Whose Responsibility is Equity and Social Justice within the Higher Education System? Reflections on the Australian university sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Covid-19 has had a dramatic impact on the delivery and implementation of university courses globally. These impacts have had a disproportionate impact on communities already marginalised, as deep-seeded structural inequalities result in those most vulnerable bearing the brunt of economic, physical, and emotional costs. Against the backdrop of neo-liberalism, the university sector moves to slash operational costs in response to the hypothesised loss in international student revenue. While the international student community suffers increased social vulnerability due to the impacts of Covid-19, market-driven government rhetoric continues to promote the international student ''market'' as a coveted income stream. This creates significant ethical and moral tensions as educators are exposed to the front-line realities of student disadvantage and inequality. By drawing from core social work concepts of social justice and human rights, this critical narrative reflects on the experiences of a social work academic teaching in the Covid-19 education context. It seeks to consider the diverse roles and responsibilities of government, universities and global citizens in response to the ethical conundrum that is the modern Australian higher education sector.

This paper presents a personal narrative about teaching international students during the global pandemic and highlights deeply rooted neoliberal mechanisms that serve as barriers to the achievement of equitable educational outcomes. As COVID-19 further solidifies deep seeded global inequity within health care, access to information, women's rights, racial oppression, marginalisation and human rights (Ozkazanc-Pan and Pullen 2021; Schiariti 2020), this paper borrows from Human Rights discourse to argue for more equitable access to higher education during the pandemic (and beyond). By considering the role of the university, government, and academics, this article considers the possibilities for improved access and reduced inequality within the neo liberal university, as part of a broader social justice and human rights mandate. In the age of uncertainty, efforts that encourage collective action represent the strongest defence again shared global issues (Bodenstein et al. 2017). This paper concludes by highlighting the power of unity in shared understandings of what it is to be human and suggests that it is this very 'humanness' that enables us to resist forces that seek to render education as a commodity rather than a human right.

Before exploring the narrative, it is important to consider the current socio-political context in which both academics and international students engage with the academy. Unequivocally, COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on the delivery and implementation of university courses globally (Dennis 2021; Jojoa et al. 2021). Within the Australian context, the international student market represents some $37 billion annually (ABS 2020). With international borders shut, universities have launched an argument that the lack of international student enrolments will translate to huge financial losses for the higher education sector (Universities Australia 2021). This has led to the justification of huge labour cuts and job losses, despite many universitys recording a budget surplus in the past financial year (Ross 2021). Not only has this created an emotional toll for academics who have witnessed the loss of colleagues, there has also been a parallel rise in workload as existing staff attempt to manage with fewer resources and amidst pressure to rapidly convert face-to-face teaching to online modes (Cutri et al. 2020). This move to online teaching has enabled universities to maintain at least some of the international student body who are attempting to complete their studies whilst caught overseas and unable to return to Australia. However, the push to online learning has not been without shortcomings. Concerns about the efficacy of online teaching models (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020; Hodges et al. 2020; Vlachopoulos 2020) include: the limitations of social interaction and

cross cultural exchange that face-to-face learning would otherwise provide (Kuong 2014); and the barriers to online engagement brought about by economic, geographical, gender, language, age and socio-political constraints (Fishbane and Tomer 2020; Guliford 2020; Dorn et al. 2020). The following personal experience is an account of these very real constraints in the day-to-day lives of academics and university students.

A Personal Narrative of Experiences Teaching During Covid-19

In the most recent semester, I was delegated to teach a first year 'introductory' social work subject comprising roughly 150 domestic and international enrolments. The student body featured a combination of high school leavers and mature age adults (many already working in the health and human services sector), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many first in family, a vast representation of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people of diverse abilities, those who identify as belonging to LGBTIQ+ communities, a significant number of full-time carers of school aged children (mainly women), and approximately 70% of students enrolled in the online/external mode of teaching. Compared to some of my colleagues, whose first year class sizes exceeded 300-500, I was viewed as having a relatively 'light' workload. This is despite the additional supports required for first year students who face significant challenges as they adjust to the university classroom environment (Ding and Curtis 2021).

Issues of language and culture shock for those where English may not be their first language (Naylor et al. 2018; Nel et al. 2009) and gaps in educational knowledge for those who may have faced interrupted education due to conflict, war, natural disaster, gender considerations, structural and racial oppression, cultural obligations and/or geographical isolation (Martin and Mulvihill 2021; Jones 2017; Naylor et al. 2017) are also key pedological considerations when delivering first year curriculum. For social work students particularly, many come with a history of adverse childhood experiences and past [or current] trauma (Newcomb et al. 2017). In my experience, this combination of factors often leads to an unofficial workplace preference to teach final year cohorts, as these are seen as less labour intensive as teaching first year units. These elements also highlight why issues of retention are often the most significant within the first 12 months of study (Naylor et al. 2017) and why education support programs often target first year cohorts. It may also explain the incessant tension within the neoliberal academy between providing adequate support to new students and the tug of an insurmountable workload (Jabbar et al. 2018; Leese 2010). Rising frustrations at the constant slashing of student support services to maintain economic efficiency within the university further compounds this (Crockford et al. 2015).

It is within this pressure cooker workload dynamic that I came to know one international student, Rupa[1]. Rupa was one of the many faceless students who did not turn their cameras on and who sporadically appear as black squares in my online lectures. It was around week three of semester that I started receiving emails from her, "*maam, I need your help…*", "*ma'am, your assistance is required*", "*madam, I need you to help me*". I would provide an obligatory response; "What is it you are needing help with? Have you checked Blackboard for the latest information?". For weeks went this back and forth of exchange before finally, my brusque email correspondence culminated in the form of a one-line email from Rupa: "*Ma'am, please help me, there is no one else*". Feeling guilt at my own antagonism coupled at this point with worry as to the student's wellbeing, I agreed to meet with Rupa via zoom the following day. As we were finally able to engage face-to-face, or at least virtually, I was met with an image of a young woman, sitting on the floor of a concrete, windowless room. I asked Rupa where she was, she said she was at her home in India and this is the only room she could get 'good enough' internet connection. I swallowed hard as I confronted my own privilege and saw a glimpse into her life as an international student, living in a continent hard-hit by Covid-19 outbreaks; experiencing over 33 million cases and 450 thousand deaths (JHU CSSE 2021).

Rupa then began to ask me a series of questions… Firstly, 'Maam, how can I access the lectures?'. It had turned out that her lack of participation in class had not been due to lack of effort as I had unfairly assumed, but because she had been unable to find how to access the lectures, gained by clicking on a rather innocuous camera icon, layered under several tabs of the online unit learning platform. Her second question was in theory, equally easy to resolve, 'Maam, where can I get the text book from?'. When I responded that she can borrow this from the library, she explained 'but how can I do this? I cannot go to the library in person as I am not in Australia'. I was then aware that Rupa had no experience with online library functionality or e-book modes of learning. She also revealed that she was confused by what it meant in the assessment when it asked for 'references'.

I spent about an hour on Zoom with Rupa, mainly connecting her to various supports throughout the university, including library and language skills. I recall how at the end of our time together she burst into tears, sobbing, "*How can I ever thank you? I have tried to ask so many people for help, even my classmates, my other teachers. No one would help me. You have been the only one*". I felt embarrassed and ashamed. How is it that no-

one was willing to help this student out? I also felt angry. How could the university accept full fee-paying students without any understanding of their ability to engage with the course? I also felt vulnerable, as if I had overstepped an invisible work/role boundary by providing this 'additional' level of support to a student. I feared questions and repercussions as to whether I would be perceived as unfairly assisting Rupa over others, especially when I agreed to meet with her once a week until the end of semester. I was confused about where the boundaries lie. Was this my role as an educator? What about the fact that I'm not been given any extra workload for this? Shouldn't this be the role of our university support systems? It is these existential questions that led me to critically examine responsibility within the provision of equitable higher education and to consider these responsibilities within the context of human rights and social justice.

Whose Responsibility is it to Provide Access to Education?

The challenges of navigating the university system in the age of neo-liberalism have been well established (Rice 2019; Schultz et al. 2019; Valente 2019; Ball 2015; Giroux 2014). These include tensions for academics who face increasing workloads in wake of cuts to administrative, student support and technical services (Rice 2019). The consequential outcomes of cutting staff to 'save' funds, is the shifting of labour requirements onto academics who work at the front line of student interaction (Wright et al. 2021). Students also suffer within the consumer model of university education with significant rates of financial hardship and poor mental health (Johnstone et al. 2016; Newcomb 2019) and a reduction in student support services (Crockford et al. 2015). These issues are particularly compounded for international students who face additional structural and racial barriers that impact their capacity to engage in learning (Skyrme and McGee 2016; Harrison and Felton 2013). There seems little hope to resolving ideological questions linked to the commodification of education, with successive neo-liberal governments all but obliterating the concept of university as a mechanism for creativity, liberalism, progressive thinking and social capital (Giroux 2014; 2002). A wave of apathy has clutched the Australian public, who have seemingly shrugged their shoulders as access to studying Arts and Humanities, key disciplines in the development of critical thinking, have been relegated to elite, with degrees in these areas facing increased fees of up to 113% (Walton 2020). Furthermore, the notion of the Nation State and government responsibility to invest in social capital (via Higher Education) seems like a distant and forgotten dream. All of this comes to a head as different sides of the political spectrum attempt to shift responsibility when it comes to addressing questions of equity and access within the Australian higher education system.

One option to shedding some light on these tensions could be found by applying a human rights lens on higher education. Certainly both sides of the political spectrum have touted claims of human rights and humanitarian ideals such as, for example, to justify the invasion of Iraq. In fact, some go so far as to argue that the Creed of Human Rights is one of the biggest social trends to sweep across the globe (Wolhuter 2019: 39). Given consistent critiques that highlight the negative impact of neoliberalism on social cohesion, equitable wealth distribution and disruption to livelihoods due to over consumption and climate change (Dominelli 2012; Piketty 2014; Lundy 2011), Human Rights may offer a conceptual framework by which there is an espoused universal appeal and applicability.

Education as Human Rights

The language of human rights has become a power force, in part due to its capacity to transcend laws of a single nation due to the 'universal' nature to which human rights can apply (Barton 2020; Osler 2016). It is important to note that the so called 'universality' of human rights have been criticised due to the heavy Eurocentric assumptions that underpin this position (Zuchowski et al. 2017; Ife and Tascon 2016). However, as a broad moral language, human rights can continue to have meaningful application in diverse global and cultural contexts (Ife 2016, 2012). 'Human rights' generally refers to the construction of human rights within the United Nations (UN) Declaration of Human Rights developed in response to World War II. Yet references to human entitlements within the confines of a moral impediment have consistently circulated since the 18th century, such as the contributions of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Immanual Kant and others (Wolhuter 2019). Considerations for both communal and ecological rights have also existed for millennium within many Indigenous, and First Nations people (Gray et al. 2008).

Within these constructs of human rights, education (including the right to educate according to cultural values and beliefs) has also been asserted (Faleolo 2013; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Indeed those from the same tradition as Thomas Jefferson and influential in the much acclaimed American Constitution assert that '*each individual should be granted an equal opportunity to education - that is, an equal opportunity to progress and to achieve…irrespective of the person's gender, race or social background*' (Husen 1979: 79 cited in Wolhuter 2019).

In the 2030 Agenda, of which both Australia and the US are signatories, the UN has established Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 - Quality Education ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN 2015). SDG 4

specifically addresses issues of equity in education and is divided further into 10 objectives with the view to ensure inclusive, equitable and lifelong access to education as the basis for improving people's lives and achieving sustainable development (Costantini 2019). Rights to equitable and quality education have also been outlined in the Convention against Discrimination in Education, the Global Education First Initiative (Justino 2014) and The Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrants and their families (Barton 2020). Again, Australia has agreed to uphold these conventions, in addition to various Nation-based legal frameworks to promote freedom from discrimination and to promote the rights of certain groups including women and migrants.

The Role of Government

Within the constructs of rights as determined by the UN and the countries that form membership, it is arguably the role of government to then enact, abide and uphold these commitments. In this sense, the role of government could be seen as central in ensuring equitable access to higher education. Within Australia, it is easy to mount the claim that a university education is indeed available to all on the basis of the HECS/HELP student loan scheme and the provision of social security payments to students of low socio-economic status. However, this argument is based on the premise of equality, rather than equity. This model is based on an assumption that all people are born equal and fails to account for social, racial, gender and geographical barriers that may impact a person's ability to move through the education system and pursue higher education (Giroux 2002). The attractive proposition of equality (rather than equity) underpins individualised, capitalist agendas and has consequently led to blaming individuals who don't obtain education milestones as somehow lacking in individual merit (De Lissovoy 2013). It also leaves room for governments to argue that they support higher education by not intervening in the affairs of corporate, business model vision of education. This consumer-driven idea would then push responsibility onto universities, as contributors to the market, to uphold any ideals of equality. Thus students, as individual consumers, would be able to hold universities accountable through the power of choice; their ability to leave and enrol elsewhere to obtain a better 'product' (Choudaha and de Wit 2014). Aside from the fact that choice erroneously assumes a level of equal capacity for social mobility, most Australian universities remain publicly funded entities, at least in part.

Since the neoliberal ideology began to dominate Australian universities in the 1990s, international students have become 'cash-cows' that have helped to minimise the impact of consequent government cuts to university investment. International students represent $37.5 billion to the Australian economy annually (Xiao et al. 2020). The

early messages from the Australian government at the onset of the pandemic were very clear that international students, if unable to financially support themselves, must return to their home countries (Gibson and Moran 2020). Those students from China and India (two of the largest education 'markets') face significant barriers in being able to travel and return back to Australia from these countries. This includes, as the initial Delta outbreak showed, Indian diaspora, despite having Australian citizenship or permanent residency (Khorana 2021). The scars of this racially biased policy decision will be felt amongst these communities for years to come.

Given that international students also contribute significantly to the 'unskilled' labour force, such as those involved in the domestic and industrial cleaning, taxi driving, hospitality and food delivery services (Howe 2019), it would surely be in the Government's interest to re-open borders. The reduction of travel restrictions and freedom of movement would enable these international students to re-engage with the broader Australian economic context (Grozinger and Parsons 2020), not to mention the contribution to social capital and cultural diversity these students offer to the country (Rienties et al., 2015). However, such re-opening poses great risks in terms of the spread of Covid to populations with low vaccine uptake (Stayner 2021) and travel accessibility is limited to those with enough wealth to cover the potential costs of quarantine. If equity and human rights were to factor in any way within Government spending, such a re-opening would require substantial economic investment to cater to the diverse needs of a globalised student body. Given the unlikelihood of the current conservative Australian Government to support a vision to fund a more equitable higher education sector, an appeal to economic rationalism suggests that attracting international students presents a lucrative financial opportunity (Hurley 2020).

The Role of Universities

The current Minister for Education and Youth, Alan Tudge, asserts that it is the responsibility of universities to diversify their funding through innovation, commercialisation and partnership with private industry to fund research endeavours (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2021). Apart from reeking of neoliberal free market rhetoric, this call to arms for universities is further compelled by the crash in international student arrivals due the consequence of Covid-19 and restricted global movement. The bottom has essentially fallen out of the Higher Education sector, which has relied on funding by international students to prop up both the provision of domestic education services, but also fund research and capital investment (Carnegie et al. 2021). This is arguably a problem of neoliberalism's own making, by driving a skewed market-driven agenda (the market being

international students), rather than a genuine commitment in educational investment as a source of social and human capital (Aronwitz and Giroux 2000). As such, it is up to universities to balance their bottom line so as to remain open.

This responsibility, as we have seen, has resulted in large staff cuts, increased workload, and the reduction of student support services deemed non-essential to the overall operation of university business (Carnegie et al. 2021). From a neoliberal view point, the Higher Education sector has done exactly what has been expected to survive in this formidable market landscape in the wake of Covid-19. Preserving funds and ensuring surplus trumps any ideals that see higher education as a function of democratic or Nation State (Giroux 2013). As such, universities as an example of the modern-day business model, need only concern themselves with issues of equity and access if it impacts on their capacity to raise or maintain revenue.

Such business and consumer model mindsets are disappointing within higher education, given the consistent evidence demonstrating the role of institutional factors in reducing the vulnerability of students of diverse cultural backgrounds (Norton and Bucatarie 2019; Harrison and Felton 2013). Education systems should therefore be held accountable for the opportunities they create for students to overcome adversity (OECD 2018). Research shows that international students face additional barriers to education due to experiences of both individual and institutional racism and that universities have an explicit responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of international students (Wei and Bunju 2021; Veness 2017; Harrison and Felton 2013). Similar concerning reports about university complacency have also been made in terms of gender safety and the rights of women on campus (Gebicki et al. 2017).

The possibilities of universities serving as sites of imperialism also need to be acknowledged, as Western epistemological assumptions within the academy seek to marginalise diverse cultural and Indigenous ontologies (Dominelli 2014). Additionally, the accepted social discourse around being a 'poor student' and the status of living in poverty while studying is a convenient prop to the casualisation of the labour force as many students are forced into casual roles so as to afford basic costs of living (Brownfield et al. 2020). Of course, since the stronghold of the Covid-19 pandemic and the experience of lockdowns, it is these casual, student workers that have been among the first to lose their jobs (Davitt et al. 2021). Arguably, universities can maintain that the impacts of Covid-19 are outside of their control and thus dodge responsibility for ensuring student wellbeing. Most, if not all universities, have chosen to address the issue of access by switching to online learning, irrespective of any additional pressures this may put on existing academic staff (Mseleku 2020).

The Role of Academics

Inevitably, in any issue involving the implementation of teaching or in response to student needs, it is academics that bear the cost (Newcomb 2021). For many, this cost is emotional and not just physical labour (Wright et al. 2021). Within my own experiences over the past ten years of working in the higher education sector, I have had many students in my office in tears. I've heard stories of economic hardship and the significant impact this has on mental wellbeing. I've had students who are homeless, students fleeing domestic violence, students with uncertain immigration statuses. I've had disclosures of racism, substance misuse, students who have attempted suicide, and I have had to call an ambulance… twice. Such experiences are becoming more commonplace within the academy as several publications have also commented on similar student vulnerability within the university context (e.g. Hamza et al. 2021; Post et al. 2021; Saxton 2021; Newcomb 2021; Singh et al. 2020; Lawless 2018; Orygen 2017; Swannell 2014).

Increasingly I, like many others, have had: students with various overt mental-health needs (Hamza et al. 2021; Saheb et al. 2021; McAllister et al. 2014); students who identify as having a disability; students who have expressed concerns regarding a lack of cultural safety within the university, which is further mirrored by the experiences of institutional racism among academics (Maseko 2020; Green et al. 2018). There are also students who have suffered unexpected loss or death, and a disturbingly high number of female students who tell of their experience of sexual harassment, intimidation, gender discrimination and violence (Australian Human Rights Commission 2017). Regardless of whether this should be the role of an academic, this encapsulates many female academics' experiences (Newcomb 2021; Lawless 2018).

Disappointingly, student consultation time is only marginally accounted for in workload (if at all), despite a growing expectation to respond to students' overt need for not only educational support, but also social, psychological, and spiritual care (Rogers 2017). These pastoral, emotionally laborious, and at times, crisis management activities, are not included in dominant neoliberal constructions of the role of the academic (Newcomb 2021; Elof et al. 2021). The suggestion from university management is to, wherever possible, refer to appropriate student support services. The irony, thanks to funding cuts, is that services are inadequate, often with extensive waiting times to obtain an appointment (Saheb et al. 2021; Headspace. 2016).

For many students, including Rupa, there is little knowledge of what services exist, or how to navigate processes and booking procedures (Becker et al. 2018). For students currently overseas or in lockdown, there is also the logistical barrier that they simply cannot access face-to-face support due to geographical isolation. Issues of gender sensitivity, shame and stigma, cultural safety and overall quality of student support services are also variables that influence whether or not students seek to engage in these mechanisms (Orygen 2017; Roberts et al. 2015), assuming they are available to begin with.

In response to this, I'm encouraged in my role as an academic to establish clear boundaries and I am careful to carve out designated student consult hours in recognition of the potential for my time to become consumed by issues of student wellbeing. Despite my best efforts, I have found myself being drawn into discourses that view student 'issues' as the time-sucking and labour-intensive consequence of teaching millennials, demonising students for not being more resilient and becoming angered that time spent with students strips me of valuable research time. Alas neoliberalism has spun its elusive web and I, along with many of my most vulnerable students, have found myself deeply entangled. It is only through my commitment to critical pedagogy and enabling students to engage in reflection of their own structural oppression that I have been able to survive a system that would otherwise seek to attribute individual blame and label both students and staff as 'failures' (Giroux 2013). It is this same critical pedagogy that prioritises education for its emancipatory aims (Morley and Ablett 2020) and situates educational barriers within a human rights and social justice mandate (Ty 2011).

Education as a social justice issue

The proviso with viewing education as a human rights issue, is that education is viewed as one among many so-called inalienable rights. This would include access to adequate housing, food and job security, freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, sexuality, ability, age, citizenship or gender, and the right to pursue one's talents and interests, in accordance with your cultural, ethnic and religious beliefs (Amnesty 2021). The fulfillment of the right to education cannot be achieved unless it is done alongside a deliberate commitment to uphold human rights more broadly (Donnelly 2013). When one or more of these rights are withheld, access to education becomes an even bigger barrier (Justino 2014; Lamichhane 2013). With the impact of Covid-19 disproportionality affecting people of low socio-economic status, persons with a disability, the aging, those with existing health conditions, those with poor health literacy and people of colour (Blundell at al. 2020; Anyane-Yeboa et al. 2020), it is those groups who need to be most supported when it comes to

ensuring equity and access to higher education. It is at the point where education fails to reach certain groups or populations that it is no longer just a human rights issue, but indeed a social justice issue.

Similar to the notion of human rights, there can be ambiguity with regards to the term 'social justice' and its connotations. In a narrow legal sense, the criminal justice system considers justice to be issues of equality (Chen and Tang 2021). In the seminal text *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971: 60-61) identifies two main principles of justice: everyone must have equal access . . . and socioeconomic inequalities should be reduced to benefit everyone. Broader definitions of social justice describe an ideal state of society where individuals and social groups can enjoy protection of their basic human rights (Chen and Tang 2021). Theoretically, social justice cannot be understood unless it engages with the concept of human rights as the overarching mechanism by which social justice is achieved (Martinez Herrero and Charnley 2019). Recognising access to education as a social justice issue and, in particular, access to education in response to the COVID pandemic, requires a significant shift from the current individualising and pathologising discourses. Similar to the relationship between Covid-19 and climate change (Baldwin and English 2020), overcoming the challenges to education and the impact of Covid-19 cannot be achieved individually and relies on cooperation and collaboration. In fact, it is this collaboration and collective responsibility that singlehandedly lights the way to the fulfillment of human rights including those that pertain to higher education.

The role of 'us'

In Celina Valente's (2019) commentary on the activist scholar, she notes how the personal, professional, and public spheres have been relegated to separate and clearly demarcated realms, or systems. The purpose of this is of course intentional, as this helps the neoliberal imperative to denigrate people as objects, who engage in the world as both contributors and consumers of material outcomes (Giroux 2010). In such a construct, education can easily be measured in terms of 'units'. That is, a measure of operationally defined, commodified knowledge of which the student consumes (at a fee) and the university must deliver, ideally at the lowest possible price (Rice 2019). However, what such ideological positions ignore is that at the core of all these systems are humans. Humans, however flawed, are not unemotive machines, but rather sentient beings capable of great love, care and aspiration. The biggest short failing of neoliberalism is its failure to account for our humanity (Valente 2019). Ultimately humanity has the potential to challenge and critique the dehumanising mechanisms of the academy as it seeks to mass produce neoliberal robots (Morley et al. 2019).

We humans, capable of complex emotional states and immeasurable creativity, are the key to solving social justice issues in both education and the broader global society.

Part of responding to the social justice prerogative inherent in both the Covid pandemic and higher education scenarios is the acknowledgement that humans are inherently social beings. It is through this interaction, connection and collaboration that human beings are capable of great achievements towards the equitable fulfillment of human rights (Martinez Herrero and Charnley 2021). It is because of this collective power that organised labour groups, lobbyists, women rights activists and Unions are seen as such a threat to the dominant neoliberal world order (Dominelli and Khan 2000). It is for that very reason that the answer to the question of whose responsibility it is to ensure equitable access to education, and indeed the broader application of human rights, is 'us'. As humans capable of care, love, sadness, joy and compassion. Humans who understand justice and are capable of imagination. Humans who value both human rights and education. Humans who dream for a more socially just and equitable planet for all human beings to enjoy.

Against a backdrop of rapid globalisation, the internationalisation of higher education, the stronghold of neoliberal ideology and the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, the key question has arisen as to just whose responsibility is it to uphold social justice and equitable education provision in the Australian higher education sector? It is hoped that this narrative serves as an opportunity to reflect on the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders within higher education and consequently highlights the role we all play in the acquisition of a fair and equitable university sector. It is not only our collective responsibility to ensure human rights and remove barriers to access, but our collective capacity to enact positive social change that highlights the incredible nature of what it is to be part of humanity.

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Notes:

1. Name changed to protect student identity.

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Dr Kate Saxton was born on Wadawarrung (also Wathaurong, Wathaurung) Country to a Dutch mother and American father of Irish and Navajo ancestry. She has previously lived in Fiji and Tonga where she both taught and worked as a social work practitioner before returning to Australia in 2014. Kate has a strong interest in decolonising approaches to research and education and has worked extensively in community development and cross-cultural settings. Her PhD explored the role of Western educational and professional agendas usurping traditional models of social care within Fiji and she maintains a strong commitment to culturally responsive and decolonising movements within social work. Kate is now based in Darwin and works as an academic with Charles Darwin University, coordinating the Masters of Social Work Course and engaging in qualitative social research. Kate's research interests include decolonisation in research and practice, social work education, critical social work, human rights and Pacific Communities.

To The Tune Of "Nine Below Zero"

There is a silence at the back of words
That you can never hear
Except in winter when the wind lies low.

Sometimes it gets so bitter cold back there
That words go blind
And cannot feel their way into the fields:

You say a word
As snowflakes mob you, walking to the barn,
Yet no one hears.

Light cannot coax
That silence into sound: crows creak on by,
An old bough cracks. . .

But now and then
A frozen word turns in your mouth
And you can taste raw silence on your tongue.

KEVIN HART