INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION

RESEARCH PAPER

Evaluating equity initiatives in higher education: Processes and challenges from one Australian university

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As part of the Australian Government's 'Widening Participation' agenda, the Higher Education Partnership and Participation Program (HEPPP) provides funding for universities to develop interventions to support the aspiration, access, participation, retention and successful completion of higher education among students from under-represented groups. There is an increasing emphasis on evaluating these interventions to demonstrate their effectiveness and to inform future program planning, particularly in the context of decreasing HEPPP funding over the coming years whereby universities will be required to make decisions about how to prioritise those funds. Quantitative data provides important information about population trends. However, understanding the more complex impacts on students' lived experiences of higher education is important, albeit challenging. This paper provides a discussion of an approach to evaluation undertaken by a research team at Deakin University to assess the cumulative and intersecting impacts of a range of HEPPP funded initiatives on students' experiences of higher education. The socio-ecological approach adopted to explore the complexity of impacts on student and staff experiences, and institutional culture and practices, was guided by Bourdieu's theory of habitus. The challenges of undertaking this kind of evaluation are also discussed, as well as recommendations to inform future approaches.

Keywords: equity initiatives; evaluation; socio-ecological; widening participation; higher education

Introduction

The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) was established in 2010 to support Australian universities to enhance the participation of under-represented groups in higher education. The scheme provides funding to universities for initiatives to support student access to and engagement in higher education, student retention, and successful completion of studies. Research suggests that HEPPP has been effective in increasing higher education participation among under-represented groups (Universities Australia, 2015; Cunninghame, Costello & Trinidad, 2016). Since the establishment of HEPPP, participation has increased amongst targeted groups, including students with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with a first language other than English, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, those living in regional and remote areas, and women in non-traditional

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areas (Koshy & Seymour, 2015).

As a result of a national review of the impact of equity initiatives, Naylor, Baik and James (2013) developed the Critical Interventions Framework (CIF) to inform provision and guide approaches to evaluation. The framework presented a typology which categorised equity initiatives according to the stage of the student life-cycle they targeted (access, participation, and progress and attainment) and the type of initiative. This was later expanded on by Bennett and colleagues (Bennett et al., 2015) with the Critical Interventions Framework Part Two (CIF II) to have a greater focus on retention, progress and success. The CIF II identified four key stages for intervention across the higher education participation life-cycle: pre-access, access, participation, and attainment and transition out. This framework recognises that interventions may sit across more than one stage due to the integrated nature of some (Bennett et al., 2015). A range of initiatives have been implemented by individual universities across Australia in each of these life-cycle areas, and sometimes in partnership. Many have been found to be effective in improving access and participation outcomes. For example, enabling programs to assist Indigenous students to access higher education have been found to have increased the number of these students enrolled in higher education (Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Pitman et al., 2016), and equity scholarships have increased participation by students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Reed & Hurd, 2014; Zacharias et al., 2016). Despite improvements in overall participation rates, major inequities persist. Successful completion remains lower for many groups (Li & Carroll, 2017; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Lim, 2015), including Indigenous students (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2015).

An array of factors, and their intersections, influence the likelihood of individuals participating in, and successfully completing, higher education (Bexley, Daroesman, Arkoudis & James, 2013; King, Luzeckyj, McCann & Graham, 2015; Cunninghame et al., 2016; Fleming & Grace, 2016; Habel, Whitman & Stokes, 2016). These factors include socio-economic status (SES) (Gore et al., 2015), prior actual or perceived achievement (Gore et al., 2015; King et al., 2015), type of school attended (Lim, 2015), prior family history of engagement (or lack of engagement) with higher education (King et al., 2015), parental aspiration (Low, 2015), disability (Fleming & Grace, 2016; Habel et al., 2016), gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, subjective perception and experiences of class (including cultural identities which extend beyond objective SES categories), and social and family roles (including roles in relationships, paid work, and caring or domestic responsibilities) (Habel et al., 2016). For Indigenous students, higher education experiences also occur in relation to traditional cultural epistemologies and responsibilities (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012; Dockery, 2013; Fredericks, Kinnear, Daniels, Croftwarcon & Mann, 2015; Gore et al., 2015), and the legacy of socio-historical experiences, for instance, intergenerational trauma (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha & Luckman, 2015).

This paper outlines an approach to evaluation of HEPPP-funded initiatives undertaken by a team of researchers at Deakin University. Deakin has multiple campuses in metropolitan and regional areas, and a strong focus on flexible online learning to enable learners in remote regions, and/or students with diverse needs to participate in higher education. The paper begins with a discussion of the theoretical framing of the approach to the evaluation, and then describes the processes undertaken and the challenges encountered throughout the evaluation. It is hoped this paper may help inform evaluation practice in the area of widening participation.

Theoretical paradigms for understanding student experiences of higher education

There are a number of paradigms within which students' experiences of higher education can be understood. The paradigms which guided our approach were a socio-ecological lens and

Bourdieu's (1989) theory of habitus. Habitus refers to the embodied cultures (including attitudes and worldviews) that an individual develops through their interactions with their 'fields' (settings of interactions). The complex interplay of the factors mentioned above contribute to the formation of an individual's habitus, and thus their lived experiences – including experiences with higher education. Further, an individual's habitus informs the kinds of capital they have access to, including social capital, cultural capital, academic capital, and symbolic capital (such as power and status), and this further influences their identities and experiences.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital are useful for exploring the complexities of students' experiences of higher education and equity initiatives in a holistic way (West, Fleming & Finnegan, 2013; James, Busher & Suttill, 2015; Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench & King, 2015; Acevdo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Hayton & Bengry-Howell, 2016). Students bring the experiences of their habitus and capital with them into the higher education field (West et al., 2013; Meuleman et al., 2015), and adapt their behaviours in the field (James et al., 2015). Thus, the student and field are interactive. Additionally, the 'field' (in this case, the tertiary institution) has its own set of implicit norms and practices (Meuleman et al., 2015). Students from marginalised or under-represented groups may experience unfamiliarity with the higher education field due to their habitus experiences, and may lack the forms of capital that are typically held by dominant or traditional students, and which are implicitly necessary to succeed in higher education. For instance, students who are first-in-family university aspirants or attendees (without a parent or sibling having attended university) may have a different form of cultural capital to that which is implicit in the university setting (Luzekyj, King, Scutter & Brinkworth, 2011). This may negatively impact on first-in-family students' engagement with, and navigation through, higher education (King et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2016; Habel et al., 2016). Furthermore, a sense of belonging is important for sustained engagement and successful completion of higher education (Fredericks et al., 2015; King et al., 2015; Habel et al., 2016; Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray & Southgate, 2016). For students from under-represented groups, a disconnect between their habitus and that of the field can impede a sense of belonging (Meuleman et al., 2015).

Furthermore, students' social identities are not static, but rather may be influenced and changed throughout their experiences of university and their participation in equity programs. Habel et al. (2016) found that students who entered via enabling programs experienced social disruption of their identities and reconstructed their social identities as students in relation to their other roles and relationships with family and friends. King et al. (2015) similarly found that students who were first-in-family experienced changes in their social interactions outside of university. Students have demonstrated increases in confidence and capabilities through their participation in equity programs (Habel et al., 2016), sense of achievement, sense of belonging (Burke et al., 2016), resilience, tenacity, flexibility and adaptation (Habel et al., 2016), and overall positive transformation (Habel et al., 2016; King et al., 2015). However, qualitative explorations of students' lived experiences of equity initiatives are undervalued in governmental discourse which privileges quantitative methodologies (Burke & Lumb, 2018).

Given the plethora of factors influencing students' habitus and university experiences, gaining insight into individual, institutional and societal factors can be enabled through the application of a socio-ecological model. Socio-ecological theory seeks to explore interactions between individuals and their environments by examining factors, and their interactions, at multiple levels including the individual, family/school/community, higher education institution, and policy levels (Smith, Trinidad & Larkin, 2015; see Figure 1). Smith, Trinidad and Larkin (2015) contend that a socio-ecological model is useful for planning social inclusion interventions, such

as HEPPP funded equity initiatives, as it considers multi-level factors which impact students' experiences. Thus, socio-ecological theory assists with understanding the multiple layers of influence in students' habitus and the field. It is important to consider the influence of these environments in any evaluation of student experiences of higher education, including their experiences with equity initiatives.
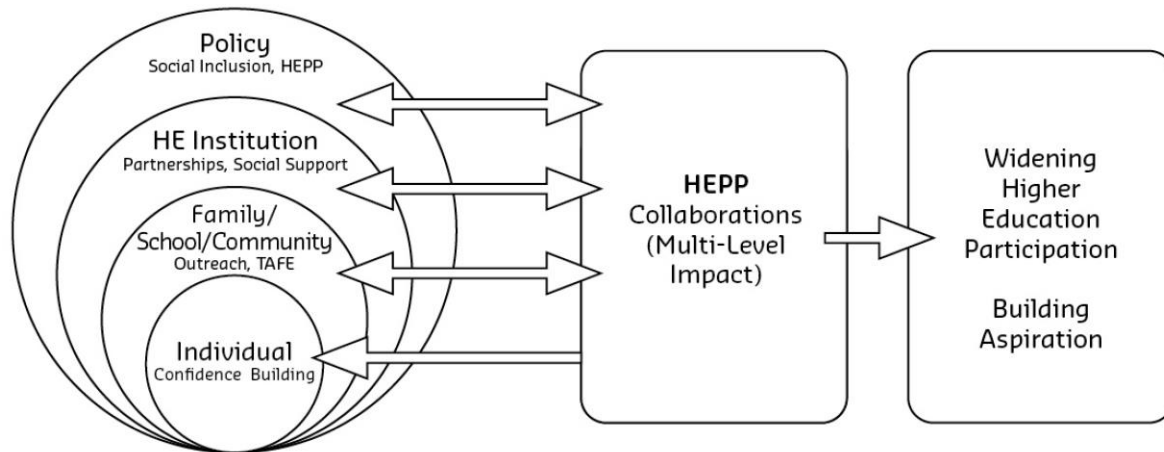

Figure 1: Socio-ecological framework[1] (Source: Smith, Trinidad & Larkin, 2015)

Evaluating HEPPP initiatives

The importance of any program evaluation is well established. Evaluation can help to: identify the extent to which program aims and objectives have been met, assess program strengths and weaknesses, highlight program processes and achievements, explore stakeholder experiences, and inform future practice (Hatt, 2007). Evaluation of equity initiatives seeks to identify how those initiatives have impacted on higher education experiences (Hatt, 2007). However, evaluating equity initiatives is challenging for many reasons, and it has been posited that there is a need for more capacity building among equity practitioners to improve evaluations (Bennett et al., 2015). Equity initiatives and their impacts do not occur in isolation, rather, they occur in relation to the broader socio-cultural and historic context of students' lived experiences (Bennett et al., 2015). Students may also experience intersectionalities of multiple equity group identities, and participate in multiple equity initiatives. Acevdo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) found in their research with first-year students that "when it comes to programmatic and institutional practices, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts", and that "each individual resource or practice reflected in student success program research was not singularly sufficient but created a synergistic support system for students" (p. 78). Thus, attributing impacts or effectiveness to the influence of one initiative is inherently difficult.

A number of evaluation frameworks currently exist to guide evaluation of equity initiatives. Among those commonly cited are the Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach (DEMO) (Gale et al., 2010), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Performance Measures Framework (AIHW, 2014), the Equity Performance Framework for Australian Higher

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[1] The model by Smith, Trinidad and Larkin (2015) presented in Figure 1 uses the term HEPP (the Higher Education Participation Program) rather than HEPPP due to a proposed name change as part of a reform package that was before the Senate around the time of that publication. However, the name of the funding scheme remains the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and so the term HEPPP is used throughout this paper.

Education (Pitman & Koshy, 2015), and the Group of Eight (Go8) Framework for Evaluation of Equity Initiatives (Bexley, Harris & James, 2010). A comprehensive list of evaluation frameworks utilised by Australian universities is outlined by the AIHW (2014). Predominantly, though, the current frameworks retain a focus on gathering data about quantitative indicators such as participation rates in equity initiatives, and retention rates, with Gale et al. (2010) a notable exception, although their focus is limited to work with schools. Comprehensive and accessible frameworks to guide evaluation practice beyond such quantitative measures, to more deeply explore students' and university staff experiences of equity initiatives in relation to concepts such as habitus and intersectional experiences, are still required.

An approach to evaluation at one university

The overall aim of the evaluation discussed in this paper was to explore participants' perspectives on the effectiveness of the university's HEPPP funded projects in regard to student aspiration, access, engagement, retention and completion of higher education. Additionally, our evaluation of the university's HEPPP initiatives also sought to explore their impacts on staff practice, and institutional or cultural change to support equity. Furthermore, the evaluation sought to understand what 'effectiveness' and 'success' meant from students' perspectives, and to uncover the stories and experiences that HEPPP funded initiatives had on students' lived experiences of university study and the impacts on their lives. The evaluation aim and design took into account that students and staff were sometimes involved with more than one HEPPP funded initiative, and, as such, separating out the individual effects of each may not have been possible, and that engagement with multiple initiatives may have interacting or cumulative effects on students' experiences. Thus, our evaluation did not seek to assess the impacts of the individual HEPPP initiatives against each initiative's own specific aims, but rather, to draw the suite of initiatives together to give an overall picture of both student and staff experiences across the range of HEPPP initiatives. Our research questions endeavoured to capture the complexity of students' experiences of the impacts of HEPPP funding on their university experience, and the impacts of HEPPP at multiple levels of a socio-ecological context.

Our evaluation initially aimed to collect data relating to the university's ten HEPPP funded projects. However, three projects were excluded from the initial evaluation process. In one case, the necessary ethics approvals were not able to be gained from the relevant external body and the other two were ineligible for the evaluation as they were no longer funded by HEPPP monies. Of the remaining seven projects, two further projects were withdrawn from the evaluation by the project coordinators or department managers due to operational reasons (and in one of the two cases, the team responsible for delivering the initiative undertook their own evaluation). As data collection had already commenced, data relating to these two projects up until the point of their withdrawal was retained. The sections below provide details of the evaluation process adopted by the research team in undertaking a rich, qualitative evaluation of the university's HEPPP initiatives, drawing upon Bourdieu's concept of how habitus impacts on experience and through insights gained from applying Smith et al.'s (2015) socio-ecological model.

Process of developing the evaluation framework
The evaluation framework we adopted involved the five distinct but interactive and iterative processes of pre-planning, evaluation design, data collection, data analysis and dissemination (as shown in Figure 2). Throughout all of these phases, the research team engaged in ongoing processes of consultation with key stakeholders including equity project practitioners, staff working in other relevant roles across the university, academics with relevant methodological or content expertise, and community representatives (for instance, Indigenous community representatives); community engagement through regular meetings; critical reflection among the

research team of their role and influence in the process; and monitoring and review of the evaluation process including timelines, stakeholder engagement, and identification of gaps and needs.
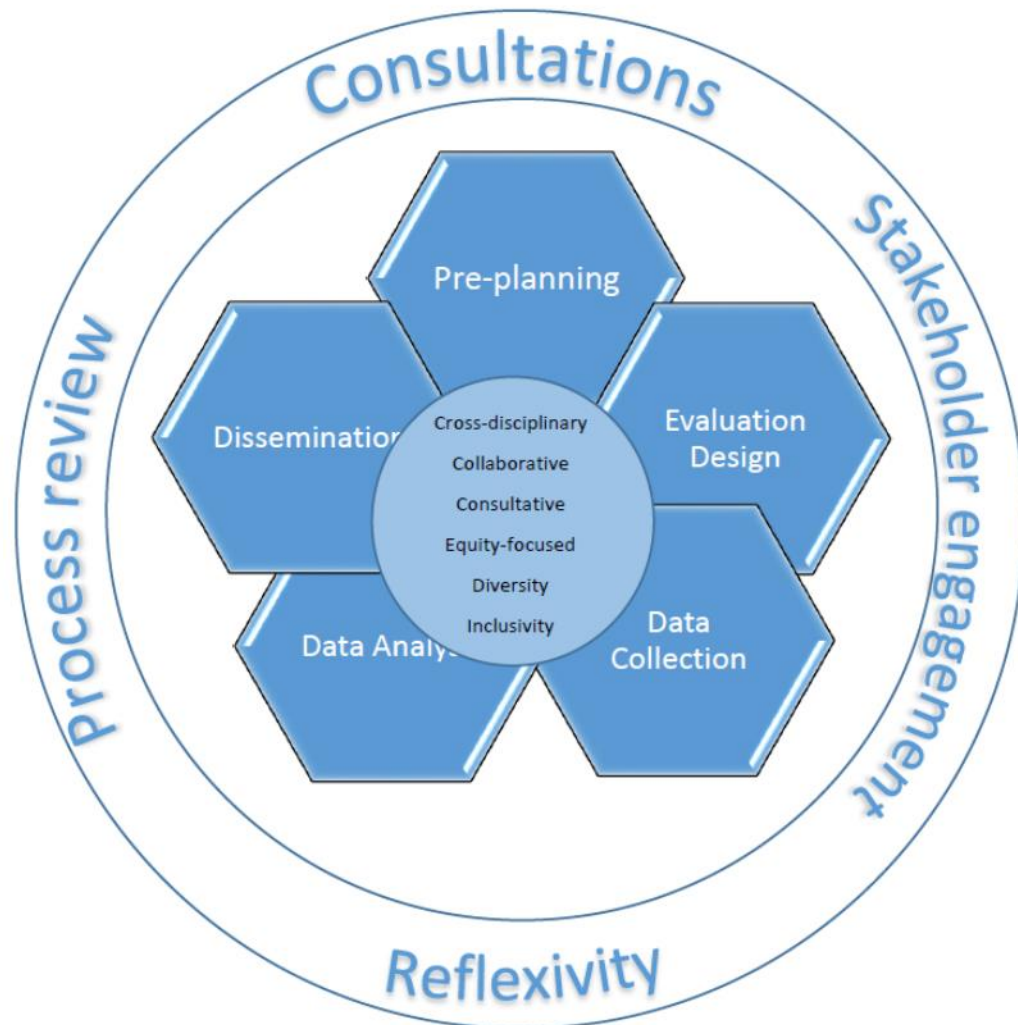

Figure 2: Evaluation framework

i) Pre-planning

During the pre-planning stage, both a project steering committee and a project operational team were established. The steering committee included managers from the university's Equity and Diversity department, and faculty members of the School of Arts and Education who had experience and expertise in inclusive pedagogy and curriculum. The committee's role was to provide guidance on the scope and design of the evaluation, and to oversee that its conduct supported the goals and objectives.

The project operational team included members from a diversity of backgrounds and disciplines, in support of the underpinning values of diversity and inclusivity. The team was comprised of two lead researchers, an Indigenous consultant, a research associate and three research assistants. Team members were from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds including from among Aboriginal, Australasian and Middle Eastern communities. They were also of varying

professional and disciplinary backgrounds, including education, social work, public health, equity and diversity, strategic intelligence and planning, community development, and Aboriginal culture; and possessed varying levels of professional experience including academics with a PhD, current PhD candidates, and early-career researchers. In this way, the research team reflected the values of diversity, inclusivity and multi-disciplinarity. The team embodied these values by sharing perspectives on cultural appropriateness and experiences of inclusive practice to inform the design and conduct of the evaluation.

Prior to the commencement of evaluation, a literature review was carried out by a research assistant. This literature review helped to inform the team about the current state of knowledge and evidence related to this topic, including the types of study designs used and population groups who have been included in previous research. This review helped the team to identify key gaps, and formulate the overall research aim and approach to the evaluation. Using this information and the knowledge and perspectives of the multiple disciplines, the research team devised a research aim, questions and evaluation design. Continued refinement of these questions and evaluation design occurred through weekly meetings held by members of the research team.

ii) Evaluation design
As part of pre-planning, a series of stakeholder consultations were held with the coordinators of each of the individual HEPPP projects initially included in the evaluation. The purpose of these meetings was to: advise project coordinators about the aim of the evaluation, seek their cooperation, and formulate and refine the research questions and theoretical framework. Thus, this research phase led to the next one: evaluation design. Through these consultations, the socio-ecological model was identified as appropriate for conceptualising and exploring the research questions, in order to capture the multiple levels of impacts of HEPPP initiatives on student experiences of higher education (e.g. the individual, community, institutional and policy level impacts). The selection of this model informed the design of data collection instruments (semi-structured interview guides) to ensure that all levels of the socio-ecological model were addressed in questioning. The steering committee and research team engaged in an iterative process of developing and testing participant recruitment and management procedures, and data collection procedures and instruments.

iii) Data collection
A total of 42 participants took part in the research through a combination of 36 individual interviews, one paired interview, and one focus group. Participants were eligible to partake in the study if they were a student or staff member of the university who was involved in HEPPP initiatives either as a participant/recipient, facilitator, or had some other role in the design and delivery of a HEPPP funded initiative. Potential participants were identified through lists of staff and students involved in HEPPP funded projects.

A captioned video detailing the processes of the research was made by the research assistants and uploaded to YouTube. This resource was designed to enhance accessibility and inclusivity of study information and recruitment materials. The Plain Language Statement (PLS) and Consent Form (CF) were attached to the recruitment email.

Data collection involved a concurrent mixed methods design, in which qualitative and quantitative data were gathered in the same phase of the study to simultaneously contribute to shaping it. Participants were offered the choice of a number of ways of being involved in the evaluation, including by participating in an interview or focus group which could be conducted

in-person, via the telephone, or via skype or other online technologies, or yarning circles facilitated by an Indigenous facilitator. Participants also had the choice of whether they took part in an interview individually or in a pair, and they could choose which research assistant to speak with. These multiples approaches were to ensure that methods of participation were inclusive, culturally appropriate and catering to diverse student needs.

Quantitative data were used to supplement and contextualise the qualitative data. Some quantitative data were collected as secondary data from existing internal evaluation reports. Other data were populated from existing databases by the Strategic Intelligence and Planning Unit (SIPU) of the university. Examples of the types of quantitative data gathered include enrolment statistics and retention rates.

iv) Data analysis

The focus group and all but one of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. One participant in an individual interview requested that the interview not be recorded and, in this instance, the research assistant took detailed hand written notes. All identifiable information was removed from transcripts which were then uploaded into the qualitative data management program, Nvivo^{TM}. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts to obtain participants' unique experiences and perceptions of their involvement in the HEPPP initiative, and to examine these experiences within the context of the socio-ecological model. This process facilitated the identification of participants' diverse individual, social and cultural experiences and perceptions, and, therefore, ensured that the study's principles of equity and diversity were upheld.

The creation of a mind map by the research team ensured that all themes and categories were linked to the layers of the socio-ecological model, and ensured that data were analysed at the individual, community, institutional and policy levels. Data analysis was undertaken concurrently with data collection. Thus, the interim analysis and mind maps helped to identify developing themes regarding impacts pertaining to various aspects of students' experiences (such as impacts on their academic outcomes, social networks and experiences, motivation for study), as well as the various levels of the socio-ecological model. This enabled any gaps to be identified and for these gaps to be probed in subsequent data collection. Weekly team meetings included a section concentrating on data analysis, where all members contributed to the mind mapping exercise through different lenses of expertise.

The analysis process involved individual and team reflection, constant collaboration within a team of researchers from diverse professional, social and cultural backgrounds and consultation with members of the university's Equity and Diversity department. This approach ensured that emerging data were considered from multi-disciplinary, social and cultural perspectives, helping to safeguard against individual bias and to promote inclusive and collaborative research practices.

v) Dissemination

Full dissemination of the project findings remains ongoing. It is important that the dissemination plan is undertaken in keeping with the values underpinning the evaluation, such as inclusivity and diversity. For instance, dissemination should be multi-modal, accessible and tailored to the diverse needs between and within various stakeholder groups including participants, decision-makers within the university, external stakeholders such as the government, and widening participation practitioners. Also in support of the underpinning values of the evaluation, the team felt it important to take a holistic view of dissemination, to report not only on findings, which is

beyond the scope of this paper, but to also outline the approach and processes of the evaluation, important aspects discussed in the following pages. It is our intention that this paper about the context and challenges of undertaking this type of cumulative evaluation in an institutional setting will make a valuable contribution to equity and widening participation practice.

Discussion

This paper sought to describe a process for exploring the multiple, intersecting and cumulative effects of the university's HEPPP funded projects on student and staff experiences of higher education, taking a constructivist socio-ecological approach in recognition of the complexity and diversity of factors impacting upon student experiences. The socio-ecological approach also helped to situate student experiences within the broader context of social and environmental influences, rather than individual influences, including institutional cultures and processes. Thus, the evaluation sought to reflect the values of diversity and inclusivity, among others, in all its aspects, including team formation, evaluation design, participant recruitment, and data collection and analysis. The research team felt the collaborative and multi-disciplinary nature of the team, and the adoption of a whole-of-institution socio-ecological approach, were essential to achieving the evaluation aims by enabling a rich, multi-layered investigation. However, the evaluation process was also met with challenges. Some of these are described below, with key learnings or recommendations for future evaluation practice outlined.

Challenges and limitations
One challenge of the evaluation approach was the capacity of the team to sustain involvement in the evaluation, but this is unsurprising given the context of academic workloads (Houston, Meyer & Paewai, 2006). The evaluation was undertaken in addition to team members' regular duties such as teaching, research and other project work. Throughout the evaluation process, there were several changes in team membership with some leaving for reasons such as other emergent commitments, institutional restructuring, and changes to work roles. Identification of the need to add new members arose through a constant process of team reflexivity. This experience highlights the need for evaluation teams to be flexible and adaptable to changing needs and circumstances that arise internally within the team, and as a result of external influences such as broader institutional changes.

The timeframe and scope of the evaluation project also posed substantial challenges. Upon reflection, the research team are of the view that evaluating multiple HEPPP initiatives across a relatively short timeframe (the period of one year) hindered the depth and scope of the evaluation. Changes in the scope of the evaluation were also frequent, such as the removal of some initiatives or expansion of others, due to broader influences such as organisational decision-making and funding. In fact, changing circumstances impacted on the very purpose of the evaluation. The evaluation was initially commissioned to generate evidence about the perceived value of HEPPP funded initiatives for students' experiences of higher education, so this evidence could be used to inform planning and prioritising of HEPPP funding for projects in 2018. However, the planning decisions for 2018 priorities were made in 2017, prior to the evaluation being completed. This led the research team to review the focus of the evaluation and what purpose it could serve, and what value for who, and this reflects the findings of other studies demonstrating the difficulty of evaluating ongoing and long term equity issues with short term funding (Zacharias, 2017).

Despite the efforts of the research team and the strategies built into the evaluation design to support inclusivity of participants with diverse needs, participant recruitment remained a challenge. For instance, recruitment of participants who identified as Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander remained low, and there were no participants recruited from two of the initiatives, despite a number of recruitment emails and follow ups sent to them. We are unclear as to the reasons for this, but we are aware that project teams working on some of the initiatives had already conducted their own evaluation, possibly resulting in participation fatigue (Clark, 2008). It is recommended that there be open communication and planning across HEPPP project teams at the outset of a funding cycle to ensure that a plan for evaluation is included as a key aspect of project design. Evaluation should form a continuous part of the project planning cycle from the outset of program planning, rather than being undertaken as a discrete activity at the end of program implementation (Scheirer, 2012). Planning early for evaluation will ensure that appropriate timelines and resources are available, and that evaluation questions are able to be answered at the end of the project (e.g. information about the necessary indicators or questions that will be able to be gathered).

Another considerable challenge was obtaining the necessary ethics approvals from an external body in order to evaluate one of the broader community-based partnership initiatives. The research team had applied to use an 'opt-out' method for consent in one setting so that without explicitly opting out, participants in that setting were deemed to be assenting. This approach was considered necessary and important in order to tailor the delivery of the evaluation to the groups that the evaluation most needed to capture and to support its equity focus. However, the external body from which ethics approval was required would not approve this process. It was felt by the research team that this in itself posed an additional equity issue for the evaluation, by inhibiting participation by those who most needed to be reached and heard. It became clear to the team that somewhat of a philosophical shift in views of contemporary ethics would be needed to support this, from one of normative 'western' institutional requirements and a more contextual approach. As Lamaro Haintz, Graham and McKenzie (2015) have argued elsewhere, researchers and practitioners must adhere to the ethical requirements of governing ethics bodies, and these requirements consider deontological (rule-based) and consequence-based issues. At times, however, a mismatch may arise between the deontological requirements and the needs or best interests of a community in a setting.

Furthermore, there have been sustained calls for institutional ethics requirements to move from the impersonal and deontological towards a greater consideration of the social context in which they are being considered, and diverse needs of the communities being engaged, particularly for marginalised communities (Glass & Kaufert, 2007; Ijsselmuiden, Kass, Sewankambo & Lavery, 2010; Cribb, 2015; Lamaro Haintz et al., 2015). This situation led Cribb (2015) to propose a need for 'diplomatic ethics' – a negotiated position of compromise between partners – particularly when working in cross-disciplinary situations. In relation to this present evaluation, the authors identified that such a process of negotiation would likely require a timely process of in-depth engagement, including discussions and awareness-raising, with the external ethics body to develop mutual understanding. Further, it was felt that roundtable discussion or face-to-face meetings between the parties would enable deeper and clearer discussions, rather than written correspondence as was typical of the ethics application processes. However, such processes were not feasible in the timeline of this project. Future project evaluations, particularly those which involve third-parties, need particular planning and attention to engagement between the parties. Thus, it is recommended that evaluation teams allocate a substantial amount of time at the outset of project design, during which evaluation plans are considered, to consulting and engaging with external research ethics bodies to generate shared understanding about appropriate meaningful qualitative evaluation methods (including participant recruitment and data collection methods) involving equity groups. For their part, it is recommended that external ethics bodies are open to dialogue and to considering contextual ethics.

Conclusions

Project evaluation is complex and nuanced. There have been calls for a national framework for evaluation of HEPPP initiatives, but given the diverse aims of these initiatives, and the various purposes for which evaluation is undertaken, this would be complex. The evaluation process presented in this paper does not seek to be generalisable to all settings or situations, or to the evaluation of all HEPPP initiatives. Instead, it seeks to provide some guidance and ideas for others seeking to develop a rich understanding of how HEPPP initiatives have influenced students' experiences and lives. In particular, it demonstrates a process for evaluating effects across the breadth of HEPPP interventions within an institutional setting, rather than the individual project impacts or outcomes, in acknowledgement of the many intersecting influences across the socio-ecological context that cumulatively influence students' habitus and their higher education experiences. These influences are at the individual, family and community, institutional, and policy levels. The evaluation process outlined here sought to explore the multiple factors at each of these levels which influence student and staff experiences of HEPPP funded initiatives.

Similarly, the evaluation process was also influenced by the socio-ecological context, and hence was disrupted by multiple factors at the team level, the community level (such as third-party partners or bodies), institutional level and policy level. Thus, evaluation of this kind requires the evaluation team to practice reflexivity in relation to themselves and their role, the purpose of the evaluation, and of emergent equity issues. Further to this, the team also needs to be adaptable and able to respond to changing circumstances. A key lesson learned from this evaluation process is that there needs to be adequate support for evaluation at all levels, from the evaluation team members, other key stakeholders such as HEPPP project teams, relevant external stakeholders (such as community partners or external ethics bodies), through to departmental or institutional level decision-makers. This support should take the form of practical measures such as sufficient resources to enable time for collaborative project and evaluation planning, as well as symbolic support such as a willingness to be open to collaboration and considering new ways of working effectively and equitably together.

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