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Beyond Access: When Educational Justice Requires Institutions to Learn How to Belong to Students

Dr Gemma Mann[1]

[1] Senior Lecturer, School of Access Education, Centre for Research in Equity and Advancement of Teaching and Education (CREATE), CQUniversity Australia
Correspondence: g.mann@cqu.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Educational justice is often judged by access, participation, representation, and retention, yet belonging is rarely examined as a measure of justice. For LGBTQIA+ students, belonging in higher education is frequently conditional and precarious, and it can depend on suppressing aspects of identity. This article argues that the burden of adaptation should not rest solely with students and that institutions must learn how to belong to their students. Drawing on the literature and on the author's lived experience as an LGBTQIA+ academic working in equity, diversity and inclusion, it offers three practical examples of how institutions can shift that burden: recognizing students' names, pronouns, and gender in institutional systems; developing staff, rather than students, through multi-tiered diversity education; and supporting meaningful representation of diverse identities within learning environments. Educational justice is achieved not when students learn how to belong to the university, but when the university learns how to belong to its students.

KEYWORDS: educational justice; belonging; LGBTQIA+ students; higher education; institutional responsibility; inclusion

Introduction

How many students have succeeded in education by becoming less themselves? Researchers have shown that students need to have a sense of belonging to an institution in order to have the best chance of success (van Kessel et al., 2025). In contrast, educational justice is often evaluated through indicators of access, participation, representation, and retention (Cazden, 2012). Belonging, however, is rarely critically examined as a gauge of educational justice. For students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual or have other diversities of sexuality, gender and bodies (LGBTQIA+), belonging is often conditional, negotiated, and precarious, reflecting broader social inequalities that persist within higher education institutions (Pruitt & Pinchbeck, 2022). The challenge is not simply whether LGBTQIA+ students can 'fit in' to educational institutions. Must students suppress aspects of their identity in order to belong within dominant institutional cultures? Literature consistently suggests the answer is yes (Blankenau et al., 2023; Evangelista et al., 2022; Pruitt & Pinchbeck, 2022). The question then becomes: how could educational justice principles help institutions to flip the script, and learn to belong to their students?

When Presence Is Not Justice

The presence of historically marginalised students is often treated as evidence of educational justice. Yet representation alone does not guarantee recognition, belonging, or equitable participation, particularly within institutions that continue to privilege normative identities (Evangelista et al., 2022; Knijn et al., 2020). Access is necessary but insufficient. Access answers one question only: Can I get in? A student may gain access without ever experiencing educational justice. Educational justice, however, must also ask: What does it take to belong? Am I able to flourish? What would the institution look like to enable students to flourish?

The Hidden Labour of Belonging

Belonging in a university context has been shown not only to support academic success, but also to enhance psychological wellbeing, coping, and self-esteem (van Kessel et al., 2025). It can be measured in part by "student perceptions of how comfortable they are being themselves at their institution" (Tice et al., 2021, p. 3). For many LGBTQIA+ students, feeling comfortable requires continuous decisions about authenticity, disclosure, and participation, and gender, sex, and sexuality are aspects commonly hidden in order to attempt to 'fit in' (Evangelista et al., 2022). Hiding cannot lead to belonging if people are not free to be themselves (Goriss-Hunter et al., 2025). This identity suppression involves significant "labour of adaptation" in the form of "performativity required to 'pass' in institutions that are not structurally designed for them" (Goriss-Hunter et al., 2025, p. 4431). The real challenge is not simply improving students' ability to adapt by giving them more tools or support services to do so, but to examine those very structures that exclude. If educational success requires

students to suppress, conceal, or distance themselves from important aspects of identity, can we truly describe the outcome as educationally just?

Reimagining Educational Justice

Educational institutions often ask: Is the student ready for university?

The question should be: Is the university ready for the student?

Educational justice requires institutions to understand themselves as participants in transformation rather than merely facilitators of student transformation. The burden of adaptation cannot and should not reside solely with students. Drawing on lived-experience as an LGBTQIA+ academic working in equity, diversity and inclusion, this article offers three practical examples of how institutions can shift that burden and foster belonging.

Who am I?

Students can experience significant emotional distress when their legal name does not align with their identity. If that name is displayed across systems, it is likely to cause distress, and require significant emotional labour as students repeatedly request that administrative staff, teachers or support workers use their preferred name. In addition, a legal name can create assumptions about pronouns.

Apart from the central student record system, where legal name may be required, it is possible to have the preferred name displayed by default where students and staff would see on a day-to-day basis. This includes but is not limited to learning management systems, web-conferencing tools, collaboration systems, institutional student email address, and communications. It should not be up to the student to have to change all of these. If they update their preferred name, systems should automatically adapt. Crucially, it must be easy for students to update their preferred name without question or judgement. There may have to be some behind-the-scenes approval to prevent inappropriate entries, but any reasonable request should not be denied. Equally important are clear, easily accessible instructions that allow students to do this without having to request the information.

Pronouns can be included by default in most web-conferencing tools and collaboration systems; institutions may simply need to activate the relevant feature. Pronouns should be included in email signature templates and encouraged wherever possible. While official gender recorded may be subject to reporting requirements, gender fields should reflect contemporary best practice, extend beyond binary categories, and be easily updated without unnecessary administrative burden. All communications and policies should reflect this, and avoid binary wording such as ‘he or she’, or gendered language such as ‘maternity leave’.

What did you say?

The research shows students face considerable exclusion, bias, micro-aggressions and explicit discrimination. This means students bear the burden of self-monitoring their language and behaviour, navigating who to trust, and managing risks to their safety, all impacting wellbeing and belonging. Students adapt their behaviour.

For educational justice, however, it should be staff who are aided to adjust their behaviour. Diversity education should be multi-tiered, comprehensive, and also considerate of the backgrounds of all people involved (Mann, 2022). Foundational education on inclusive language, behaviour, and practice

should be embedded within mandatory institutional professional development; however, institutions must commit to embracing lived-experience codesign principles in its development. Voluntary Ally programs can develop staff to be truly knowledgeable, understanding, have practised skills as an 'upstander' against discrimination, and most significantly, be safe people for students to approach. The institution needs to back the Allies and genuinely act on reports of misconduct and inappropriate behaviour. The third tier of education is for executive management. While it may share features with Ally training, it should foreground institutional accountability by highlighting the measurable institutional consequences of decisions related to inclusion, including impacts on reputation, media scrutiny, student recruitment and retention, staff engagement, and organisational success.

Where am I?

Students spend a majority of their time immersed in the learning environment, including course materials, tutorials, practical sessions, and assessment. If students cannot 'see' themselves, they may feel like outsiders or perceive themselves as unimportant. If students never encounter examples of people like them, then they may struggle to develop a sense of belonging in those contexts. Even more importantly, if they see themselves as being pathologized, this leads to feelings of low self-worth and can have consequences to mental wellbeing and even suicidality (Garcia et al., 2025).

It may be a difficult feat to request all educators include positive, diverse representations, as they may end up being tokenistic, and 'add-on' or actually detrimental—for example in the field of psychology, the emphasis on diagnosing a 'disorder' can lead educators to include LGBTQIA+ identities under the banner of 'sexual perversion' or misconstruing 'gender dysphoria' to mean it is something inherent in the patient that needs to be 'treated'. Institutions can support educators through centralised resources (both static or interactive), expert consultation, and lived-experience partnerships that facilitate meaningful representation.

Conclusion: A Challenge for Educational Justice

The theme from the Educational Justice Symposium was "Innovative Leadership in Education: NextGen Learning—Exploring the Future of Education". As higher education pursues "future-ready" graduates, there is a need to pause and ask a more uncomfortable question: future-ready for whom? For LGBTQIA+ students, educational success has often depended upon resilience, adaptability, and the management of identity. These are frequently celebrated as strengths, yet they can also conceal an inequitable reality in which some students are required to undertake significantly more work, including emotional labour, simply to belong.

Innovative leadership is demonstrated through a willingness to challenge systems, assumptions, and cultures that require marginalised students to adapt in order to succeed. For LGBTQIA+ students, a genuinely 'educationally just' future will emerge when educational institutions become more responsive to their presence. Educational justice is not achieved when students learn how to belong to the university. Educational justice is achieved when the university learns how to belong to its students.

Reflection

My takeaway from the symposium is that we still have a lot to discuss. Everyone was keen to share their stories. I know underlying that was the desire to connect and share what we have learnt from our own experiences. This demonstrated the need for more time for conversation; more time invested in each other. That will also allow more time to truly listen. It should not be a rush. This is important work. I also found there was still a lack of knowledge around some areas of diversity, me included. This leads to inadvertent injustice. Human connection is key to deep learning, personal growth, and true justice in higher education, whether between students, between staff, or between students and staff. Human connection requires sharing, listening, trust, respect, and that one thing we all seem to lack in this fast-paced world—time. Let's make more time to listen.

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