Celebrate, Collaborate, Create: Positioning Equity for the Future

Report on the 2015 Equity Practitioners in Higher Education
(EPHEA) Conference
hosted on 9–12 November
by Deakin University
at the Geelong Waterfront Campus

Introduction

The 2015 Equity Practitioners in Higher Education (EPHEA) conference was hosted in Victoria by Deakin University at the Geelong Waterfront Campus. The conference focused on collaboration and creativity as key factors in positioning the equity agenda into the future, and aimed to provide a platform for recognising and celebrating recent successes and innovations.

The conference objectives were to:

- challenge practitioners to analyse current challenges and opportunities, identify emerging issues, and develop ways forward
- create a safe space for sharing professional knowledge and discussion of challenges facing equity practitioners in a continually changing and challenging higher education sector
- recognise the significance of Indigenous, Maori and Pasifika perspectives and experiences in shaping future developments
- contribute to the evidence base and practice of equal opportunity in higher education
- develop links with organisations that have similar professional aims or recent experiences relevant to equity practitioners (including the corporate sector).

Conference Committee

The conference was collaboratively organised by a committee of equity practitioners made up of representatives from the majority of Victorian universities.

Name	Position	University
Dr Nadine Zacharias	Chair	Director, Equity and Diversity Deakin University
Roman Ruzbacky	Co-convenor EPHEA Victoria	Manager, Staff Equity Equity and Diversity Deakin University
Dr Juliana Ryan	Conference Coordinator	Manager, Communications and Engagement Equity and Diversity Deakin University
Jodi Morgan	Event Manager	Senior Events Coordinator External Relations Deakin University

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Name	Position	University
Shannon Kerrigan	Co-convenor EPHEA Victoria	Equity & Diversity Coordinator La Trobe
Marian Cronin	Member	Manager Workforce Development, Diversity and Inclusion Victoria University
Lara Rafferty	Member	Manager, Equity and Diversity RMIT
Gabrielle O'Brien QUT, President EPHEA	EPHEA President	Senior Equity Officer Queensland University of Technology
Barbara Webb	Member	Manager, Equity & Equal Opportunity Federation University
Kay Gardner	Member	Director, Social Justice Unit Monash University
Carol Triantafyllidis	Member	Project Coordinator, Social Justice Unit Monash University

Attendance

A total of 226 delegates attended the conference, representing 38 universities in Australia, New Zealand/Aotearoa and Saudi Arabia and more than 30 organisations, including the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, the Department of Education and Training and Pride in Diversity.

36 EPHEA members attended the Annual General Meeting on Tuesday 10 November 2015. The elected 2016 EPHEA Executive included two members of the conference organising committee, Lara Rafferty (Secretary) and Juliana Ryan (ordinary member).

Program

Themes

The program was structured around five conference themes:

1. Access/Widening participation
2. Equity and social justice in an uncertain higher education system
3. Human rights
4. Genders
5. Equity practice: Diversity management, work intensification and resilience.

These themes were designed to:

- challenge practitioners to analyse current challenges and opportunities, identify emerging issues, and develop ways forward
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Keynote speakers

The program featured five keynote speakers, a progam of themed parallel sessions comprising 66 presentations, two strategic planning workshops, two professional practice workshops and seven special interest groups. Conference programming presented two key challenges. First, the vast majority of papers were student equity related. Second, despite guidelines about timing, the majority of lightning presentations went over time without the opportunity for questions or other engagement. Both points were noted in feedback on the conference, which is discussed below under 'Lessons learned'.

Based on committee members' recommendations, the keynote speakers were chosen because of their expertise in areas related to the conference themes and their ability to engage and inspire a diverse audience. They were (in program order):

1. Dr Tim Soutphommasane, Race Discrimination Commissioner

2. Professor Liz Cameron, Director Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University

3. Professor Kerri-Lee Krause, Provost, Victoria University

4. Mary Crooks AO, Executive Director, Victorian Women's Trust

5. Liam Leonard, Director Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria.

Parallel sessions

Parallel sessions included two formats: a conventional showcase presentation of 25 minutes, which incorporated question time, and a 10-minute lightning presentation format intended to provide a snapshot of an issue or initiative to spark further thought and discussion.

Presentations were selected after blind peer review of abstracts by two members of the review committee which included the conference organising committee plus a highly experienced equity practitioner. Special interest groups were chosen in the same way following an expression of interest process.

Two linked workshops gave delegates an active opportunity to reflect upon and strategically plan equity practice collectively. The first, titled 'Positioning equity for the future: the past and the present', involved a stocktake of the past and the present of equity practice in the Australian higher education sector and aimed to identify drivers of change as well as enabling/disabling factors to achieve systemic change. Two equity stalwarts, Dr Ann Stewart and Ms Kay Gardner, offered their reflections before an overview was provided of the results of a pre-conference survey of delegates. The survey offered a profile of equity practitioners, current issues and challenges. Under the banner of 'Positioning equity for the future: workshopping solutions', the second workshop focused on the discussion of strategic directions and challenges. Facilitated by Dr Ann Stewart, this began and ended with plenary sessions (introductions and reporting back) interspersed with small-group discussions on the following questions: How do we reposition equity practice for the future? What are our key priorities, opportunities and challenges? How do we demonstrate the value add of specialist equity roles? Where to from here for professional development and practice? Discussions were scribed and collated in real time. Discussion notes were prepared and circulated to the EPHEA membership. The EPHEA executive has committed to incorporating workshop discussions into strategic planning during 2016.

Professional development

Practice development is a key aspect of the conference. A representative from the Department of Education and Training facilitated a workshop on effective preparation of competitive grant applications. Two staff from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education facilitated workshops on monitoring and evaluation of projects, one introductory and one for experienced practitioners.

Special interest groups

Special interest groups offered opportunities to engage with topics more deeply and share good practice around:

1. School and community partnerships
2. Improving pathways for students from refugee backgrounds
3. Social marketing for low socioeconomic status communities
4. Cultural competency
5. Widening Participation Models
6. Staff development for women meeting
7. Little Hands, Big Idea: Engaging Schools and Universities in Service Learning.

Transcripts of keynote speeches and PDFs of presentations will be published on the conference website <www.ephea2015.org>, subject to author permission.

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Highlights

Based on feedback on the conference experience provided by delegates, the conference committee was pleased with the success of the conference overall. Highlights included a relaxed conference experience, energising program content and helpful staff; the consistent quality of the keynote speakers; and the value of the reflections from Ann Stewart and Kay Gardner as part of the two workshops on 'Positioning equity for the future'. The social program was very well received, particularly the conference dinner. Event management was also commended.

The success of the keynote speeches underscored the effectiveness of the criteria for speaker selection. The committee approached speakers who were known to be engaging rather than simply going for 'names'. Having the whole committee's input was very helpful, enabling a good range of speakers across the conference themes.

37 delegates completed an online conference evaluation survey (SurveyMonkey) which was distributed by email on 26 November 2015. This confirmed the committee's perception that overall the conference had been a success. The majority of respondents to the survey cited networking as the key benefit of attending, reflecting a number of first-time conference attendants, generally working on widening participation initiatives. Some delegates also cited the value of the keynote speeches and the social program.

Lessons learned

A post-conference debrief by the conference committee identified a number of lessons learned and some areas for improvement. Many of these were also picked up in the evaluation survey, as noted below. The majority of feedback related to programming and pre-conference communication.

Range of content

A bias in the program towards student equity content was noted. While this reflected the nature of submissions received and the focus of much contemporary equity practice, feedback from delegates about the need for more Indigenous content and keynotes from New Zealand/Aotearoa, as well as content related to gender, is noted for future reference and action. Some survey respondents requested a reduction in the number of plenary sessions in favour of workshop opportunities, reflecting the previously mentioned value placed by delegates on practice sharing and networking. As noted earlier, guidelines and format for lightning sessions warrant reconsideration in a future conference, as a number of these went over time without opportunities for discussion or engagement by the audience.**Speaker briefing**

Even though the keynote speakers were seen as a highlight of the conference overall, some participant feedback suggested that some speeches were not as targeted as they could have been, had the speaker been better briefed about the nature and expertise of the audience.

Pre-conference communication

Pre-conference communication was an area for improvement noted by the committee and by survey respondents, in particular earlier release of the conference program and more consistent communication with presenters between the date of notification that a paper had been accepted and finalisation of the program.

The committee also noted that there were a number of late paper withdrawals. Deakin Events advised that these were mostly attributed to workload and, in a couple of cases, to a lack of budget to attend the conference. Nonetheless, earlier notifications about the final program and more consistent communication with presenters could perhaps have averted this outcome in some cases.

Arrangements for the special interest groups were seen by both the committee and survey respondents as open to improvement. Several respondents queried the timing of the special interest groups after the main conference, with one suggesting that they would have been better scheduled on the morning of the first day instead of having a lunchtime start (although that was intended to help those travelling from a distance). Promotion of the special interest groups was also noted as an area for improvement, particularly earlier communication of special interest group content.

Deakin Events used the online submission and registration tool *Ex Ordo* for the first time on this conference. Based on the committee's experience and feedback from some survey respondents, this software is not recommended for use at future EPHEA conferences.

Recommendations

- Select keynote speakers who are known to be engaging as well as expert. Draw on committee experience to get the best possible range of speakers.

- Ensure speakers are fully briefed on their audience, noting the diversity of equity practitioners, which may mean acknowledging audience expertise while providing background for newer practitioners.

- Release the conference program as early as practicable and maintain consistent pre-conference communication with speakers, presenters and delegates.

- Look for opportunities to engage academics in the conference, including the possibility of a research stream.

- Balance plenary sessions with networking and workshopping opportunities.

- Consider timing of special interest groups (including scheduling on the first day of the conference), ensure they are well promoted and that facilitator contact details are provided.

- Consider including an induction for new practitioners and mentoring in the conference program.

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