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# Children's University Newcastle Evaluation Report



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**NEWCASTLE**  
AUSTRALIA



centre of  
**excellence**  
for **equity**  
in higher  
**education**

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# Introduction



The name and concept for the Children's University (CU) originated in the United Kingdom (UK), with the University of Adelaide taking up the national licence for the brand in Australia from 2013, and the University of Newcastle (UON) beginning a sub-licence of the program in 2015. This work was then re-located to within the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at UON and significant efforts have been made to embed a social justice approach to the initiative by bringing research and practice together within critical praxis-based frameworks. This report documents a sustained attempt to conduct evaluation that reflects a commitment to equity in higher education by embedding new layers of practice.

The purpose of the report is multi-faceted. Primarily, the work undertaken was to provide opportunities and information to reflect on Children's University practices. However, in this process, we are keen to acknowledge how in the practices of evaluation voices are inevitably excluded, perspectives misrepresented, and contributions not properly understood or recognised. Therefore, another purpose of the report is to communicate our attempt to move away from evaluation as a form of crude judgment at one moment in time by those in privileged positions to something more akin to curiosity. We yearned to escape what Kafer calls a "curative imaginary" (2013, p. 27), tragically common within equity and widening participation, whereby interventions target fellow community members based on a view that someone or some group is deficient and needs fixing. Instead, we aimed to curate spaces of curiosity in which learning about and across about different social locations and identities becomes possible.

Furthermore, this report seeks to contribute to the wider CEEHE project of reconceptualising equity and widening participation (EWP) as a participatory project of social justice. In this context, evaluation becomes an embedded commitment rather than constructed as a separate and distinct stage of measurement of impact. The focus therefore is creating the conditions for meaningful, ethical pedagogical relationships that nurture co-development, supported by the evaluative framework itself. As this report details, the development of this framework builds on a body of work developing Pedagogical Methodologies (Burke, 2012; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017; Burke & Lumb, 2018) and Praxis-based Pedagogical Ethical Methodologies (PPOEMs) (Burke, 2020).

Through a social justice reframing of evaluation, the experiences, histories and knowledges of diverse and often misrepresented communities are brought into conversation through enabling pedagogies that value learning in all of its diversity and difference. Critical approaches are developed in which children, young people and adults who might have previously experienced a sense of alienation from formal learning might discover a sense of re/connection with and through education through (rather than despite) their differences.

Finally, we hope this report is experienced as part of a wider CEEHE evaluative disposition of being critically curious in order to understand better the dynamics of the Children's University Newcastle in a specific geographic context, and to explore one pathway in the project of reconceptualising evaluation for equity and widening participation in higher education.



Children's University Newcastle Graduation 2019 – Photo: Murray McKean

# Children's University background



## a. CU Program history, practice and goals

The Children's University name and concept originated in the UK via the Children's University Trust. It developed through programs with schools, beginning in 1990, and was associated with the Saturday School Project. Founders Professor Sir Tim Brighouse and Sir David Winkley had the support of the Kind Edward Foundation.

By 2012, the initiative had seen participation by 136,000 students, 3,000 schools, 2,200 learning destinations, 80 centres with more than 3,000 schools across the country. The Children's University UK webpage positions the program in the following ways:

*The motivation and rationale for the Children's University is based on research that shows that participation in extracurricular activities can positively impact on attainment, increase a pupil's positive identification with school, and build self-confidence and resilience. Research also shows that children who do not have access to these opportunities fall behind, lack confidence and fail to develop career aspirations.*

*The expected impact of the program is that the children who participate have the opportunity to learn in a rich range of contexts, experience new places, visit universities and attend their own graduation ceremonies. This adventure introduces children to the joy of learning, brings a sense of wonder in the world around them and develops their confidence and aspirations for the brightest futures.*

In Australia, the University of Adelaide acquired the licence for Children's University in 2013. The program began with one school located in the most disadvantaged metropolitan community and has grown across South Australian metropolitan and rural communities.

*CU truly has the power to change entire communities. It supports social innovation, social entrepreneurship, social mobility, community participation, a passion for learning.*

Kiri Hageus, Managing Director,  
Children's University Australasia and Africa (IO)

The University of Newcastle began working with the Children's University program in 2015 and since then has been exploring and adapting the program for it to respond and be appropriate to different community contexts. The University of Tasmania acquired the program in 2015. Charles Darwin University and Edith Cowan University both acquired the program in 2017 and the University of Western Australia in 2019.

In New Zealand, the University of Canterbury and Lincoln University both acquired the program in 2018 and Massey University in 2019. In 2020, Children's University commenced in Mauritius.

## b. The CU Newcastle approach

The Children's University program at Newcastle works within the licensed model and supports an approach to practice shaped by its location within the CEEHE.

Children who participate in Children's University Newcastle have the opportunity to learn in a rich range of contexts through both local and regional accessible educational activities, experience new places, visit universities and attend their own graduation ceremonies. The program is built on the belief that these experiences can be transformative in how young people see themselves and how they engage with education within and beyond school.

The Children's University Newcastle program encourages children (7–14 years old) to explore new learning opportunities within their local and regional communities. All children in the program travel with a passport to learning which records the learning that has taken place. Children work towards a minimum of 30 hours of learning outside the classroom and, where these hours have been reached, students are invited to the formal annual graduation.

With a focus on social justice, the Children's University Newcastle program seeks to foreground the experiences, histories and knowledges of diverse communities that have traditionally had them ignored or undervalued. Through enabling pedagogies, the program values existing knowledge and new learning in all of its diversity and difference.

Fundamental to the program is the development of relationships across, within and through communities. There are certain key participant groups in the program that are pivotal to creating learning opportunities. This includes for example, the children's teachers, peers, families, carers and learning destinations themselves. We refer to these program participants as a learning community. These learning communities, through the program, offer different ways to value individual student stories and encourage discovery and curiosity for children and their learning communities (inclusive of a child's family). Educational experiences are especially sought after in the local area to allow the program to be embedded in the community and to also foreground and value the knowledge and skills of the community. It challenges children to engage with education in multiple ways, beyond the constraints of curriculum, encouraging comfort/discomfort that occurs in any



new learning experience. It values educational experiences/providers that promote safe and welcoming spaces with the desire to achieve positive outcomes. Because of this focus, a key role for the Children's University Newcastle team is to forge and develop relationships between schools, students, families, learning destinations and the wider community. Further to this, resources and learning experiences become a co-creation through the different relationships of a diverse range of participants.

### c. The CU program broader context

In numerous Australasian contexts, the licensed iterations of the Children's University program are funded by allocations of federal funds to universities via Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). This program was established following the Bradley Review of higher education in 2008 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) to fund public universities around activities to increase access to undergraduate study for those from low SES backgrounds and to improve their retention and completion rates. In 2009 the Australian Labor government set the target that by 2020, 20 per cent of all undergraduate students would come from low SES backgrounds and 40 per cent of all 25 - to 35-year-olds would hold a Bachelor degree. These targets were to be met through a 'demand-driven' system of uncapping undergraduate places and through HEPPP, which was introduced in 2010.

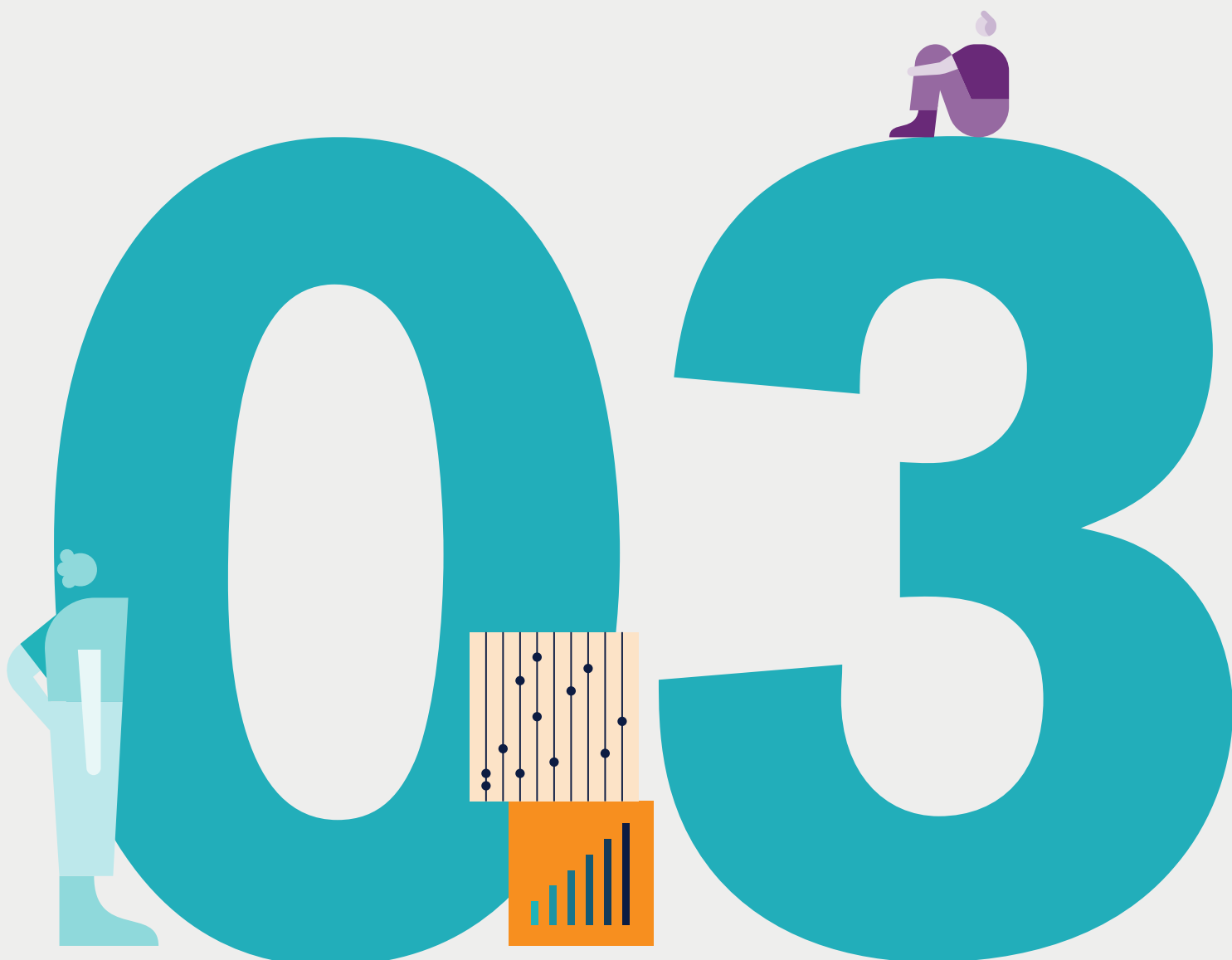
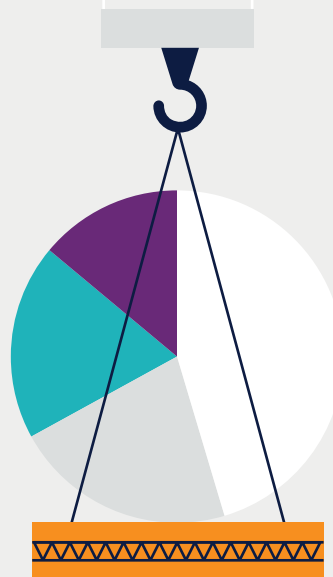
At the time of publication, these targets are no longer used by government and the demand-driven system has effectively been ended by a Liberal-National coalition government through changes in funding agreements with universities. HEPPP remains, although in 2020 the 'Job-ready Graduates' reforms have legislated changes to the equity-related aspects of higher education policy and funding in Australia through the creation of the Indigenous, Regional, Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) of which HEPPP is now one component alongside the National Priorities Pool Program; the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program; the Regional Loading Program; and the Enabling Loading Program.

'Widening participation' in higher education systems is a major aspect of policy across Western, nation-state contexts (Burke, 2017). Commonly a focus is placed on undergraduate studies for students from disadvantaged backgrounds with 'potential' and/or 'ability' to benefit. This push to widen participation aims to rectify underrepresentation of historically marginalised groups (Burke & Kuo, 2015). Policy and practice in this field tend to aim at overcoming 'barriers' faced by students and processes of evaluation where equity and widening participation policies have been prominent (for example, the UK and Australia) and largely focussed on measuring the easily measurable whilst arguably not grappling with the underlying ethical and value-laded tensions at play (Burke, Hayton & Stevenson, 2018). The challenge of evaluating the effectiveness of activities designed to widen participation in higher education in the UK are discussed by Harrison and Waller (2017) who describe the problem of evaluation in this context as complex and vexed. These authors note that enduring pressure to produce evidence of impact appears to be undermining effective efforts by encouraging managers and practitioners to narrow the focus of their activity to that which is most easily evaluated. They also point to the emergence of partnerships of least resistance where activities are tolerated not because they are innovative or effective but because they fit existing structures (such as schooling) and are easier to evaluate. The authors offer a clear warning that there are critical challenges in the emerging calls for experimental designs and instead point to the importance of longitudinal studies, the fostering of multiple approaches and the need for ongoing efforts to understand why initiatives produce the effects that they do.





# Approaches to program evaluation



## a. CU Evaluations: Approaches and findings from other contexts

### i. UK, 2012: University of Cambridge

Macbeath (2012) used data from repeated attitudinal surveys as well as standardised testing results, school attendance records and participant testimonials. “Perhaps the most salient of differences between the mainstream curriculum and that of CU is between a curriculum tradition... of the Middle Ages and a set of activities rooted in present and future interests (MacBeath, 2012, p. 15). Key findings for this project included reference to the importance of “The ten ‘A’s” which were: Attendance, Attainment, Achievement, Attitudes, Adventure, Awards, Agency, Aspiration, Adaptability, Advocacy.



### ii. UK, 2016: Sheffield Children's University

Sheffield Children's University annual report includes analysis of the impact of Children's University participation in Sheffield. This effort compared academic performance in Key Stage 2 SATs taken in Year 6 at primary school, and Key Stage 4 GCSEs taken in Year 11 with participation in Children's University activities. Year on year, results of this analysis have continually shown a clear link between participation in Children's University and achievement and attendance at school. (2016).

[www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/media/1095/sheffield-cu-how-does-it-make-a-difference-2017.pdf](http://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/media/1095/sheffield-cu-how-does-it-make-a-difference-2017.pdf)

There are different approaches that can be taken to understand the impact, worth or value of a social program. A common approach is to identify ‘evidence’ of ‘what works?’ and to then consider the implications of this ‘evidence-based’ result. From this moment decisions taken often include closing initiatives down, reshaping or reorienting them and/or ‘scaling them up’ given supposed proof of their soundness based on assumptions of generalisability that ignore consideration of the importance of context, history and social relations in terms of ‘what works’?

As Biesta (2007) reminds us, a “focus on ‘what works’ makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the questions of what it should work for and who should have a say in determining the latter” (2007, p. 5). The question of whose values come to matter in processes of evaluating equity and social justice initiatives in higher education is important and will be explored in depth in Section 3b of this report.



The Children's University Newcastle has been evaluated in different ways, and in different contexts. We provide some brief examples following before moving to a detailed description of the approach taken and the methods we adopted, for this particular evaluation process.

### iii. UK, 2017 University of the First Age (UFA) Young Researchers and Evaluators

In 2017, the Children's University worked with the UFA to run a child-led Young Researchers and Evaluators project. This involved the UFA working with children in Years 5 and 6 from Birmingham schools to train them in research and evaluation projects in their schools.

[www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/media/1094/ufa-report-final.pdf](http://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/media/1094/ufa-report-final.pdf)

### iv. Australia, 2015: University of Adelaide

An external evaluation, by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, with a mixed-methods approach was conducted in 2015/2016 (See Harrison & Skujins, 2016). State government has continued to support the program over the past three years. External evaluation has also been conducted with a qualitative focus including the perspectives of volunteers via focus groups.

### v. Australia, 2016: University of Tasmania

The University of Tasmania acquired the program in 2015 with a focus on Launceston, Burnie, Hobart and surrounding areas. An evaluative survey of the program was conducted internally and philanthropic funding enabled expansion to additional schools in the north west.

## b. CEEHE approach to evaluation

The Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education at the University of Newcastle draws on ethical frameworks for conducting evaluation processes of equity and social justice initiatives in higher education contexts. This evaluation has therefore been designed to support **parity of participation** from a social justice perspective; that is holding together the principles of redistribution (of opportunities to participate in evaluation processes), of recognition (of evaluative capability) and representation (ensuring that the evaluation represents the different perspectives, knowledges and histories of community participants).

As referenced in the introduction of this report, the development of this evaluation framework builds on a body of work developing Pedagogical Methodologies in the context of equity and higher education (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2007; Burke, 2012; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017; Burke & Lumb, 2018) and **PPOEMs** (Burke, 2020).



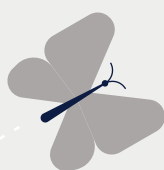
PPOEMs are underpinned by social justice principles of redistribution of resources, recognition of difference and representation of diverse communities and groups (Fraser, 1997; 2003), theories of embodied subjectivity and formations of difference (Skeggs, 1997; Burke, 2002; Ahmed, 2004; McNay, 2008; Burke, 2012) and Freire's liberatory pedagogies (Freire, 1972). Resources are ethically allocated on the basis of our commitment to equity. Students and our communities are at the centre of all equity endeavours. Frameworks and initiatives are co-developed with students, staff and our communities through ethical consultation and engagement. The diversity of and differences within

our student body and communities are celebrated, recognised and valued. Going beyond a superficial understanding is foregrounded as a commitment to ensure that systems, frameworks and initiatives respond to, recognise and represent student/community contexts. This aims to support the development of an environment that nurtures student aspirations, capabilities and sense of belonging, which are seen as dynamic formations rather than fixed, objective and measurable variables. In PPOEMs frameworks, research and/or evaluation becomes a pedagogical space in which diverse communities of participants engage in a collaborative process to generate knowledge and understanding through an ethos of reciprocity. PPOEMs, as an evaluation framework, support the social justice principles underpinning our approaches to widening participation. This includes recognising that we are all learners and we all have valuable experiences, histories and insights to contribute to participatory pedagogical and evaluative processes. PPOEMs bring to light the problematic deficit imaginaries that have seeped into the mainstream frameworks of equity and widening participation (Wilkins & Burke, 2015), which include the distorted assumption that widening participation necessitates a focus on changing the perceived impoverished character and aspiration of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Rather, our reframed, community-focussed PPOEMs methodology aims to open up spaces to work together with children, young people and adults in the wider contexts of their lives to understand the kinds of learning and knowledge that they deeply value, generating a sense of belonging, connectedness and capability.

This reframing of equity in higher education is to redistribute its resources to enable high-quality pedagogical opportunities to emerge through the co-development of widening participation programs within and across heterogeneous communities. The evaluation opens up a space for co-development to become possible. The aim is to open spaces of critical reflexivity for all participants including children, young people and adults, but also local community organisations and institutions (schools, colleges and universities). Critical reflexivity becomes part of the praxis-based iterative evaluation – that is, critical reflection on practice and critical practice folding back into reflection. Power becomes foregrounded rather than a vague, abstracted theoretical concept. Critical reflexivity requires that evaluators continuously question the relations of power at play that reinforce the valuing of particular ways of ‘knowing’ participants and the ‘what works’ for them.

Through a social justice methodological reframing of evaluation, the experiences, histories and knowledges of diverse and often misrepresented communities are brought into conversation through enabling pedagogies that value learning in all of its diversity and difference. Critical approaches are developed in which children, young people and adults who might have previously experienced a sense of alienation from formal learning might discover a sense of re/connection with and through education, and through (rather than despite) their differences. However, the primary focus is to re/position higher education as a vehicle for social justice, as a dynamic institution which has the transformative potential to become inclusive, redistributive and equitable through enabling pedagogies of hope, compassion and empathy (drawing on Freirean insights, for example, Freire, 1972).

# CU Newcastle evaluation design and methodology



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## a. Evaluation Team



### Ms Shaye Bourke

CU Program Officer,  
Children's University Newcastle

Shaye is a Children's University Project Officer with over 5 years of experience of delivering higher education equity projects. Her Children's University work has been geographically placed in the Cessnock, Kurri Kurri, Singleton and Muswellbrook areas. She has a Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) and is interested in working with young children in education.



### Professor Penny Jane Burke

Global Innovation Chair of Equity  
and Director, Centre of Excellence  
for Equity in Higher Education

Professor Burke's commitment to equity in higher education stems from personal experience, initiating her lifelong dedication to equity and widening educational participation. She seeks to bring to light and challenge entrenched and insidious inequalities that undermine efforts to widen educational access and participation. Her extensive body of work has created Pedagogical Methodologies for research, evaluation, peer-mentoring and professional development aiming to instil collaborative and reflexive approaches for equity. Her work has served as a model for bringing together scholars and practitioners across the world and has had a profound and transformative impact in opening up possibilities for inclusive higher education and lifelong learning spaces. She holds an honorary position as Global Chair of Social Innovation at the University of Bath, is honorary professor at the University of Exeter and has held the posts of Professor at the University of Roehampton, the University of Sussex and Reader at the Institute of Education, University of London.



**Ms Selina Darney**

CU Program Manager,  
Children's University Newcastle

Selina is an education access enabler who has engaged with misrepresented learning communities for 30 years across all education sectors (primary, high school and higher education). An active community contributor and avid listener, Selina crafts and shapes widening participation work that is contextualised within each community, recognises the embodied subjectivities of the learners (both children and families) and acknowledges how the architecture of learning spaces impact on the learning experience.

**Dr Rhyall Gordon**

Praxis Officer, CEEHE

Rhyall has over 20 years' experience of working in community development research and practice. He has carried out community-based research and evaluation for projects focussed on areas including homelessness, affordable housing, food security, refugee policy and the youth sector.

**Dr Matt Lumb**

Associate Director, CEEHE

Matt's commitment to equity in higher education has been developed through his experiences in classroom teaching and as a community worker. Matt's PhD investigated the unintended consequences university outreach and the role that evaluation plays within these connections.

**Ms Sharon Smith**

CU Evaluation Assistant, CEEHE,  
Children's University Newcastle

An academic in enabling education at UON, Sharon is enrolled in a PhD titled *(Re) Constructing the Invisible: Religious and Gendered Subjectivities in Higher Educational Spaces - Aspiration, Access and Impact*.

## b. CU Newcastle: The picture so far

The table following provides statistics for some of the different geographical areas that Children's University Newcastle works in. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value is intended to capture the socio-educational and socio-economic status of the students in a particular school. It is used for comparison between 'like' schools. Debates abound as to the usefulness of the ICSEA value. We include it here as it is often used as a marker of advantage/disadvantage.

Similarly, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics provide a snapshot of the demographics of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in certain schools. However, reading more into what these statistics might indicate in terms of socio-economic disadvantage is fraught with complications.

These statistics potentially can be construed to show how Children's University Newcastle is working in disadvantaged communities. Children's University Newcastle certainly does focus its work where the commitment to social justice can be best pursued. However, the Children's University Newcastle team is very sensitive to the dangers of labelling certain schools and communities as disadvantaged and the risks associated with perpetuating a deficit model. The Children's University Newcastle program is specifically designed to celebrate and build on the strengths of individual students and tap into the knowledge that is in their families and wider communities.

The specific Children's University Newcastle statistics offer a snapshot of the breadth of the work being carried out. The number of students graduating is one possible measure of what 'success' might be for the program. The Learning Destination<sup>1</sup> (LD) statistics offer perhaps a first glimpse into how 'engaged' a community might be with the Children's University program. This is an overly simplistic position though, as it might be that a school community context with only a few registered Learning Destinations might actually see significant connection with these few destinations as opposed to a situation where many Learning Destinations are registered yet there is little active engagement. Again, this is a situation in which caution must be exercised when using the quantitative measures.

These statistics are a beginning point in the construction of a picture of the Children's University Newcastle program. They are unable to provide any depth and as already discussed, with Children's University Newcastle's methodological commitment to social justice, the parameters around what should be considered 'success', 'impact' and 'evidence' need to be developed by the Program participants themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Learning Destinations are part of the Children's University model. The Children's University Adelaide website describes them as "locations that provide the unique and engaging experiences where children can 'travel' outside of school hours. All Learning Destinations provide activities that children can choose to do, either independently or with their family"  
[www.adelaide.edu.au/childrensuniversity/learning-destinations#what-are-learning-destinations](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/childrensuniversity/learning-destinations#what-are-learning-destinations)



Children participants in the evaluation process

Table 1: Children's University Enrolments and Graduations

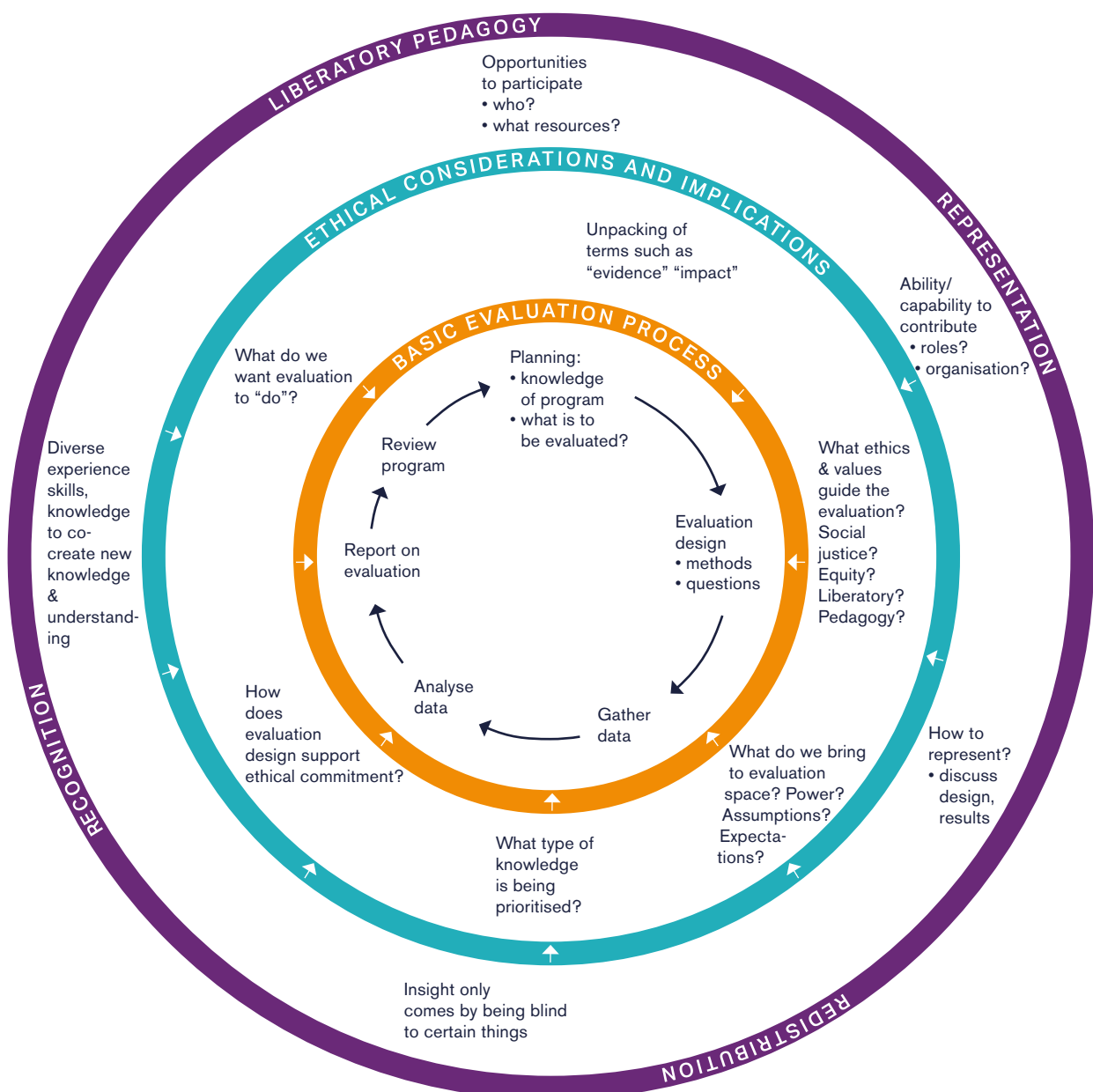
	Lower Hunter		Upper Hunter		Maitland		Port Stephens	
# of schools	13		4		2		2	
# of LDs	40		17		18		16	
Total # of hours from 2016-2019	39,105		6,282		6,032		2,779	
2016-2019 ICSEA average	937		927		934		899	
ATSI participating	107		14		6		1	
ATSI graduating (%)	101 (94%)		13 (92%)		6 (100%)		1 (100%)	
Students	Enrolled	Grad	Enrolled	Grad	Enrolled	Grad	Enrolled	Grad
2016	197	58%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2017	139	100%	0	0%	41	68%	0	0%
2018	305	80%	58	82%	34	70%	26	84%
2019	298	83%	74	83%	95	92%	23	95%
Total (16-19)	939	80%	132	82%	170	76	49	89

	Mid North Coast		Newcastle		Lake Macquarie		Central Coast	
# of schools	7		14		11		10	
# of LDs	12		85		39		44	
Total # of hours from 2016-2019	4,782		61,961		24,276		34,189	
2016-2019 ICSEA average	918		982		977		989	
ATSI participating	13		99		33		29	
ATSI graduating (%)	13 (100%)		89 (89%)		28 (84%)		20 (68%)	
Students	Enrolled	Grad	Enrolled	Grad	Enrolled	Grad	Enrolled	Grad
2016	0	0%	154	0%	31	61%	44	63%
2017	0	0%	214	0%	32	100%	59	100%
2018	38	84%	270	82%	174	91%	163	95%
2019	90	80%	520	83%	292	94%	293	93%
Total (16-19)	128	82	1158	82%	529	86	559	87

### c. The first steps of the evaluation process

As described in our methodology, PPOEMs (Burke, 2012; Burke & Lumb, 2018; Burke, 2020) are underpinned by social justice principles of redistribution of resources, recognition of difference and representation of diverse communities and groups (Fraser, 1997; 2003), theories of embodied subjectivity and formations of difference (Skeggs, 1997; Burke, 2002; Ahmed, 2004; Adkins, 2007; Burke, 2012) and Freire's liberatory pedagogies (Freire, 1972). Our evaluative research therefore was designed to open up a pedagogical space for participants engaged in a collaborative process to generate knowledge and understanding.

**Figure 1: Overview of the process we undertook as a team**



In an attempt to imbue our first steps as a team with our methodological commitments, we collaboratively developed a creative literature review for the project, including attempts to organise our different understandings of key terms such as 'impact', 'value', 'evidence' and 'power' so that we might better adopt them as tools in the evaluative research process.

The below images illustrate the collaborative methods we took. There were many messy and generative whiteboard representations of team discussions as we sought to initiate a process of purposefully unsettling our own complacencies and value judgments.



What follows is a brief summary and insight into the terms, theories and concepts we took up in this project, and our collective relation to them given our critical and non-conventional evaluation approaches.

We felt it was important to review literature together as a team and to begin to embed the language of the literature into our everyday practices in the context of both the evaluation and the program itself.

We were interested to unpack together terms such as **impact** and **evidence** in order to not take these for granted and to engage in processes of problematising our evaluation and equity practices. We had concerns that the use of the term impact is a trend shaping higher education reform worldwide, arguably underpinned by contemporary move towards 'datafication' (Lindsay, 2013; Sellar, 2013; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017). We were cognisant that exactly what constitutes impact or **progress** is contested, and that this can actually be part of the work of evaluation, creating spaces and moments in

which loaded terms such as **value** and impact can be discussed and debated. By making the implicit more explicit, we hoped to bring forward concerns where they might ordinarily operate in more 'hidden' ways. This is of course a challenging task, "fraught with contradictions as the translation from research to action is far from straight forward" (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017, p. 52).

Our project team wanted to adopt an **ethical** position for the project (in contrast to the bureaucratic ethics instruments of university institutions); one that might provide opportunities to talk together about pedagogical experiences, expectations and frustrations that would never happen in formal and bureaucratic committee meetings. We posited that PPOEMs should begin with the researchers discussing the principles underpinning our collaborative work and participatory project. So we worked for some time to identify shared principles that would guide the team's work, knowing that agreeing this ethical framework was part of



developing a Pedagogical Methodology. One of the key concerns for us as a group was how evaluation could work for **social justice**.

We drew on a specific framework for social justice as articulated in multi-dimensional form by Nancy Fraser and as translated for equity in higher education (Burke, 2012; Bozalek, Ischer & Zembylas, 2020). Fraser uses three dimensions to lay out a foundational architecture for social justice: *redistribution* relating to the economic and material, *recognition* relating to the cultural and *representation* relating to the political. In this way, Fraser is interested in the abstract and material dimensions that can produce a nuanced 'parity of participation' in various contexts when these dimensions are held together. What is being referred to here is not some crude numerical parity to do with quotas or a counting form of accountability. Instead, Fraser points us toward the complex interplay of elements that hold the possibility of participatory parity, or being treated as an equal peer in social life. This contests narrow notions of parity of participation as only proportional representation to extend to critical notions of access, value and influence.

An aspect of this effort to discuss questions of the social and of justice was to recognise that the project team had life experiences, commitments and concerns that would operate on the project throughout the project. As Podems (2010) articulates below, this could be called a **feminist** orientation to evaluation:

Feminist evaluators also make explicit that an evaluator has experiences, sensitivities, awareness, and perspectives that lead to a particular standpoint. In other words, feminist evaluators recognize that they bring who they are into the evaluation process. (p. 5)

This brought **power** to the fore of our evaluation considerations, including our relation to power relations as equity practitioners, our concerns to understand how evaluation operated within unequal architectures of historically formed power relations that would make it difficult to recognise, celebrate and value knowledges residing 'outside' the dominant frames of reference, for, as Burke and Jackson (2007) remind us:

It is the constitution of knowledge claims as 'truth' that is linked to systems of power: those who have the power – institutionally as well as individually – to determine and legitimise 'truth' also have the power to determine dominant discourses. This exercising of power happens so thoroughly, so powerfully, and so ideologically, that the political nature of discourses becomes hidden. (p. 6)

We however held a critical hope that a Pedagogical Methodology would provide a space for consideration of power explicitly, even **reflexively**, and to understand that we are all complicit in complex relations of power. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of power (Foucault, 1982), we understood the working of power in educational spaces as *productive* rather than simply about hierarchy or domination. We understood power as producing inequalities within institutional and social contexts but also we hoped to harness this productive capacity to steer new subjects and relations into life through a critical and problematised notion of empowerment (Lather, 1991).

Whilst evaluative research is commonly about 'findings', it can also be about generating spaces for critical thought and yearning towards new ways of knowing, new relations and understanding that otherwise might be unavailable and/or closed down. In Pedagogical Methodology, evaluative research becomes a form of pedagogy, as part of the process of **meaning-making**, learning and making sense of ourselves and our relations to others (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017, p. 53). We were also hopeful this could be a recuperative experience for those involved, from the research team to the large number of participating students, school staff, family members and community members. Drawing on liberatory pedagogies (as Pedagogical Methodologies does) we hoped to engage in **humanising** processes, drawing particularly on the work of Paulo Freire (1972). Empathy, connection and care – worryingly absent from some formal education spaces – were concepts we wanted to emerge as 'humanising' experiences of evaluation. **Freire** was a Brazilian educator and philosopher interested in how 'education' has potential for dialogic and collaborative forms of knowledge-formation to transform relations of oppression. Freire was also interested in **curiosity**, delineating between 'ingenuous curiosity' and 'epistemological curiosity'. Ingenuous curiosity Freire associates with 'common sense'. For Freire, this form of curiosity can develop, as, for example, philosophers do towards epistemological curiosity:

a restless questioning as movement toward the revelation of something hidden, as a question verbalised or not, as search for clarity, as a moment of attention, suggestion, and vigilance, constitutes an integral part of the phenomenon of being alive. There would be no creativity without the curiosity that moves us and sets us patiently impatient before a world that we did not make, to add to it something of our own making. (2009, p. 37–38)

**Curiosity** is a concept used within the program language for the Children's University program yet, as Freire (2009) contends, "It is precisely because curiosity does not automatically become critical that one of the essential tasks of progressive educational praxis is the promotion of a curiosity that is critical, bold and adventurous" (2009, p. 37). It was therefore important for us to consider how we might encourage critical curiosity both within the CEEHE team and the Children's University communities participating in this investigative praxis through the PPOEMs evaluative framework.

Our team was also very aware that participants of evaluation and equity programs are never mono-dimensional beings and to construct persons in such a way is a form of deficit and symbolic violence (that is, being reduced to a single and fixed form of identity through pathologizing policy categorisations). For example, no person is reducible to a simplistic categorisation such as low SES. We were instead interested in building more respectful and complex frameworks for evaluation processes, including that offered by **intersectionality**:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149)

Our team discussed how intersections of identity both empower and disempower depending on the context. Intersectionality offers a way of recognising and mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics (Crenshaw, 1989). Mirza helps us to understand how intersectionality provides a framework for understanding the lives of those simultaneously positioned in multiple structures of dominance and power as gendered, raced, classed, colonised, and sexualised 'others' (Mirza, 2015). In this way, our team wanted to think about **intersectionality** as part of rejecting an 'additive' model of categorical disadvantage, to recognise that experiences are complex and relational, located at the intersection of structure, culture and agency.

We also discussed how educational experiences are '**embodied**' [emphasis added] and that this can also establish new injustices whereby some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations, while others are marked out as trespassers who are in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined, politically, historically, and conceptually circumscribed as being "out of place". (Puwar, 2004, p. 51, in Mirza, 2014, pp. 3 & 7)

As equity and widening participation agendas have grown in many western contexts, they have often been accompanied by the discursive practices relating to **aspiration** (Burke, 2006; Burke, 2012). Often, this has been imbued with a deficit 'poverty of aspirations' assumption in that the targeted community members in university outreach frameworks are commonly conceived of to lack aspiration (along with potential, resilience, capability, and so on) (Morley, 2003). Given this project entered this ethically fraught terrain (Stevenson & Leconte, 2009; Burke & Hayton, 2011) we wanted to take up a more respectful and sophisticated account of aspiration if and when it did arrive either in language or discourse. In the Australian context therefore, we might agree with Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale (2015) in arguing for a "complex understanding of how aspirations are constituted by multiple social-cultural resources, including policy and populist ideologies but also family and community histories and the lived-cultural agency of people in the present" (p. 228).

Our team was excited and also daunted by taking up an approach to evaluation that rejected simplistic accounts of lives and the worrying 'logical' leaps of causal claims. Instead, we were interested in how we might build something of a "curriculum around cultural resources of life-based contexts... to transform student's diversities into pedagogical assets" (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997, p. 88). We saw this as holding the possibility of inverting systemic deficit views in which schools often see less well-off families and communities "as places from which children must be saved or rescued, rather than places that, in addition to problems (as in all communities) contain valuable knowledge and experiences that can foster... educational development" (Moll & Gonzalez, p. 98). In this way, we developed a framework within our Pedagogical Methodology that took account of a diverse and challenging range of theories and concepts. We wanted to redistribute dialogue around these terms and their histories, yet in ways that did not marginalise existing ways of knowing, being and doing within the communities involved in this evaluation. In the next section we begin to detail how we attempted to structure the process via careful iterations informed by our methodology, albeit constrained by the limitations of existing material, temporal and symbolic structures.



#### d. How we structured the process, the methods used and data analysis

As discussed above, the team's commitment to social justice involves a reframing of evaluation towards the experiences, histories and knowledges of diverse and often misrepresented communities to be brought into conversation through enabling pedagogies that value learning in all of its diversity and difference (Bennett, Motta, Hamilton, Burgess, Relf, Gray, Leroy-Dyer & Albright, 2016). We want evaluations to be pedagogical experiences in and of themselves and for all participants (as much as is possible) to be involved in the design in order to recognise and foreground that we are all learners and we all have valuable experiences and insights to contribute to participatory pedagogical and evaluative processes. We were attentive to the following considerations in the design of the processes:

- the shifting and evolving power dynamics amongst participants and how they might impact on desired workshop outcomes
- children's capacity/ability to participate being foregrounded and celebrated whilst acknowledging that time and effort is needed to allow this to happen
- the spaces and locations for evaluation activities and how they can (and cannot) welcome and include all participants
- workshop activities to reflect and embrace the diversity and difference that participants bring to the workshops
- effective ways of communicating with schools and families given the often time-poor and information overload that they experience.

We used semi-structured focus groups and workshops. Each method was chosen and designed with the aim of facilitating participation and learning for as many of the people involved with the Children's University Newcastle program. The participants formed five different groups: students; parents, carers and other family members; school educators (teachers, principals and teacher aides); learning destinations; and the wider community.

Participant group workshops included:

- School Educator (SE) Forum/Learning Destination (LD) Forum
- Student Evaluation Team (SET) recruitment process
- Student Evaluation Team workshops x 2
- Participant forum (SE, LD, SF, SET) using questions developed by SET
- Final Student Evaluation Team workshop
- Follow up workshop with SE and LD participant groups

#### Figure key

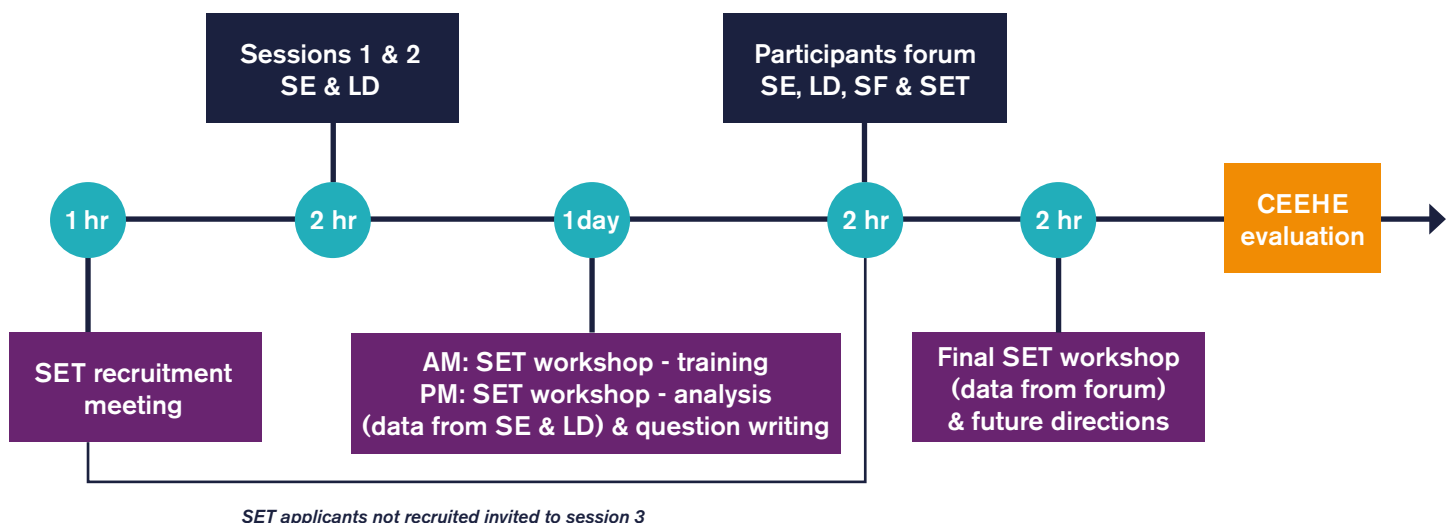
**SET** – Student Evaluation Team

**SE** – School Educators

**LD** – Learning Destinations

**SF** – Students and Families

**Figure 2: Participant workshop process**



Each forum explored with participant groups questions and concerns such as:

- i. What facilitates a positive learning experience?
- ii. Deliberations on concepts such as 'impact', 'evidence' and how we might re-imagine evaluation methods
- iii. Different conceptualisations of 'success', both within schools and beyond
- iv. The forms of learning (outside of formal schooling) that participants valued.

The data analysis began with the process of transcribing the recordings from the focus group and workshop discussions. The Evaluation Team then read the transcriptions and spent time 'immersing' ourselves in the data. Next, the Team met to begin the process of content analysis by noting key themes that were common across all the data and to discuss what emerged as of significant importance within the accounts of participants. Initially, this involved a collation of around 12 key themes that were considered only for their frequency in the data. The next stage of rereading involved a more in-depth analysis of each theme to consider the meaning of each theme in the context of the evaluation. The purpose of this was to draw out the nuances and complexities of each theme. This process built a picture of a diverse range of meanings and insights around each key theme.

The key themes that were crystallised from this evaluative process were:

1. Challenges to creating equity in relation to the working of privilege
2. Learning contexts as both inclusionary *and* exclusionary
3. Relationships as key to generating valuable learning experiences
4. The importance of different roles within the learning process – the role of school, community, LDs, families/carers and the University
5. Locating, foregrounding and championing knowledges in a community to mobilise meaningful and contextualised learning for children.

These key themes are discussed in detail in the Key Learnings section below.



I believe that one of the many strengths of the CU Evaluation Team was the subtle gestures that were thoughtfully put in place throughout the entire process, ensuring that we were nurturing and preserving the relationships that were already present, as well as establishing new relationships. By taking the time to think and carefully embed respectful and thoughtful ways of planning, this could ensure that the community members could feel considered, safe, welcome and as though they were extremely valuable contributors to this process and members of the CU Evaluation Team.

**Shaye Bourke**

Children's University Newcastle Program Officer

## e. Why we structured the process the way we did

The reflection on the previous page by one of our report authors and evaluation team members speaks to the possibility of every practice within an evaluation 'doing' equity work in ways that are commonly absent from objective and objectifying approaches. Evaluation processes can be generative toward new, deeper, more nuanced relationships that are central to universities facilitating community-engaged, equitable widening participation work. It seems to us tragic the way in which the professional discipline of evaluation, with its growing range of 'independent' consultants, is quite divorced from these practices, particularly when this unintentionally reinforces oppressive and marginalising relations in and through widening participation commitments.

In 1969, American Social Scientist Donald T. Campbell sought to produce a path towards an "Experimenting Society", providing an agreed foundation for "rational decision making" by policymakers and politicians through an effort "based on hard headed tests of bold social programs designed to improve society" (Donaldson, 2009, p. 3). By the 1980s this dream had fallen apart. Widespread evaluation has however become something of a necessary condition of contemporary Western societies. Yet, even with such volumes of resource-intensive activity, we seem collectively somewhat confused and alarmed to have learned that "most things have been found sometimes to work" (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 10) which is of little use to practitioners or policymakers (or community members) as it implies also that most things have often been found not to 'work'. For, as we have indicated earlier, taking up the 'what works' position tends to obliterate prior considerations such as who gets to decide what 'working' means, looks and feels like.

Our concern is to make visible the possibility that the processes involved in evaluation can be as generative and/or damaging as the 'products' that emerge. Whilst evaluation efforts are commonly focussed on understanding the impact of a programmatic intervention, there is not always an awareness of, or value placed upon, the evaluation process itself having intended and unintended impacts of its own. Epistemologies that construct the endeavour of evaluation from a privileged position foreclose endless possible other paths that are arguably the responsibility of those involved in projects of social support, equity and social justice.

'Independent' evaluations conducted by consultants commonly privilege quasi-experimental designs. Rallis (2009) argues that such designs pay little attention to meaning and context, and as such are at an enormous disadvantage methodologically and to ensure the evaluation itself is productive and aligned to its purpose (that is, generating equity and inclusion in learning and

education). Ultimately, evaluation brings value to play in the inevitable judgements that are made through the evaluation process. As evaluation is an important layer of equity and widening participation practice. What we are arguing for here is a reimagining of what evaluation can do when the politics of value (such as, who and what is valued by whom and who participates in determining what is of value) are foregrounded throughout the evaluation design and process.

In this project, we continuously strived to make explicit that what we were doing was exploring how certain methodological commitments shaped the next step. This was to challenge utilitarian and decontextualised methods of selecting instruments of data collection. Attention is needed to the unquestioned values embedded in particular evaluation instruments that are historically exclusive to the communities that are being measured and judged by those instruments. A diverse team attempted to build something of a shared, 'generative instability' (Lumb & Roberts, 2017) whereby we might constantly trouble each other and stay with the trouble, asking the difficult question of what participation means to different participants and in different contexts. We opened ourselves to critical interrogation over taken-for-granted practices such as subject lines in emails or the size of the font or the amount of text on flyers, in an attempt to navigate complex power relations in the fraught politics of participation. The thought and care that went into questioning the taken-for-granted practices implicated in unequal power relations make new and more equitable practices possible. We are not claiming that we 'got things right'. But we would claim to have had an enduring and explicit ethical disposition to our facilitation of participation in this project and to creating an evaluation *for* rather than *of* equity.



I now think about the evaluation as such a complex process that requires so much time to think and reflect on how best to carry it out in the most respectful and careful way possible. I also believe that an evaluation process requires a countless amount of small and subtle gestures to make the participants feel as comfortable, safe, and welcome as possible, so that we can get the most out of the process whilst also developing and maintaining strong and trusting relationships.

**Shaye Bourke**

Children's University Newcastle Program Officer

## f. How PPOEMs underpin the CU Evaluation

PPOEMs provide a framework for collective knowledge-formation that begins with respect for, and attention to, participation, and which considers the possibility that evaluation could unwittingly marginalise knowledges, and ways of knowing, situated within the communities participating in the evaluation process. PPOEMs therefore need to evolve, as we continue to reflect on our approaches in ever-changing conditions. For example, as this report is finalised, we are navigating a global health pandemic as COVID-19 re-shapes the lives and livelihoods of so many people, families and communities. With PPOEMs as our approach, we aim therefore to constantly produce a humble relation to epistemology because, as Sedgewick reminds us, there is a danger in “knowing too much” (Sedgewick, 1979). This does not undermine the project of evaluation. Instead, it presents new and arguably more democratic possibilities whereby the values and concerns of those positioned as the beneficiaries of equity initiatives are better recognised as knowers of their own lives, experiences and interests. In this, we want to recognise the tensions that come with engaging questions of power and knowledge. We however agree with Ashwin that, “As higher education researchers, we need to engage with such tensions critically, constructively, collectively and courageously” (Ashwin, 2015, np), which requires that this is built into the very design of an evaluation for equity.

The care required when constructing the frames of evaluation are evident when exploring the UK experience, as Harrison (2012) argues, where statistics (admissions data) used to evaluate the success of (and ultimately dismantle) the Aimhigher program in the UK, were something over which Aimhigher had no control. Demonstrating the contested nature of the field, a recent Systematic Review of evidence of the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education (Younger, Gascoine, Menzies & Torgerson, 2019) found that there have been no robust evaluations of UK-based interventions. This work however takes up a definition of robustness that adheres closely to a positivist, evidence-based decision-making set of commitments. And, as the American critical quantitative higher education researcher Stage (2007) has warned:

A positivistic researcher seeks models that nearly completely explain phenomena of interest, aiming for confirmation and verification to explain universal human behaviour. But because much of positivistic research is based on previously developed models, the outcomes tend to replicate the status quo and verify meritocratic fairness. (p. 10)

These debates regarding the construction of rigorous credible evidence are an important consideration for higher education policymaking. These deliberations have direct implications for evaluative claims and are rooted in often implicit philosophical perspectives about the nature of reality and commitments regarding what constitutes knowledge and how it is created (Christie & Fleischer, 2009).

We argue that it is therefore important to engage the assumptions guiding much research and policymaking if we are to shift the field of equity and widening participation evaluation to new and more respectful approaches. Anderson & Larsen (2009), investigating an Upward Bound program in the United States (US) context (one of the TRIO programs that has operated in this country for over 45 years), explore how the program attempts to increase educational opportunity for urban youth and how this approach plays out in the lived experiences of young men who participate in the program. Their findings suggest an urgent need for coordinating support programs with other social, economic and human service agencies serving communities if we are to move towards equality of opportunity for underrepresented youth.

In taking up PPOEMs in our evaluative efforts, we tend to concur with Rallis' (2009) view that it is important to consider how processes of evaluation, as a matter of rigor and integrity, can develop essential insights for the broader field by attending to “the means and context more than the outcome of a program. The latter approach commonly asks, ‘What does the experience mean to the individual?’” (Rallis, 2009, p. 281). It is to these concerns that we now turn in terms of what was learned throughout the evaluation process.

# What we learnt through the evaluation process





## a. Key learnings

### i. What is valued in the Children's University Newcastle program?

**1. UON's community presence.** The participation of the University of Newcastle in school communities is highly valued. There was much discussion about how the simple aspect of Children's University Newcastle being a presence in the schools is a positive thing. It has the ability to establish a connection and a relationship with the University for Children's University participants. This is enhanced even further when Children's University students get to visit the UON campus and feel welcomed into what can be a very intimidating and foreign space for the children and their families and carers.

**2. Opening pathways.** The Program has been described as "about going to university, but it is also not about going to university". Parents, carers and teachers discussed how Children's University Newcastle presents the idea of going to university as a real possibility. However, it presents it as just one of many different ways to learn and pathways in life. This notion of offering different learning pathways in the context of people's lives was an important theme emerging through the evaluation.

**3. Valuing the (diverse) knowledges of a community.** The bringing together of different sections of the community into a learning community is viewed as a key contribution of Children's University Newcastle. A learning destination described it as: "The community is helping everyone... so they [the children] have a better future". The Children's University Newcastle program seeks to both strengthen the learning opportunities already present within communities along with making accessible the new and different learning opportunities outside of communities. This is a form of social justice redistribution aiming to provide access to educational resources and learning opportunities that otherwise are inaccessible to participants due to systemic disadvantage and social inequality.

### 4. Recognition of and accessing lifelong learning.

The Children's University Newcastle program shifts the idea of learning to something much more than what happens in school. One parent commented: "It shows children that everything they do they can learn from. It takes it outside the box. I know for my child doing it, everything you do that's not within school, can still be learning." A teacher offered the feedback of: "The biggest impact the Children's University has on kids is the fact that it makes them lifelong learners."

### ii. How equity and privilege impact on the program

**CU Newcastle must be attentive to and respond to historical, existing and persistent social disadvantages within a CU community.**

The two themes of equity and privilege came up frequently in the evaluation process. Not only did they become significant topics for discussion in the data gathering activities, they became a focus for the collaborative design process as well. The students expressed concerns about how accessing learning opportunities (and consequently passport<sup>2</sup> hours) was a challenge for certain families. This is in some instances complicated by the fact that many students, parents and/or carers are highly motivated to get passport hours and the feedback was that often some parents are better positioned socially and in terms of networks to "know how to get them" whilst others are not. This raises challenges for those facilitating the Children's University, including teachers, particularly in how they support students through to graduation. In one workshop a parent described her experience as:

It's like the in group and the out group of parents and how the in group kind of network amongst themselves and share and then the out groups don't get any of that sharing...

These challenges in redressing how equity and privilege operate have been analysed by the Evaluation Team as financial, locational and cultural. The financial challenges typically involve the cost of accessing certain learning destinations. Some of the school community representatives discussed how often learning destinations were not close to where they live and often required parents and carers to travel a distance in order to facilitate their children accessing passport hours activities. A student observed that:

the children who get most from CU are the ones whose families take them to places and stuff.

<sup>2</sup>A 'passport' within the Children's University model is "where CUA members 'collect' their learning. Each activity is recorded, along with the time spent, and validated with a stamp from the Learning Destination. As learning hours accrue, they build towards CUA certificates awarded at graduations".  
[www.cuaustralasia.com/faq/](http://www.cuaustralasia.com/faq/)

Parents, carers and teachers also commented on the extent to which different learning destinations were culturally welcoming places for diverse communities. This had the potential to reinforce exclusion. One student in the SET described it in the following way:

well, that group of families go there... I'm not in that. I'm not part of that. My mum and dad are not part of that.

Many community members reflected on how the community is reduced to the construction of disadvantage, which operated as a form of misrecognition. There was concern for example that this construction carries implications for the future of the community with the risk of self-fulfilling prophecies. Children's University Newcastle is seen as an opportunity to shift out of this perception of certain communities as places where learning and education were perceived as absent. The recognition of communities who have experienced significant disadvantage as places where lifelong learning does happen is significant to generating equitable transformation.

### iii. Learning contexts as inclusionary and exclusionary

#### **CU Newcastle must work to create challenging but also inclusionary learning opportunities**

There was much discussion across all evaluation workshops on how Children's University Newcastle needs to "push students out of their comfort zone" to learn new things. However, at the same time, it was emphasized that this has to happen in 'safe' and welcoming pedagogical spaces through approaches that build curiosity and a sense of being a lifelong learner.

A particular challenge for the Children's University Newcastle team is the need to always be considering the environment in which the learning opportunities take place. One parent emphasised the importance of "finding a learning space that's comfortable to walk into for the adults, as well as the student". This is relevant to the points discussed above about the tensions that need to be addressed between equity and privilege: learning spaces need to be culturally welcoming spaces. One parent at an evaluation workshop spoke candidly about her reluctance to attend. She said "I don't know why I am here. I don't do these things". The parent explained how through the encouragement of her daughter and the fact that her daughter was involved in the design of the evaluation (she was part of the SET) she herself felt challenged and supported to participate in the workshop.

Learning destinations have the opportunity to create and contribute to shared spaces of learning (safe and welcoming) and much of the evaluation discussions pointed to how some spaces are but some clearly are not. The evaluation workshops themselves, and the discussions that took place, offered the opportunity for LDs to reflect on and listen to how other LDs create welcoming spaces.

Teachers, and schools in general, also play a pivotal role in how students get excluded and included in Children's University learning opportunities and activities. One teacher described it in the following way:

I think as a school, we need to work with you, to work out how to do that. Because we're the ones that know our community, so we're the ones that are going to know how we can get that through in different ways.

With a strong emphasis on inclusion in learning opportunities, the design process of the evaluation also pushed the Children's University Newcastle team out of its comfort zone. This is a unique aspect of the design that was foundational to allow different voices to emerge; voices that often don't get heard. One parent described how the CU program has both the potential to be inclusive by creating new and appropriate learning opportunities but at the same time has the potential to be exclusive because not all students will take up these opportunities: "Are we privileging them [CU students] even more and putting them on a different pedestal ... its tricky." This requires attention to who is *not* participating and why, so that evaluation enables closer attention to consider questions of absence as well as presence to better refine widening participation strategies.

#### iv. Relationships as key to learning

##### **CU Newcastle must work with learning communities to foment and support the development of relationships within and across communities**

A key theme to emerge from the evaluation was the pivotal nature of relationships to a successful learning experience. Many participants spoke about how a key person can make a difference in a young person's life as to how they see learning and their ability to learn. It was discussed how Children's University Newcastle can perform this role but more importantly it can facilitate a community to perform it for themselves. Meaningful (rather than instrumental) relationships and authentic connections need to be developed for the program to be valuable. This also helps to overcome educational exclusion and disconnection that becomes entrenched through systemic disadvantage and social inequality (Burke, 2012). One student in describing the art project:

the cloud – it represents like how the community is on top helping everyone on the bottom with education so they can have a better future.

The student discussed how the evaluation itself brought together parents, carers, schools and learning destinations to discuss where the challenges lie with getting the students to access meaningful forms of learning. This captured for them the need for it to be a community effort.

The coming together of different partners to build a community learning space can be a powerful thing for students to see and be a part of. One parent commented: "Seeing organisations working collaboratively together is a high value for students.

#### **v. Different roles – the role of school, community, LDs, families/carers and UON**

A lot of the evaluation feedback identified communication and distribution of information as very important to the program's success. The communication needs to be an ongoing part of the program and to happen with all participants.

The evaluation revealed that often there is a sense of powerlessness in all of the partners in a learning community – the school, the parents/carers, LDs. Often one group will blame another for failings. The evaluation allowed for the Children's University team to see the importance of dialogue, cross-participant conversations and the whole of community approach. A key role for Children's University is to build the dynamic between the key groups of a learning community. Parents feeling welcome in a school, families happy to go to a museum, schools ready with an effective approach to work in the wider community are all important aspects that require collaboration with other participants in the program.

The process of carrying out a collaboratively designed evaluation has allowed Children's University Newcastle to embed further the Children's University program in the local community.

Taking a strengths-based approach to students' knowledge in the wider context of their families and communities and the desire of participants to learn more and to support others to challenge deficit imaginaries were identified as significant parts of an equitable and inclusive program.

Many participants spoke of how others (school, parents, learning destinations) at times enabled learning and at other times constrained learning in the Children's University activities.

#### **vi. Locating, foregrounding and championing knowledges in a community**

The suggested learning experiences and destinations need to be community sensitive, relevant and appropriate. Not all families and students will feel comfortable in the space of museums and art galleries due to a complex array of historical and cultural inequalities. Children's University Newcastle needs to consider different forms of knowledge and learning and how that is differently valued in the context of inequalities. The importance of discussion of how public learning destinations have a responsibility to consider their local and often heterogeneous community to ensure what is available and offered is also accessible to all community members emerged as a key theme, while sustaining a greater diversity of learning experiences was recognised as a strength of the Children's University program.

There is a need to find new ways to acknowledge and foreground community knowledge to shift deficit perceptions of a particular place, school, family, community or individual.

## b. How has the CU Newcastle program changed as a consequence of the evaluation?

- The evaluation process and experience has embedded a commitment to constantly reflect on program practices and approaches. This enables evaluation to also play a key role in ongoing and high-quality professional learning, to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions and practices about 'what works'. This enables the evaluation team to question what is working, for whom, and the particular circumstances shaping this understanding.
- Communication with communities, schools, students, LDs and families is approached with a recognition of context, history and complex power relations. Understanding how, when and what language to use, for example, is an ongoing process and a key part of building – and sustaining – meaningful relationships of value to all participants.
- Relationship building efforts are important. The Children's University team attempts more than ever to prioritise continually reconnecting with LDs, in order to nourish that relationship. New LDs are now better supported to ensure greater understanding of the aims and ethos of the program. These longer-term relationships will then feed back in to strengthen the program through a more explicit valuing of what is seen as important to those involved.
- Prioritising time and space for relationship building as a cornerstone is also key to ensuring the agenda is not driven by the University. Indeed, it is important to disrupt university-centric approaches in order to develop a more balanced relationship with schools, LDs and community members. As part of the recognition of this, the Children's University team engage in ongoing mapping of Children's University activities and possibilities using Asset Based Community Development models that are constantly being added to because the community is always evolving. Consequently, the role of the Children's University team is to facilitate and support the learning community to take a lead in their engagement with the Program.
- Acknowledging that authentic (community relevant) learning experiences are built on longstanding relationships, the Children's University team has a commitment to understanding possible pathways for young people, in both formal and informal education and within their local context, and supporting them to explore these lifelong learning pathways. Children's University activities and learning destinations are opportunities to highlight what pathways are available, to ensure these are accessible and to connect the learning experiences to what the children and their communities value and are interested in.
- Wherever possible, connection points (such as validation training, meetings, activities) happen within the local community settings in an attempt to recognise the importance of the University being part of the community, not the community having to come to the University to maintain a relationship. This is balanced with an invitation across the year to be on university soil (for example, on-campus experiences), in order to demonstrate that the University belongs and is accessible to all in the community.
- The Children's University Newcastle team is more attentive to exploring the complex processes of identity formation involved in our work for all participant groups (young people, family, learning destination representatives and Children's University staff). The Children's University team seeks to promote the Children's University experience as a 'third space' of belonging for the young people, beyond their local identity of their local public school. Understanding what that third space is and exploring those levels of comfort/discomfort that come with it is an important and challenging dynamic for the Children's University team.
- The Children's University team is supported to develop thinking around and reflect on the theoretical commitment of the Children's University program and CEEHE more broadly. A key aspect of this support is to build opportunities for ways of working whereby young people in the Children's University program are able to participate in the decision making about program design.

## c. Reflections on PPOEMs and CEEHE evaluation methodology

Program evaluation is now omnipresent in contemporary society, as part of contemporary conditions whereby 'New Public Management' is shifting how institutions of higher education justify their existence in relation to the state (Neave, 2012; Lumino, Gambardella & Grimaldi, 2017). Given that equity and widening participation in higher education is an ongoing concern in so many contexts, it is important to consider how those involved in evaluating the success of this large-scale social project relate to the "technologies of evaluation" (Burke & Lumb) because in our adoption of them we are producing the social worlds we inhabit (Gordon, Lumb, Bunn & Burke, in press). This is difficult work.



One of my main apprehensions throughout the entire process was that this could have potentially made people feel intimidated or overwhelmed at times, as this was a new and unfamiliar experience for all. This may have resulted in not having as many participants involved in the process, therefore, not having as many people's voices heard due to the uncertainty of it all.

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We would argue there is a need, if social justice is our goal, to shift from a narrow focus on method in evaluative work to a more complicated yet generative consideration of methodology. Morrison and Van De Werf (2015) remind us that “Evaluating the effects of educational interventions at the appropriate level of analysis, or without taking cognizance of the contexts in which they are located, or overlooking the complexity of the phenomenon, is to walk a hazardous path” (p. 299). We have tried with this initiative to wrestle with our position that implicit commitments embedded within approaches to evaluative research fundamentally shape (and significantly limit) what can be known as a result of these processes. We agree with those who would argue that, in some contexts, particular approaches to evaluation have been constructed as more legitimate ways of knowing about interventions into lives.

A metrics fixation has, over recent decades, produced a vast proliferation of measures to help judge the ‘performance’ of individuals and organisations, adopting only certain notions of accountability, transparency and efficiency (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). It is a problem *for equity* if evaluation of equity in higher education is consistently built through a one-dimensional logic. As a recent review of equity in higher education has unveiled large amounts of funding have been deployed in systems to understand if equity initiatives are ‘working’ but via logics of experimentation and metrification that fail to identify, or simply overlook, fundamental and relational dimensions of social inequality.

There have been moments during the process whereby in both invited and uninvited ways, people have offered their perspectives on what evaluation is and what it does.



# Final reflections



Equity of 'access' to, 'participation' in, or 'success' within and beyond (or as a result of) higher education is not easily understood nor represented as a simplistic set of program logics. Equity is a contested concept, to which many different notions and values are attached. Negotiating these contested conceptualisations and the practical realisations they facilitate, we would argue, is vitally important if evaluation in this field is to ever make a significant contribution. To ignore these politics within an evaluative project relating to equity in higher education arguably undermines the potential of the initiative, because to only "approach evaluation scientifically is to miss completely its fundamentally social, political, and value-oriented character" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 7). This certainly presents challenges however relating to how evaluating the success of policy and funding can be achieved without a careful articulation of what is meant by 'equity' and through adopting appropriate frameworks for constructing knowledge that are themselves imbued with these characterisations.

This sustained evaluative project has not attempted to prove that the Children's University Newcastle 'works', or that it doesn't. Instead, we have committed to taking time and building structured pedagogical spaces to embed an evaluative layer of ongoing practice whereby different participants have learnt from each other. This has seen our team attempt to sensitively facilitate the threading together of: the theories and perspective of community members (including students, family members, learning destination); the theories and perspectives of practitioners involved in constantly constructing the initiative (including Children's University team members and coordinators); and the established theoretical frameworks and commitments offered via CEEHE's PPOEMs methodology. The Children's University Newcastle team are currently taking the difficult COVID-19 'opportunity' to respond differently to an ever-emerging social context.



I now think about evaluation as a metaphysical space where value is placed on, and time given to, pausing and reflecting on the present, past and future. Trying to understand / sit within the comfort / discomfort and the complexities of how and why social constructs occur, continue to change or remain the same. Evaluation is no longer for me what happens at the end of a set period of time (6 months / 12 months) but perhaps is more of constant state of 'being'.

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