches to maintain both independent inquiry and collaborative analysis, particularly as project funding concludes
- Building institutional capacity through communities of practice to preserve and transmit co-analysis approaches as specific projects and personnel change

[11] Support as a standard practice, however, should not be conflated with a one-size-fits-all approach. Indeed, Dale et al. (2025) report that students at the University of Oxford encounter many distinct barriers to accessing university support, including attitudinal barriers like difficulty discussing problems, practical barriers like time constraints, and stigma-related social barriers, which must each be addressed as points of individual difference as they contribute differentially to preventing or delaying students in needs from seeking support.

[12] Burke (2012) argues that widening participation must challenge hegemonic utilitarian frameworks that position certain students as inherently lacking, advocating instead for institutional transformation that recognises diverse forms of knowledge and capability. Burke et al. (2018) document enabling pedagogies demonstrating how embedded, discipline-specific academic development values students' existing knowledge while providing epistemic access to powerful disciplinary concepts. Their participatory research emphasises that effective pedagogies recognise academic skills as socially situated practices within disciplinary contexts rather than generic competencies, requiring iterative reflexive approaches that engage with complex relational dynamics of teaching. This strengths-based framework conceptualises academic literacies as embedded within disciplinary practices, focusing on developing students as "genre analysts" capable of understanding and adapting to discipline-specific conventions.

- Adapting the diffractive and collaborative aspects of our framework, all or in part, at the institutional level to support ongoing research and evaluation work[13]

Conclusions and Implications

In this proof-of-concept, we demonstrate how diffractive collaborative enquiry can transform the insight process in higher education by rapidly drawing from multiple on-going research projects in real time to uncover justice-oriented approaches to understanding student experience; and pursuing new approaches and collaborative projects thereon. Relying on project representatives to read and interrogate different forms of evidence through one another can reveal complex patterns in how institutional structures create barriers for underrepresented students that may be overlooked by conventional approaches. For instance, in our case study, quantitative data showed that deficits in academic performance were primarily linked to gender and ethnicity, but when read alongside qualitative data from other projects, socioeconomically disadvantaged students simply experienced academic disadvantage in other ways (e.g. mental health interference).

Diffractive collaborative enquiry also has the potential to forward a sector agenda for transdisciplinary reflection, which argues for creating spaces where researchers and practitioners can critically examine standard definitions and measures, avoid deficit framing, and meaningfully involve students to address persistent inequalities through institutional change rather than mere regulatory compliance (Rahman & Schulte 2023). By embracing the multiplicity of perspectives for both students and research projects, our approach offers a rapid and nuanced means for developing more equitable, effective, and targeted approaches to support diverse student populations across heterogeneous higher education institutions.[14]

[13] Creation of the Student Data Insights team within Education Policy Support, working alongside the Community of Practice for evaluators and analysts could, for instance, deploy these methodologies to examine how different evaluation streams interact, generating insights that might inform responsive adjustments to practice without waiting for formal evaluation cycles to conclude.

[14] The potential value of establishing a Theory of Change for collaborative evaluation merits consideration. Such a framework could help universities develop systematic approaches to recognizing and working with the productive tensions that emerge when different forms of evidence create interference patterns, rather than seeking premature resolution or synthesis.

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VIEWPOINT

Reflections on evaluation of widening participation initiatives in England: The emergence and development of NERUPI

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For this special issue of 'ACCESS' looking at the evaluation of equity and widening participation in higher education, my focus is developments in NERUPI (the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions). NERUPI set out to provide a collaborative space for colleagues involved in planning and evaluation of widening participation and equity (WP) initiatives. The NERUPI Framework (Hayton & Bengry-Howell 2016), which underpins the Network, is now 10 years old and was developed to address some of the dilemmas that were confronting evaluation of WP in higher education. This paper describes how a network such as NERUPI can combine understandings from educational theory along with insights from practice while continuing to take account of policy and reporting requirements. In this paper I outline the context for the creation of the Network and the NERUPI Framework, considering the impact of some recent changes in research, practice and policy on its development. Rather than exploring particular evaluation approaches and methods, I focus on how we aim to create a collaborative and reflexive environment for innovative evaluation. Policy changes described here relate mainly to England, where the majority of our members are based, and where WP activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) are regulated by the Office for Students (OfS).

Keywords: NERUPI; praxis; Bourdieu; equity; higher education; evaluation

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Background

It is 25 years since the first national initiatives specifically designed to widen participation through active intervention were introduced in the UK. Despite expansion of the sector, undergraduate entitlement to free education and non-repayable maintenance grants from 1962 and the proportion of students from lower income families had not increased thirty years later. The New Labour Government of 1997 recognised that removing the economic factors underpinning social and economic exclusion alone had limited impact. A range of public policy initiatives were developed to support progressive cultural change such as the early years programme 'Sure Start'. Along with a commitment to social justice was the ambition to develop a workforce with the capacity to grow a high skills economy. This powerful combination justified considerable investment from central government resulting in a number of WP initiatives, including the flagship national Aimhigher programme designed specifically to widen access, which are well-documented elsewhere (Burke 2012; Whitty, Hayton & Tang 2015; McCaig 2025)

Measuring the success of these WP initiatives was regarded as important from their inception. Understandably, there was a strong focus on monitoring the amount of activity and accounting for expenditure to the funding council and ultimately the treasury. Although HEIs satisfactorily completed and returned all the information requested, and there was a steady increase in numbers of underrepresented groups, the evidence was never quite sufficient to make the case that the initiatives were worthwhile. Mainstream education is also evaluated and regulated, yet the focus there is on improving quality and ensuring proper use of public funds. In contrast, evaluation for access and success initiatives seems tasked with providing proof as to whether expenditure on the initiatives overall is worthwhile.

Practitioners also conducted evaluations but, like schools and teachers, they were more interested in the short-term success and benefits of specific activities. These concerns can be regarded as unimportant in the broader context of whether to continue funding WP activities on a national or organisational scale. However, it is practitioners who are charged with addressing centuries of structural inequality through creating and delivering successful activities, not policy makers. For practitioners, evaluation which informs development and delivery of successful activity is important and represents a challenge which was and remains underestimated. The evaluation approaches and methods which provide the types of information they need are often dismissed as unimportant and regarded as 'lacking rigour' (Gorard & Smith 2006). While many of the early practitioner evaluations undoubtedly could have been improved it seems that the real issue was a lack of clarity on the purposes of evaluation.

A body of research and scholarship was also developing around the reasons for differences in participation rates between socio-economic groups but this was largely descriptive, rarely offering practical strategies for change and with entirely different concerns to those of the funding council and regulator.

In 2019 the Office for Students (OfS) introduced Standards of Evidence to guide HEIs and strengthen their evaluation findings. An earlier report had produced a hierarchy of methods positioning experimental methods, including Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), as the most rigorous (Crawford et al. 2017). Following a lengthy debate, the final guidance listed three 'types' of allowable evidence (OfS 2019). Nevertheless, the sense that RCTs were the gold standard of evaluation persisted, reinforced by the establishment of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) in 2019, a consortium comprising the Government Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team, King's College London and Nottingham Trent University. At that time TASO had a strong commitment to the superiority of experimental methods in assessing the impact of WP activities. While experimental methods can be of value in certain contexts, their grounding in a positivist, medical model can all too easily situate students as problems who need a particular 'dosage' of a certain 'treatment' to be changed or 'cured'. Quite apart from ethical issues with some experimental methods, they are notoriously difficult to administer successfully in complex social settings, as efforts in other sectors such as health and international development have demonstrated (Hayton & Stevenson 2018).

The NERUPI Framework

The NERUPI Framework set out to challenge concepts of neutrality in evaluation, taking a critical approach that sees structural inequalities, discrimination and misrecognition as the bases of educational inequalities. The Framework provides a theoretically grounded foundation for evaluating initiatives, that also acknowledges the complexity of different contexts. It integrates practice and practitioner insights with theoretical understandings to create a praxis-based space for reflexivity and collaborative learning, allowing interrogation of the context and exploration of strategies for progressive change. (Freire 1970). The Framework uses Bourdieusian concepts to underpin understandings of structural inequalities, combined with other theoretical approaches exploring marginalisation of groups and individuals. It sets out the capabilities that higher education institutions need to foster to widen access and support student success in the form of aims and learning outcomes to underpin planning and evaluation of initiatives. Taking a critical realist approach to evaluation it recommends a range of methods appropriate to the context and purpose of the evaluation. With the capacity to support reporting requirements, it is also of practical value to WP evaluators. To test, develop and sustain the Framework, it was important that it should have a dynamic base, including both practitioners and academics, so a praxis-based Network was launched in 2018. This is now an active organisation with over 60 subscribing members offering resources, supporting working groups, fostering collaborative research and hosting online and in-person events. As a dynamic venture designed to be responsive to context, some changes and developments have taken place on which I will reflect below.

Bourdieu's capitals and field

The use of Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capitals, habitus and field in the Framework has stood the test of time, making good use of and adapting his 'thinking tools'. Challenging common beliefs and assumptions about the reasons for educational inequalities along with strategies for addressing them is fundamental to the development and delivery of effective policies and activities. Colleagues involved in WP activities are found in a variety of disciplines and roles, and may not have considered the reasons for educational inequalities in any depth (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek 2017). Some colleagues will draw on so called 'common sense' explanations such as 'intelligence' to explain differences in educational outcomes. Many colleagues will see their role as supporting the 'disadvantaged' into higher education, adopting a 'deficit' model without recognising the cultural bias of higher education in favour of those already participating. Nor might they easily recognise the cultural wealths (Yosso 2012) that students from under-represented and minoritised groups can bring to the academy. Bourdieu's concepts support analysis of the causes of educational inequality, moving the gaze away from individualistic, neo-liberal ideas that place responsibility for success on individuals rather than organisations and the wider society.

Praxis

A praxis-based approach is fundamental to the way that NERUPI operates. It has perhaps been less immediately obvious to our members as a theoretical underpinning. Praxis is embedded into our working practices guiding how we engage with policy, design our events, support collaborative learning, foster praxis-based research and develop the Framework itself.

Praxis and the NERUPI Framework

Despite the enduring value of the original NERUPI concepts, economic and policy changes have led to some significant change in the Framework. Originally based on five overarching aims related to social and academic capital, cultural and intellectual capital, and habitus, we did not include economic capital. When originally delineating the field of widening participation in relation to the Framework, we excluded financial capital. The student loans and bursary system introduced in 2012 was well established with relatively generous funding. The key actors had limited agency to resist national policy and create change in their practitioner or academic roles. But, over time, the situation changed radically as the student maintenance loan has not increased in line with inflation. The conservative government of 2016 – 2024 chose instead to increase hardship funding to universities (OfS 2023). An unexpected outcome of this punitive policy was the speedy development of a range of innovative practice, quite different from traditional 'hardship' support offered by HEIs in the past. The original five aims of the NERUPI Framework could not encompass these exciting new activities, representing a whole new strand of activity often developed collaboratively with students.

Following consultation with our members, including an in-person workshop, a sixth aim was established relating to economic inequality. As with other NERUPI aims, there is an expectation for action from both organisations and students, and it was finally agreed to use the active learning word 'sustain' which applies to both. While economic capital could have been included in the original Framework aims, it is unlikely that the more detailed capabilities and objectives would have stood the test of time. The change in the policy unexpectedly provided a new space for action, clearly illustrating the importance of developing evaluation approaches with the capacity to respond to changing contexts and to learn from practice.

SOCIAL & ACADEMIC CAPITAL		HABITUS	SKILLS CAPITAL	INTELLECTUAL & SUBJECT CAPITAL	ECONOMIC CAPITAL
PROGRESSION CURRICULUM		STUDENT IDENTITIES	SKILLS CURRICULUM	KNOWLEDGE CURRICULUM	ECONOMIC RESOURCES CURRICULUM
KNOW	CHOOSE	BECOME	PRACTISE	UNDERSTAND	SUSTAIN
Develop students' knowledge & awareness of the benefits of higher education & graduate employment	Develop students' capacity to navigate Higher Education sector & make informed choices	Develop students' confidence & resilience to negotiate the challenges of university life	Develop students' study skills & capacity for academic attainment	Develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge	Develop students' capacity for critically informed financial decision making & managing financial resources

Figure 1: The NERUPI Framework Overarching Aims including Economic Capital

NERUPI Events

Praxis informs the design of our events on key issues for WP. These typically include theoretical perspectives, relevant academic research, a policy update, practice examples from our members, and an active session where participants explore strategies for addressing similar issues in their own organisations. Our members consistently report that they appreciate this collegiate and exploratory approach, along with the value that NERUPI places on their work, but they may not recognise this as praxis. Praxis-based pedagogy does call for engagement from all those involved, presenters and participants, academics and practitioners, an ambition which has become increasingly challenging since the pandemic when the majority of our events moved online. The number and accessibility of our events has increased, but there is considerably less engagement with the active elements of the sessions. Also, recent feedback from members revealed that many staff who had not experienced the in-person workshops introducing the Framework itself and its theoretical underpinnings, struggled to apply them to their activities. The connection of everyday practice to theory is fundamental to NERUPI and praxis-based knowledge creation. Addressing the risks associated with online learning is a key area of development for NERUPI and a burgeoning field of research and innovative practice from which we hope to benefit as we seek to increase online interactivity, make good use of opportunities to meet in person.

Collaboration for effective praxis

Praxis-based collaborative activity outside of colleagues' own organisation is important for so many reasons: to share practice, provide mutual support, develop new insights and understandings, and provide fresh perspectives from other contexts. Effective evaluation of WP initiatives remains an evolving and contested area. The in-house model emerging in HEIs has many potential benefits including support for continuous progressive institutional change and reflexivity. The use of external evaluators, or indeed an 'inspection' model of quality assurance, could not offer this ongoing relationship with practice, practitioners and understanding of local context. However, it can lead to accusations of universities 'marking their own homework', confirmation bias, questioning the validity of qualitative methods. More importantly reflexivity can be restricted if perspectives are limited to colleagues in one team or organisation. In recognition of this, NERUPI developed the Peer Evaluation Course, inspired by the external course examination process, to facilitate scrutiny of in-house evaluation plans, approaches and choice of methods by peers from other HEIs (Hayton & Moore 2024).

Praxis-based research

Developing our approach to collaborative research and evaluation projects in response to members' needs is an important aspect of NERUPI's work. Practitioners and researchers collectively explore areas of interest to NERUPI members with the aim of improving practice and contributing to scholarship. Currently the Student Ambassador and Mentor (SAM) working group is awaiting the results of a collaboratively designed survey to capture employability skills and personal development qualities that students develop in their often misrecognised roles supporting WP activities. NERUPI coordinates the design of the research along with analysis of the findings, supported by an academic adviser, in this case Clare Gartland (2015). Participating members administer the survey locally benefitting from the local and collective findings. Not tied to the requirements of funders, participants can choose areas of interest to them. As well as developing their own understandings and capacities for research, this process opens up opportunities for reflexivity within the group and for individuals.

Our commitment to including perspectives from minoritized groups across NERUPI stems from praxis as much as social justice. The involvement of colleagues from a variety of backgrounds with a range of professional and personal experiences is fundamental to our praxis-based approach. This has been of immense value to NERUPI and resulted in some new areas of endeavour including production of a glossary from the Student and Staff Race and Ethnic Equity (SsREE) working group and an article on language used in race and equity discussions (Daramy, F & Dumangane, Jr C, 2025). In a recent collaborative project arising from the SsREE working group, a 'Culturally Curricula Scales' survey developed by members was administered in six NERUPI member universities. In addition to increasing local organisational knowledge and understanding of the factors creating exclusionary curricula this resulted in an edited collection for Palgrave (Thomas & Quinlan 2024). My own contribution to the volume (Hayton 2024) gave me cause to reflect on my experience as a member of a minoritized community and to further explore the links between Bourdieusian perspectives, praxis and critical race.

Policy and praxis

A significant shift in policy coming from the OfS increased the focus on organisational change. This had become a regular subject of discussion in our working groups and events, perhaps best reflected in the increased use of the term 'underserved' groups which emerged from the health sector. In 2023 the OfS (2023) launched an Equal Opportunities Risk Register along with an analysis of groups with particular 'characteristics' least likely to access and succeed in higher education. When producing their Access and Participation Plans HEIs are now required to identify the specific risks to equality of opportunity posed by their HEI to students from these groups. To mitigate the risks they are tasked with developing action-focused Intervention Strategies along with evaluation plans to measure their effectiveness. This regulatory change called for a whole institutional approach prompting a burst of activity to form planning groups and committees if they did not already exist. The new requirements also impacted on the role of in-house evaluators who are increasingly engaged in planning Intervention Strategies, developing the evaluation approach and supporting colleagues to undertake aspects of evaluation. NERUPI had always actively promoted communities of praxis (Burke 2012) and praxis teams (Hayton 2018). Now their value as effective and equitable organisational structures for planning, delivering and evaluating WP became clearer to our members as they drew together a range of expertise and experience from across their organisations.

Organisational change

As we have seen, the NERUPI Framework is based on a set of capabilities designed for easy adaptation into active learning outcomes that organisations need to enable responsive services, active pedagogies and progressive curricula. Although we positioned individual student transformation as fundamental to the higher education experience, it would be impossible to successfully meet the NERUPI aims without the corresponding institutional transformation. Nevertheless, as organisational change is embedded and implicit in the original Framework, it can be overlooked. Also, in the absence of explicit markers for organisational change, the original aims and objectives can initially appear merely as a list of skills and qualities that students lack, reinforcing a deficit model. On reflection, we should have been more explicit about the level of organisational change required, particularly given the ubiquitous neo-liberal climate with its focus on individual responsibility. This has been compounded by approaches to evaluation that focus on measuring changes in students rather than questioning the higher education environment in which they find themselves. To address this gap in perception, we deconstructed the Framework identifying five areas of focus for organisational change: culture and structures; staffing; curricula and pedagogy; student support; and economic capital. We tested these with practitioners using them to consider the changes required to create an enabling environment for specific groups of students, for example, mature students, care experienced students, minoritized ethnic groups or students from low-income families.

Culture, structures, policies & procedures	Staffing (incl. student staff members)	Curricula & Pedagogy	Mechanisms for student support	Economic capital
ENACT	**ACTIVATE**	**EMPOWER**	**ENABLE**	**SUSTAIN**
Embed a culture and ethos, backed up by policies, procedures, & resource mechanisms internally, which promote inclusivity, supportive values & behaviour, and promote participation and engagement for all	Embed staffing & professional development arrangements, support & rewards, which build the capacity, awareness & skills of staff members to support & promote equity	Support and extend approaches to curricula & pedagogy which ensure inclusivity, & promote innovation, co-creation & partnership arrangements	Identify & operationalise types and mechanisms of financial, academic & pastoral student support to enable full participation & engagement of diverse student groups & individuals	Include equity considerations into organizational decision-making & management of financial resources

Figure 2: NERUPI Framework for Organisational Change

Theoretical development

We had also started to explore Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory which was useful in several ways including unravelling the wider context for widening participation and organisational change. Following consultation with our members and discussions with colleagues (Miri 2023) we adapted Bronfenbrenner's model to further explore the context of WP, incorporating both NERUPI aims and areas for organisational change.

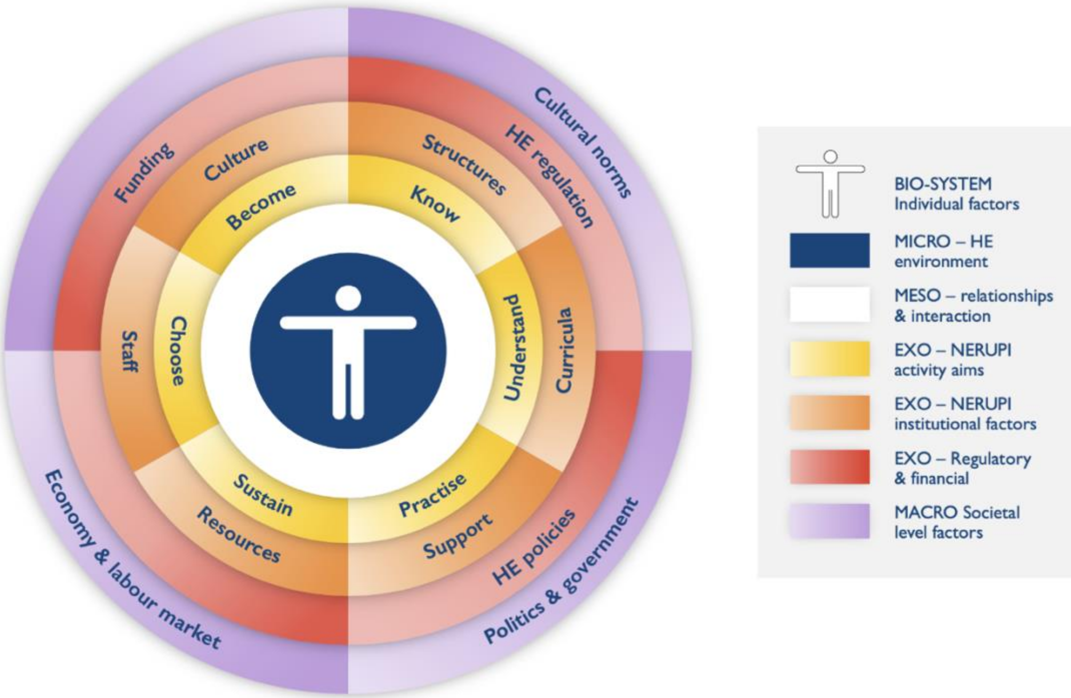

Figure 3: NERUPI Ecological system diagram

Evaluation of organisational change is complex as my colleague Joanne Moore found in our recent project reviewing the OfS Standards of Evidence. Working with seven case HEIs through in-depth discussions, interviews and collective analysis, she found that HEIs are undergoing radical organisational changes to develop more equitable and effective provision. Concerned with addressing issues such as non-completion and degree awarding gaps, HEIs are reconsidering their student support systems and reviewing their curricula, as well as extending their collaborative work to enhance outreach. Understandably, HEIs are keen to evaluate the impact of their innovations, and these potentially radical developments in complex environments require a variety of evaluation approaches and methods to support them. As a result, we have made a number of recommendations to the OfS for broadening and strengthening the Standards of Evidence to encompass evaluation of complex and evolving programmes, identify methodologies appropriate to the context, explore approaches to whole system evaluation and promote and facilitate student involvement.

Conclusion

NERUPI's praxis-based approach and theoretical underpinnings have stood the test of time. The popularity of our events for members continues. The combination of research, practice and policy offers spaces for practitioners and researchers to explore key issues collaboratively creating new insights and understandings of inequalities.

Our membership-based structure enables us to respond collectively to policy and policy-makers, with NERUPI voicing members' concerns to influence policy debates and developments. Our most recent project calling for changes to the OfS Standards of Evidence has triggered a national debate. Our recommendations, based on current imperatives for our members such as new approaches to curriculum and pedagogy and overhauling systems and services. We argue for evaluative approaches that better reflect praxis-based organisational the needs rather than one-off activities.

The theoretical underpinnings of the Framework also remain relevant and important, demonstrating the capacity to respond to our members' innovative practice and adapt to wider policy changes. Along with our praxis-based collaborative research the Framework's theoretical base has been extended. More work is required here, particularly in exploring dilemmas of structure and agency to create progressive change and shaping hopeful futures.

As we have seen in the USA in recent years, it is always possible to undo positive innovations, but only to some extent, as the ideas and values underlying them are not so easily abandoned. Hopes for continuing to develop a more equitable and positive higher education experience need careful nurturing along with resistance to reactionary forces. NERUPI plans to continue its collaborative work with colleagues and play a small part in that process to support progressive change.

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Yarn: Evaluation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Preparation program experience: An exploration of the program's contribution to First Nation student futures

Vicki Pascoe
Laurence Armstrong

Yarning with editors James Ballangarry, Monica McKenzie and Matt Lumb.

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A paper on the research discussed in this yarn will be available in 2026 on the ACCESS journal platform.

Highlights from the yarn are included below. This is a summary of a rich connection between the editors and authors. It has been edited to provide a snapshot of themes and does not reflect the full yarn or the context behind each of the points made. It mainly follows the flow of conversation and we have attempted to show where cuts/edits have been made through formatting. The insights from this discussion, held in late 2025, have informed the editorial. They link across the concerns and motivations for evaluation for social justice.

This exchange with the SI editors offers insight from the authors on the challenges faced when trying to ensure contemporary higher education institutions actively value culturally safe, Indigenous-led programs. The yarn asks us to consider why an award-winning program would be discontinued and absorbed into a mainstream model without consultation. We are challenged by questions such as why rigid approaches to review and reporting are seen as legitimate when they are clearly unfit for purpose if we consider cultural standards of conduct. The authors argue for Indigenous co-designed evaluation in higher education, the valuing of culturally embedded preparatory programs, and the need for forms of reverence when an effort seeks to build knowledge with community members through evaluation research.

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Moments from the yarn:

VP: Why did we start this, Laurie? We started it over a coffee, when we were reminiscing, because we both taught in this wonderful program… it was such a rewarding program, and when it kind of got shrunk and shoved in with something else, and…You know, we thought… Hang on, what's happened to this program? Laurie said, would it be great to go and talk to some of those students that completed the program and really talk about it with them? And then, of course, I said, that can be a piece of research. So, that's what we decided to do…you know, well, we saw great success from this program, and it wasn't necessarily in dollars, as in students going into undergraduate, but it was… it was everything, confidence, people building their… their own businesses, people getting promoted. Dramatically, because they could now write a report and reference, and, you know, just, just wonderful themes, and people saying, I now know I'm not stupid. Sowing those seeds with their families, and becoming sorts of role models, and very… even if they didn't go into undergrad, continually encouraging their children. And, you know, a lot of their children had great success, didn't they, Laurie?

JB: What made you see as that as being, key and important when it comes to evaluation? Like, why do you see those stories as so significant?

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LA: It was… it was obvious the value that our mob had got from the program in lots of different ways, and it wasn't really… the value…[the University measured] was only measured by one part of success, and that's who went into undergrad, and who, were successful in undergrad.

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JB: I am picking up the idea of purposeful evaluation… it's evaluation because you want to lead to, meaningful change. It's an act of… Resistance and Resilience. Against a system that has never worked. It wasn't designed for us and has never worked for us, and we're continuing to fight against that system, even when that system takes away achievements of the past… How do you do that? How do you use evaluation to fight against these systems and to show our value and our ways of doing things?... We're using a… a… we're attempting to use the [western] system, to navigate the [western] system, using our ways - if that's making sense?

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LA: We knew right from the beginning that we had to talk to [the people who did the program] first. We had… we had to have their voices. Before we can do anything, move forward, because the university's always got its agenda of how it's doing things and what it wants to do…If [the University's] got this information, it probably gets more credibility once it's published. I guess. And then they'll take notice, and more people will hear about it, and then we might have more of a starting point, because it almost seems like we have to start again.

MM: [As] researchers and evaluators, [how did you] come to create those safe spaces, or how did students, I suppose, feel that level of safety. And… and that power dynamic shift in… in the data
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collection phase or process, and how did the institution support, or hinder any of those processes? Were people, comforted in sharing their stories? Talk to us a little bit about how that, that context played out.

LA: I think that, the people that we talk to they, they knew the program and trusted the program that we were talking about, even if they didn't know us. And what we noticed is that… so we already had that base, that trust base, and they were happy to, to share with us openly about, you know, their experiences… You know how over… because this program went for 20 years, so over that time, staff come and went, and Vicki and I were both part of it at certain times, but you know, we weren't there all the time, so even staff that… that when we weren't there..
they still had that same trust for us because of the program, and because we… and what happened… I remember why that program started, because I was around when it started, and I was part of that whole thing.

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JB: You tapped into generations of trust that was built up through this program, and people's association with this program.

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MM: Absolutely. And that idea that the Trust was associated to the Indigenous Education center, you know, as a support mechanism, rather than the individuals that, you know, had come back and forth through that work.

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LA: when you go through, like you guys have, no doubt, when you go through a university and you receive that support and help along the way. You really want to find a way to give it back, and these students that we, spoke to they were eager to do whatever they could to pass this on, because if there's one thing that our mob want to do, is we want to help other people, our mob, you know, as well. We want to try and get that across. And they were really keen, because it was almost like this was their chance to really be able to get it out there that, you know, that education was an… it was so important for them.

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JB: I'd love to be able to capture that in this yarn of, like, well, I'd love to hear from your arguments, saying why it is the right way [to do evaluation].

VP: It's our way…. If you're going to have some kind of rigid framework, you're not going to get the rich data that you want… Quite frankly, if you don't… if you can't have a trust relationship, and you can't have a good, open, honest conversation, and you want to stick to your Likert scale, good luck to you, but you're not going to get rich data… The way you do it. If people are going to give their stories to you, then you've got to treat them very carefully, and with great respect… And there's, you know, still a lot of talk about, well, you can't do that. That's obviously not valid, or that's not robust, or whatever. But it actually is… It's just, I guess, putting more onus on having respect for that person who's gifting this to you.

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JB: And there's two things that I've actually, picked up from hearing those stories that you've shared, and that's, your intention behind the evaluation, and your intentions towards the participant, making sure your intentions are respectful… you as [researchers], it sounds like you were being open, and you were being honest, and you were being accepting and embracing, and you were somewhat modeling what you were hoping the participant would do. You're creating that space first… And, it seems to me that it's not just about what the participant gives, but it's also about what you give as the evaluator.

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LA: It's almost like we have to find a way to place ourselves as the learners, and those people with the knowledge as the ones With the power. And that's not always an easy thing to do.

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MM: I just thought about when you say, Laurie, that we're learners, thinking about how sometimes we say that we got *learnt*. Like, that kind of switch between, for us as Blakfellas, it's… you're… if you're a learner, it's… you got learnt, and that's how we sort of would say those things.

JB: … [my people] don't say teach them, they say learn them, you know, because that's the emphasis on the learnings, not on the teaching.

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JB: thank you both so much. This has been very valuable to… to me, not just for the special issue, but on the personal side, it's been very valuable to me, like, you… the sharing your insights and your stories and your journeys and, even your passions of what you're trying to do, it's very inspirational.

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MM: And do you have any thoughts about, the importance of Aboriginal researchers or Aboriginal evaluators leading and designing and shaping and analysing this type of work?

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VP: It really does help if you can get the right lens onto the evaluation to actually be able to dig into people's stories and really hear what they're saying, and empathise with them, rather than continually struggling to fit it into some kind of, you know, script, or whatever, to understand that, that someone's story is a very special thing. And if someone is keen to share it with you all, it's a privilege….A lot of mainstream researchers don’t have that …reverence… I think we would have got probably better data with us doing this research than a mainstream researcher. …we knew the program, we remember teaching some of the students…

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LA: It's important to have the right person. Rather than just choose an Aboriginal person because they're Aboriginal. Yes, yep. Because there is some really… yeah, we know all the time that we've had special non-Indigenous people that have helped us.

MM: Yeah, look, I think one of the things that struck me, we touched… you touched on it briefly there, Vicky, about time, and I'm curious to know how, time played out in the data collection and the data analysis sort of phase of your work.

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VP: Well, we… yeah, time was fun. It took us a while to collect our data to start with, didn't it, Laurie? … of course, we tried to organise interviews so that we could both be there, so, you know, that was quite a process. But we got a strong sense, didn't we, as we went by interview by interview about this confidence thing, these other themes started emerging…how… how things were then impacting for family, motivating kids, or partners, or friends, or that kind of stuff. That kind of… that probably worked in our favor. What didn't work in our favor was getting it written.

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LA: But when we did… now I think about it, it's just not something that you have to…
You know, think about too much, but it seems natural that when we get ourselves with one of those participants. We want them to think like we've got all the time in the world.

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ML: but that's fascinating, the idea that you can…express…that you've got all the time in the world in that moment, and not impose upon a participant, a particular sense of…that extractive time, you know, this is my time to collect from you, but to create another whole world in time where that's felt, you know? That reverence that you talk about is deeply, deeply present. I think that's an amazing thing.