

## **Executive Summary**

Equity in Australian higher education has been a national priority for the past 40 years. Despite this, there has been limited research or investment into equity practitioners. The term 'equity practitioners' is used as an umbrella term for staff at universities whose work contributes to the project of enabling equity in Australian higher education.

This submission highlights the lack of attention to equity practitioners in the Universities Accord Interim Report and urges the Accord to consider equity practitioners as critical actors and collaborators in the shared goal of enabling equity in Australian higher education.

The submission draws on limited existing scholarship, practice-based knowledge, and the author's research on the embodied experiences of equity practitioners in Australian higher education. It focuses on three main themes with four associated recommendations.

### **Theme One: Understanding Equity Practitioners**

#### **Recommendation One**

Secure initial baseline data and insights on equity practitioners through:

- 1A: A national scoping survey of staff working in equity in Australian higher education.
- 1B: Conduct a qualitative study on equity practitioners' experiences
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#### **Recommendation Two**

Commission a feasibility study for ongoing research and reporting on equity practitioners. It is recommended that this study explicitly considers:

- 2A. Annual or bi-annual quantitative reporting on equity practitioner roles as part of the national governance framework for equity reporting
- 2B. Structured, sustainable, and ongoing investment in research on equity practitioners

### **Theme Two: Training Equity Practitioners**

#### **Recommendation Three**

Pilot and evaluate a government-funded national training program for equity practitioners, co-designed by equity practitioners. The training program should involve a minimum-standards component as well as ongoing training opportunities.

### **Theme Three: Supporting Equity Practitioners**

#### **Recommendation Four**

Develop and implement an external supervision pilot with a sample of equity practitioners nationally.

- This pilot should involve equity practitioners at different professional levels, from a range of professional backgrounds, employed in a variety of Australian higher education institutions.
- The external supervision pilot should include a robust evaluation framework which captures both personal and professional impacts.



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Mary O’Kane  
Chair, Australian Universities Accord  
Higher Education Division  
Australian Government, Department of Education

Dear Mary O’Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel, thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.

I am a current part-time PhD candidate in the School of Social Sciences in the Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). I am also presently employed full-time as a member of professional staff at UNSW. In my professional work I specialise in equity, diversity and inclusion as well as student experience and engagement.

My academic research focuses on the embodied experiences of equity practitioners in Australian higher education. As a terminological note: I use the title ‘equity practitioners’ within this submission as an umbrella term for staff at universities whose work contributes to the project of enabling equity in Australian higher education.

In my study, I explored the experiences of 12 equity practitioners from eight different Australian universities over a year using creative, arts-based methods. I chose to focus on equity practitioners as while there has been significant investment in equity research in Australia over the past 40 years, the experiences of equity practitioners have received comparatively little attention in research, policy, and practice.

The Accord’s Interim Report reflects this pattern, making no significant mention of equity practitioners despite equity being identified as a core focus of the Accord and constituting four out of five of the Accord’s Priority Actions. My submission urges the Accord to consider equity practitioners as critical actors and collaborators in the shared goal of enabling equity in Australian higher education.

In line with the guidance for submissions regarding the Interim Report, my submission focuses on a primary area for desired improvement: greater attention on equity practitioners. I have identified three major reflections on this gap in the Interim Report, organised by theme: Theme One: Understanding Equity Practitioners, Theme Two: Training Equity Practitioners, and Theme Three: Supporting Equity Practitioners. I draw on my research, existing scholarship, and practice-based knowledge to explore these themes and offer four key recommendations. These recommendations work best when considered together but may also be considered individually. Recommendations can be found listed in the one-page executive summary, and further explicated below.

## **Theme One: Understanding Equity Practitioners in Australian Higher Education**

As noted in the Universities Accord, equity in Australian higher education has been a national priority for the past 40 years. Despite this, there has been limited research into the experiences of equity practitioners. The research which does exist has been the impetus of individual researchers, rather than a strategic investment in progressing Australia's equity strategy and targets.

As there is currently no uniform definition of an equity practitioner, I have drawn on the professional body Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA), the limited scholarship which exists on equity practitioners, alongside findings from my research to broadly characterise the role.

Equity practitioners are often professional staff working to facilitate equitable access to, and participation in, higher education for underrepresented students. Equity practitioners are typically the primary individuals responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating equity-focussed initiatives. They may also serve as case-managers and advocates for equity cohorts. Equity practitioners are commonly responsible for reporting on equity targets and ensuring compliance with equity-focussed institutional, state, and national policies and legislation. While some equity practitioner roles or initiatives may be funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), equity-focussed roles and initiatives may operate outside of HEPPP funding.

While this broad understanding of what equity practitioners *do* can be pieced together from a melange of sources, it does not offer any significant insight into who equity practitioners *are* or their experiences. The absence of dedicated inquiry into equity practitioners means there currently is:

- No clear understanding, nor nationally recognised definition, of the role of an equity practitioner in Australian higher education.
- No comprehensive insight into the scope of work equity-focussed employees do across Australian higher education institutions.
- No standardised training nor accreditation for equity practitioners.
- No visibility over the number of equity practitioners currently employed in Australian higher education nor their demographic or professional backgrounds.
- No mechanism to track the retention and attrition of equity practitioners.
- No formal mechanisms of professional support for equity practitioners.

In sum, we do not currently effectively understand who equity practitioners are, what they do, how they enter the profession nor how long they stay. This gap is significant as:

- Research from comparative industries such as social work and disability services highlight that employees in social justice focussed industries experience high rates of emotional labour and burnout (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Hochschild, 2022; Kolomitro et al., 2020; Mutkins et al., 2011; Wilson, 2016)
- Evidence indicates that industries with high rates of burnout and low employee wellbeing lead to poorer outcomes (Hochschild, 2022)

Therefore, while it is positive to see equity in Australian higher education prioritised in the Universities Accord Interim Report, enabling equity requires a sustainable, skilled, and supported workforce. To achieve this, we first need to better understand who constitutes the current equity workforce and their experiences.

### **Recommendation One: Securing Baseline Data and Insights**

Secure initial baseline data and insights on equity practitioners through:

**1A: A national scoping survey of staff working in equity in Australian higher education.**

**1B: Conduct a qualitative study on equity practitioners' experiences**

**1A. Conduct a national scoping survey of staff working in equity in Australian higher education to capture baseline data around:**

- Equity practitioner's primary responsibilities
- Role level and contract type
- Institutional spread of practitioners
- Practitioner's demographic background
- Professional background/training
- Retention and attrition rates of equity practitioners

Existing surveys of professional staff at Australian higher education institutions do not currently effectively capture information on equity work. Surveys such as the UniForum benchmarking survey, administered nationally and internationally, require line managers to report on the core function of staff's work. The categories provided within the UniForum survey, however, do not include any equity-specific categorisations and therefore equity work could arguably be mapped to any number of broad professional services categories.

Furthermore, while mandatory (or heavily encouraged) institutional reporting on core business may have the benefit of facilitating comparative institutional data, these reports are reliant on managerial interpretation of employee roles and often cannot effectively capture or meaningfully report on:

- 'Invisible' or non-formalised equity roles, including roles which sit outside of formalised equity structures but contribute to enabling equity
- Demographic backgrounds of equity practitioners
- Practitioners' professional background or training
- The day-to-day reality of practitioners' work which may significantly differ from official position descriptions or understanding of employee's roles

As such, it is recommended that this survey be opt-in and open to any individual employee who self-identifies as meeting the following selection criteria:

Is currently employed in an Australian higher education institution in a role which is either solely equity-focused or involves significant equity work

It is suggested that this survey be administered by an organisation such as Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) and co-designed with current equity practitioners. The survey should be distributed both via institutional and non-institutional channels (such as professional email list serves and social media). This distribution approach may assist in confirming the legitimacy of the survey while avoiding over bureaucratising the process which may in turn maximise the breadth of engagement. Results should be de-identified and publicly accessible.

**1B. Conduct a qualitative study on equity practitioners' experiences**

Equity practitioners who engage in the national scoping survey should have the opportunity to express interest in participating in an additional, qualitative, component of the study examining practitioners' experiences. Participants should reflect a range of institutions, roles, and demographic backgrounds. The methodological approach of this qualitative study should be exploratory in nature and seek to better understand the nuances of equity practitioners' experiences.

While the national scoping survey may provide valuable high-level insights into *who* equity practitioners are, it is methodologically ill-suited to effectively capturing the lived and embodied experience of *being* an equity practitioner. In addition to this large-scale, predominately quantitative study investing in an exploratory, qualitative study of equity practitioners could provide more substantive insight into the reality of equity practitioners' experiences in the field.

It is important to acknowledge that university structures and systems continue to valorise positivist (including 'objective', linear and clinical) research approaches and methods including empirical, quantitative surveys (Ellingson, 2017; Lenette, 2019). This has, in turn, perpetuated assumptions about what constitutes valid, valuable, and reliable research which reinforce western, colonial, hetero-patriarchal thinking (Ellingson 2017; Lenette, 2019). Designing a qualitative study which is methodologically aligned with equity work and uses culturally safe, participant-centric approaches should therefore be considered critical.

Challenging normative approaches to academic research through creative, exploratory qualitative inquiry may have the added benefit of centring practice-based knowledge. Practice-based knowledge, often dismissed within university settings, is core to equity practitioner work and therefore should be prioritised in studies of practitioners. Furthermore, qualitative research methods, particularly arts-based and creative methods, may offer participants alternative forms of expression which can capture that which is difficult to put into words or feels transgressive. In my research I found that participants, through their engagement with creative methods, were able to capture their personal experiences of structural oppression or discrimination within the context of equity work, even within equity specialist teams. These findings therefore provided critical insight into some of the invisible and pernicious challenges facing equity practitioners.

### **Recommendation Two: Determining Value and Viability of Longitudinal Reporting**

Commission a feasibility study for ongoing research and reporting on equity practitioners. It is recommended that this study explicitly considers:

- 2A. Annual or bi-annual quantitative reporting on equity practitioner roles as part of the national governance framework for equity reporting
- 2B. Structured, sustainable, and ongoing investment in research on equity practitioners

#### **2A. Annual or bi-annual quantitative reporting on equity practitioner roles as part of the national Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TESQA) Higher Education Standards (HES) Framework for equity reporting**

The results from, and engagement with, the national scoping study of equity practitioners (1A) should be used to inform a government-funded feasibility study on the value and viability of ongoing annual or bi-annual reporting on equity practitioner roles.

The feasibility study should specifically consider whether reporting on equity practitioner roles should be integrated into TESQA's established framework for equity reporting. Embedding consistent, mandated institutional reporting on equity roles into the TESQA reporting framework has some clear benefits including:

- Engagement rates with data collection process
- Visibility of national, state, and institutional data trends
- Longitudinal analysis and trends
- Visibility into employment trends in equity including recruitment, attrition, and retention rates
- Indicative national, state, and institutional investment in equity roles

However, there are additional initial factors to be considered including:

- The impact of additional administrative reporting on individuals, institutions, and equity work more broadly
- Whether this kind of formalised reporting captures data which can meaningfully inform strategies for enabling equity and provide insight into equity practitioners' experiences
- Ethical considerations around capturing personal information, including demographic data, and sharing de-identified data given the relatively small size of the field
- How to best categorise or reflect practitioners' experiences within a limited data framework
- Ensuring that any targets or KPIs which emerge from results of this reporting are relevant, meaningfully contribute to equity objectives, and are appropriately supported

As such, the feasibility study should consider not only the viability of ongoing national annual reporting on equity practitioners but whether formalised reporting is in the best interests of equity work and equity practitioners.

## **2B. Structured, sustainable and ongoing investment in research on equity practitioners**

Despite significant investment in equity research, there is currently no systematic support for sustainable, ongoing investment in research specifically on equity practitioners in Australian Higher Education. Indeed, to date there has been no national investigation as to the value and feasibility of sustained investment in research on equity practitioners. As such, this submission recommends that, in the first instance, the Accord leads a comprehensive exploration into the benefit of ongoing research investment in this field. The exploration should also include potential funding models for research investment for consideration.

This exploratory inquiry should, at minimum, examine the:

- Impact of the current gap in research on equity policy and practice
- Feasibility of incorporating funding support for research on equity practitioners through HEPPP
- Viability of other funding mechanisms, including through fellowships and grants administered by national centres and key bodies
- Benefits of investing in practice-based research alongside traditional academic research
- Sustainability and equitable distribution of research funding across institutions and professional equity associations and centres
- Significance of longitudinal and sustainable funding given that equity often operates within precarious funding models

The findings of both 2A and 2B should ultimately inform a set of final recommendations and implementation plan from TESQA regarding the value, viability, and sustainability of investing in reporting and research on equity practitioners' experiences.

## **Theme Two: Supporting Equity Practitioners**

While there is a clear need for further research into equity practitioners' experiences, existing insights and finding from my own research point to the need for greater support for equity practitioners. Equity practitioners in my research highlighted the absence of reliable, relevant, and accessible professional support. Practitioners reported that the lack of support often had negative consequences for them and their work including feeling ill-equipped to effectively advocate for equity work, experiencing significant burnout which led to attrition from roles, and being unable to access relevant development or training opportunities. Recommendation Four highlights an area for immediately prioritisation with further expansion to be considered after the initial pilot.

### **Recommendation Three: A national training program for equity practitioners**

Pilot and evaluate a government-funded national training program for equity practitioners, co-designed by equity practitioners. The training program should involve a minimum-standards component as well as ongoing training opportunities.

Participants should engage in a pre and post training program survey to capture changes over time in priority areas for development. Priority areas for development (e.g., self-efficacy, emotional agility) should be determined from the national scoping survey and qualitative study of equity practitioners.

Practitioners in my study, and in existing research, indicate a strong desire for relevant training that is evidence and practice-based. Experiences shared by participants in my research highlighted how practitioners often come from a range of professional backgrounds into the field of equity work yet there is no minimum standard training available for equity practitioners in Australia.

Participants in my study highlighted how much of their equity knowledge and practice was acquired on the job. While they acknowledged the value of this type of hands-on learning, access to foundational skills development was seen as critical. Furthermore, while practitioners in my study highlighted the growth of equity, diversity, and inclusion training globally, they noted that most often these training programs were not designed for experts and as such rarely stretched their skills. Practitioners in my study sought training which addressed the skills required to enable sustainable and successful equity work, including:

- Communicating the value of equity to non-expert and possibly resistant audiences
- Positioning and translating practical expertise as expert knowledge
- Feeling confident critically engaging with academic research on equity
- 'Managing up' - appropriately and effectively ensuring their line managers understood and could effectively advocate for equity to senior leadership
- Building healthy, sustainable practices to manage the emotional demands of their work
- Developing skills as a praxis-based professional
- Effective data collection and reporting practices
- How to practically implement best-practice recommendations for equity which have not always been 'real world' tested

Practitioners in my study noted that the above skills would form a valuable foundation for all practitioners, particularly those at the beginning of their career. However, practitioners in my study emphasised that training should also be offered on an ongoing basis. Many felt that training opportunities were one-off, siloed, and failed to meaningfully build on core skills over time.

### **Theme Three: Supporting Equity Practitioners**

### **Recommendation Four: External supervision**

**Develop and implement an external supervision pilot with a sample of equity practitioners nationally.**

This pilot should involve equity practitioners at different professional levels, from a range of professional backgrounds, employed in a variety of Australian higher education institutions. The external supervision pilot should include a robust evaluation framework which captures both personal and professional impacts.

It is recommended that results from the initial pilot inform the viability of the continuation and expansion of an external supervision program for equity practitioners, possibly funded as part of a new HEPPP National Priorities Pool project.

Key challenges equity practitioners identify relate to navigating institutional interpersonal and structural obstacles. In my study, the relatively small size of the equity field made many practitioners hesitant to seek guidance or raise concerns about their work both within their own teams and institutions but also within the wider community of equity practitioners. While equity practitioners greatly valued the opportunity to connect with practitioners in other institutions, they were conscious that, in a small and interconnected field, anonymity or professional distance could not be guaranteed. Given that several of the concerns participants in my study raised were about unproductive or even harmful managerial and workplace practices, the risk associated with seeking professional guidance within their established networks was clear.

Participants in case management roles with had access to external supervision, however, noted the importance and positive impact of this structured, institutionally funded, and confidential support mechanism. Their reflections on external supervision aligned with existing insights from research in related fields and highlighted the importance of access to external, expert supervision for equity practitioners. The proposed pilot may provide valuable insight into how external supervision may be effectively implemented in order to support and sustain equity practitioners' in higher education.

To conclude, the themes addressed in this submission, Theme One: Understanding Equity Practitioners, Theme Two: Training Equity Practitioners and Theme Three: Supporting Equity Practitioners highlight three key areas of reflection on the Interim Report. They speak to the need for greater consideration of equity practitioners within the Accord. If we are to give Australia the best chance of achieving its objective of a more equitable higher education system, we must substantially invest in better understanding, training, and supporting equity practitioners.

Thank you for your time considering my submission. If you have any questions or require further information, please feel free to contact me at the email below.

Tierney Marey  
PhD Candidate  
School of Social Sciences, UNSW Sydney  
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