Editorial

Welcome to this Special Issue of the *Journal of Social Inclusion.*

This issue is dedicated to exploring the relationship between Social Inclusion and Higher Education; and we are grateful for the papers that the authors have offered in order to extend our understanding about this topical area. Social inclusion in higher education is a national and international concern. Many governments, including the Australian government have set substantial targets to improve the access, participation and success of identified, lowly represented groups in higher education.

Inclusion, however, is an interesting concept. In its most basic understanding, the term encompasses notions of redressing exclusion; for, as discussed in previous issues, inclusion sits within a dualistic relationship with exclusion. Fundamentally, the mere existence of the concept is dependent on pre-existing forms of exclusion. Therefore, the basic aims of any inclusion agenda are to bring the 'outsiders in'. The attainment of such aims can be simplistically dependent on technical, assimilationist strategies of making provisions for how this can happen. In some contexts, including some higher education contexts, this occurs through modifications of pre-existing processes and / or removing perceived barriers, to improve access and 'smooth the way'. Alternatively, acts of goodwill are operationalised to extend the social goods of an elite context to those who have not been so fortunate, that is, through well-targeted actions that reflect charitable intentions of inclusivity. Inclusion attained through such simplistic means, as these, is rarely the case as the papers in this issue attest.

Understanding complex constructions of exclusion, presents dense challenges for promoting inclusion. For 'social' inclusion, contexts are complicated; and actions are more likely to be directed beyond merely opening up access to various social institutions. Because of the inherent forms of exclusion produced in social institutions from structural intersections with 'normative' presumptions about gender, class, culture, ability, sexuality, age, religious beliefs and so on, discussions about social inclusion necessarily are multi-faceted. In exploring social inclusion in the social institution of higher education, these complex constructions and intersections are critical foci for attention and analysis.

To the degree that social inclusion in higher education can enhance citizenship, prepare professionals and improve individuals for well-being, employability, and productivity is of significant interest for politicians, policy makers and university leaders. Agendas encompassing these concerns variously envelope a range of practices about Equity,

Widening Participation, Lifelong Learning, Social Mobility and Social Inclusion. Within such practices are numerous strategies and programs for outreach, student support, inclusivity, enhancing the student experience, improving retention and supporting success. Practices are likely to be scaffolded by values and beliefs in conjunction with principles and concepts such as social justice, rights, social capital, fairness, equal opportunity, empowerment and commitments to diversity. These elements all constitute a complex maze that is variously navigated by a range of stakeholders – students, families, community members, policy makers, funding bodies, leaders, academics and practitioners across national and international education sectors.

A key dimension of social inclusion in higher education considers ontological issues in regard to students. *Who* are the students considered as the focus of social inclusion agendas? They are typically described by a range of characteristics derived from various demographic attributes (eg. gender, age, ability, socio-economic status, culture, religion, sexuality, place of living). Importantly though, their identities are also perceived as *different* from a *typical,* or normative student of an institution – hence they are often regarded as 'non-traditional'. A fundamental focus of social inclusion in higher education is to explore how difference is understood. Significantly, various forms of difference present implications for students' personal achievements and presence within an institution. Ontological outcomes can be influenced by notions of accommodation and relational support, as well as empowerment, transformation and emancipation. Furthermore, the extent of ontological change depends on how difference is underpinned and sustained by pre-existing structural factors within institutions and the higher education sector. Structural factors such as traditions, ideologies and accessibility also impact students' senses of belonging and whether these are negative or positive experiences. Ontological issues in regard to social inclusion in higher education extend beyond 'being' and 'belonging' to 'becoming'. Who individuals become is often a key focus, but what and who higher education institutions become has been less considered.

Although these multiple elements of social inclusion in higher education constitute a complicated context to investigate, they cannot be seen only in isolation. To this end, Gidley et al (2010) present a nested schema by which to understand degrees of inclusion and their limitations. They describe the schema in this way:

> The narrowest interpretation pertains to the neoliberal notion of social inclusion as access; a broader interpretation regards the social justice idea of social inclusion as participation or engagement; whilst the widest interpretation involves the human potential lens of social inclusion as success through empowerment. (2010, p. 7ff)

As well as providing a layered view of different ideologies of inclusion, Gidley et al (2010) outline a layered view of social inclusion practices. They assert that "quality in

higher education is therefore synonomous (sic) with a broad interpretation of social inclusion in higher education in that both are concerned with equitable access, participatory engagement and empowered success." (Gidley et al, 2010, p. 17) Similarly, it could be said that the contributors to this special issue provide us with layered understandings about social inclusion in higher education that are not only cognisant with the complexity that the topic presents, but also indicate how the quality of higher education is expanded when social inclusion is a key focus. Their attention to reflective practice, inquiry, innovation, curriculum development and pedagogy provides rich sources for further contemplation.

Emily Callander, Deborah Schofield, Rupendra Shrestha Simon Kelly outline their research to establish what constitutes a 'Sufficient education attainment for a decent standard of living in modern Australia.' In doing this, they sought to explore the relationship between levels of education and dimensions of disadvantage and poverty, finding that education can be included as a dimension in multidimensional measures. In their study, they identify that a sufficient level of education attainment for people over the age of 65 years is Year 10; and for 15-64 year olds, year 12 or higher. Other important findings indicate employability and labour force participation are decreased or increased by other qualifications such as having a certificate or diploma. The level of the certificate appears to be relevant; and shows that gaining a Certificate III or higher significantly increases labour force participation. This research highlights the importance of education and what levels of education contribute to a decent standard of living in modern Australia. How these can be improved by attaining higher levels of education beyond year 12 is pertinent to social inclusion issues.

Exploring education as a pathway from poverty and disadvantage is the focus of the paper 'Promoting personal agency and social nclusion through the Clemente Australia Program' by John O'Gorman, Jude Butler and Peter Howard. This program builds on the "program pioneered by Earl Shorris in New York for educating the poor and marginalised in the humanities". Drawing upon social cognitive theory, an integrative rationale is presented to both increase capacities for social inclusion and develop personal agency. The Clemente Australia Program offers a range of subjects from the Arts and Humanities. Undertaking these university studies can build participants' self-esteem and hope; as well as enhance engagement and participation opportunities. Successful completion can also lead to other university undergraduate programs at certain universities. The authors report processes of reflection and the findings of significant personal change as understood through personal narratives.

The paper 'Homeless university students: Experiences with a foyer-type service' by Marty Grace, Deborah Keys and Aaron Hart reports on research undertaken to document the experiences of 11 university students who had experienced homelessness. Exploring the challenges and difficulties faced, the research identified

types of service responses that could make a difference. The presentation of vignettes in this paper provides rich insights into the experiences of some of the students. Significant themes underpinning supportive responses are outlined; and the quality of collaborative relationships between universities and community-based services emphasised. The authors also identify the need for further research for this often under-recognised population of university students.

Sue Jackson highlights how experiences of inclusion can be compromised by structural factors that fail to 'speak' to students of diverse backgrounds, especially at ontological levels. In her paper 'Supporting part-time learners in higher education: Equalities and inequalities', she outlines how universities and their staff need to adapt to the changing landscapes of more diverse student groups. For instance, Jackson describes how in many countries, part time enrolments are likely to increase at such a rate that the demographics of universities will change substantially to the "majority of entrants to part-time undergraduate programs are over the age of 30, and more likely to be women." However she contests that the implications of these changes are poorly understood at the structural levels of institutions who continue to predominantly base their discourses and practices on younger school-leaver students. Hence opportunities for new flexible pedagogies and capacities to perceive students as knowers as well as learners remain restricted and untapped.

A key educational issue within Australia is the inclusion of Indigenous people in universities. In her paper 'Inclusion/Exclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students: Understanding how 'We' matter(s)', Catherine Demosthenous explores issues about participation as experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Using an Ethnomethodology, she analysed students' yarning; and the language that was used, especially the use of the personal pronoun 'we'. From this, she concludes that students use 'we' as related to membership of culture or race; but not as being members of a university. This phenomenon, she suggests, means that there is yet a long way for universities to create a culture in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders actually feel included.

Race and culture are also the foci of the next paper 'Complexities of inclusion and exclusion: Dalit students and higher education in India' by Sanil Malikapurath Neelakandan and Smita Margeshwar Patil. They explore the degrees by which caste determines the field of education and how students of lower caste structures such as dalits, experience widespread discrimination and exclusion due to the stigmatised identities ascribed to them within hegemonic institutions. The authors also discuss how negative experiences can be so deep as to cause suicide amongst the affected students. This paper highlights a very complex educational context in which issues of inclusion and exclusion are not readily resolved.

Sophie Goldingay's paper 'Getting it right in the mix: Teaching social work practice skills inclusively to diverse student groups' draws on her own reflective journal entries to examine "the challenges that social work academics might face in teaching social work practice skills effectively to the increasingly diverse student cohorts" in undergraduate and post-graduate social work programs. The author highlights how this process identified significant gaps between her "intentions and the reality of the classroom experience", particularly in regard to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students. She nominates a range of tensions and themes that impacted her practice and concludes that it is not enough for her to tell students that cultural location affects practice. Rather alternative paradigms of practice need to be explored. Even though some students may be uncomfortable, Goldingay posits that there would be significantly positive outcomes across student groups to make the changes appropriate.

The authors of the final paper 'Keeping the door open: Exploring experiences of, and responses to, university students who disclose mental illness' present an important contemporary issue for consideration. Donna McAuliffe, Jennifer Boddy, Vanette McLennan and Victoria Stewart undertake a literature review in order to set a research agenda for this topic, asserting that there is a substantial need for such research. Complex issues about decisions to disclose, to whom, and the consequences of disclosure are considered alongside the implications of disclosure of mental health issues in regard to professional placements. Consideration of professional practice standards which guide professional placements further complicates these issues. McAuliffe et al suggest there are strong interplays between disclosure, experiences of social inclusion, protecting against discrimination and professional safeguards that require further attention; and as such, universities need to also urgently develop a policy framework around such issues.

Two commentaries about aspects of the relationship between social inclusion in higher education are offered to provoke further thought. Firstly, Judith Kearney writes of a restrictive structural issue within Australian social policy. Students from Pacific Island communities who use New Zealand as a migration pathway to Australia are denied financial assistance to study at Australian universities. Thus because of an inability to pay upfront university fees due to financial hardship, educational opportunities and, also social inclusion, are compromised. Secondly, Susanna Chamberlain provides an overview of entrenched exclusive practices in universities and ponders what impact inclusion agendas actually have? She undertakes this exploration through three aspects: policy, curriculum and practice and leaves readers with questions to ponder.

With this special issue, it is timely that a new book *Social Inclusion and Higher Education* has recently been published. Edited by Tehmina N. Basit and Sally Tomlinson, this book contains chapters written by a range of international writers of this field across a variety of aspects. Lesley Chenoweth provides a book review of this publication.

In 2010, I was awarded an Australian Churchill Fellowship: *To investigate sustainable outcomes for students of low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian Higher Education.* The final contribution to this Special Issue, then, is a summary of the Report of my study tour undertaken in 2011 to visit the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Finland. I highlight key observations make recommendations for consideration in the Australian context.

In conclusion, this Special Issue would not have been possible without significant contributions by a range of people; and it is appropriate to acknowledge these and express appreciation to:

- The authors and writers for their enlightening papers, comments and book review;
- The international and national reviewers who diligently undertook their task in a timely way;
- Griffith University editorial colleagues and also support staff (especially Suzie Bailey) for technical support
- Madeleine Sternberg for style setting all of the articles for publication; and also offering her insights about the papers.

Finally, to you the Readers, thank you for your interest in the journal and also for your patience as this issue has been prepared.
We hope you enjoy reading this Special Issue on Social Inclusion in Higher Education.

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Reference

Gidley, J. M., Hampson, G. P., Wheeler, L., & Bereded-Samuel, E. (2010). From access to success: An integrated approach to quality higher education informed by social inclusion theory and practice. *Higher Education Policy, 23*, 123–147.