Validating your access card: How to strive beyond equality to equity (or something close enough)[1]

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Communication is the heart of all postgraduate study. As such, your chances of survival and success are strongly affected by your facility with English and subsequent relation to the efficiency bottom line. If you are a postgraduate student with a disability or if English is not your first language, your default arrival in the system may be one of disadvantage. However, it doesn't have to remain this way. As a deaf PhD student of linguistics, I learned a number of strategies to mitigate the upsetting effects of inequitable language access. Some were developed accidentally through making mistakes, others because my supervisor was actively on my side. Some are simple practicalities, others forced me to dive deeply into transformation. All proved to have value. I am sure they will for you too.

Equality or equity?

In the eyes of your university, all students are equal and deserve the same opportunities to survive and succeed in their postgraduate studies. Yet in practice, our individual circumstances are anything but equal. If you are young / healthy / highly educated / white / heterosexual / able-bodied / male / native English speaker / city dweller / with parents who both went to university, you are in a fortunate position. You may intersect with a demographic that has been present through the development of Australian universities since their founding.

On a practical level, this means that everything you need for embracing your academic freedom is systematically entrenched into the structure and language of the institutions we see today. Depending on your academic skills and interests, you can enrol in any class, walk into any lecture, attend any seminar, and expect to hear and be heard as you are. The environment that allows you to do this shapes everyone's understanding of what is "normal" and mainstream in higher education, which in turn sets the standard for what is equitable. Postgraduate study will doubtless present its challenges to you and may still not deliver you a job, but your survival as a postgraduate student is pretty much guaranteed and your chances for success (however you choose to define it) are high.

But what happens if you and your personal circumstances are not (yet) embodied as mainstream? What if you are from a non-English speaking background? What if you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander? What if you are the first in your family to attend university or if you come from overseas? What if you are deaf, blind, dyslexic, crip or otherwise habitually disabled by the status quo? What if there is something else about your circumstance that means your decision to undertake further study is greeted with excessive adversity when communicating with your university, your supervisor, your peers?

Unfortunately, your university may or may not have evolved from its founding structures to accommodate you equitably. Depending on your academic skills and interests, you may not necessarily be able to enrol in any class, walk into any lecture, attend any seminar, and expect to hear and be heard without some kind of significant adaptive activity. This is recognised by the overt support already provided to promote equity for students, for example, academic and English language support, alternative text and recording formats, assistive technologies, Auslan interpreters, notetakers, and so on. At some stage of our studies, many (if not most) of us will draw upon these structural additions in the pursuit of academic freedom. It may

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[1] In press. 'Validating your access card: striving beyond equality to equity (or something close enough)'. In C. McMaster, C. Murphy, I. Mewburn and B. Whitburn (Eds). *Postgraduate study in Australia: surviving and succeeding*. Peter Lang: New York.

ISBN: 9781433141782 DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3726/b11340
Published 2017, https://www.peterlang.com/view/product/80840

become apparent that our shared equality is not enough. Survival, let alone chances for success, depends on striving for equity too.

Equality is conditional, equity is not

Much of postgraduate life occurs off-campus at conferences and workshops. When it comes to accessing these fundamental and thrilling events, I need support from Auslan interpreters or live English captioning. Both are expensive. But unlike buying a wheelchair or other assistive device, there is no tangible end product (apart from my happy, fulfilled soul and maybe a transcript). I also need to spend money every time I want to use them.

Equality means that I can compete for grants on the basis of merit to fund my flight, accommodation and registration fee to attend a conference to present my research. But even if I am successful, I will miss most of what speakers say during their presentations or the questions and answers. Speakers from my audience will need to repeat their questions or feedback many times, or write them down. I will be doing a lot of "pardon?" and bluffing while I look at my neighbour's notes to try and play catch up with the real-time talk from presenters. Later I will feel confused when someone assumes I understood something because I was in the same room as them when they heard it.

Equality is exhausting and unpleasantly conditional – there is usually a "but" in there somewhere and it's a real arsehole. Yes I can compete for a grant to attend a conference, but success means that I won't be able to access the conference when I get there. If English is not your first language, chances are this experience is familiar to you too (although while you have the opportunity to develop and improve your access to English over time, deafness is permanent).

Conversely, equity means that I can compete for grants on the basis of merit to fund my flight, accommodation and registration fee to attend a conference. If my application is successful, I will understand what speakers are saying during their presentations when I get there. I will understand the questions people ask and answers given, and it will be easier to network with fellow attendees during the breaks. Speakers from my audience will only need to ask their questions or offer feedback once, and I will be able to answer them straight away for the benefit of everyone.

This is because there will be professional interpreters working between English and Auslan, or there will be a qualified stenographer on site transcribing English speech to text. I will not need to depend on the kindness of friends or strangers to broker language for me. Equity means I won't be frustrated at being interested enough to be there, but not understanding enough to participate confidently. I won't be fearful of the humiliation that comes from asking questions that someone else has already asked, or from offering an intellectual contribution that someone else has already made.

Equity is unconditional – there are no "buts". Instead we are all subject to fairly differentiated chance. There is simply "thinking" and "talking" and "asking questions" and "doing". Not only does equity enable you to access everyone else, it enables everyone else to access what you have to offer in return. Everyone deserves equity. So how can you reach beyond equality to achieve it? The first step is to look what your institution has done for others before and what it can do for you.

Ask your university

All Australian universities must provide some form of equity and access support to students who require it. However, support is not necessarily provided in the same way at each university. In the case of disability support, there is very little consistency in how it is funded across institutions and even across departments within the same institution. It is also up to the

student to disclose their disability to the university, which some prefer not to do. Disability access and equity seems to improve over time in response to funding opportunities and advocacy, but particularly in reaction to protocols established by former students.

This means if you are the first student at your university with your particular disability, you will probably have to work more to achieve equity compared to the second, or third, or fiftieth student with a similar disability at your university. As a result, some universities are better than others in providing access and equity for postgraduate students with a disability. Great reputation does not necessarily correlate with great access. A large and prestigious sandstone institution might not know what to do with you, whereas a regional university with a growing reputation might facilitate a level of access that furthers engagement with your peers and postgraduate study far beyond your expectations.

It is up to you whether you prefer to follow an established path by choosing a university that already knows how to support your specific circumstances, or if you prefer to venture into the unknown to clear the way for yourself and others in the future. Your decision might actually depend on other factors, such as wanting to work with a particular supervisor who is based at a particular institution, and whether you need to be in the city near accessible facilities or your support network. All of these issues can only be weighed up by you. Either way, it will be easier if you do some groundwork by asking around and talking to others already in the system. Also ask your potential supervisors and the university. What has been done before? What can be done in the future? What can you do for me? If you can't get a straight answer, get ready to be innovative.

Talk to your support personnel

When you ask your university about what they have done in the past and what they can do for you, they will probably direct you to a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) or other support personnel. While universities and departments differ in structure and funding arrangements, disability support for undergraduate and postgraduate students is typically negotiated with a designated DLO. Generally speaking, DLOs work very hard on microscopic budgets. A DLO is tasked with working out the specific needs of each student and how best to support them within the constraints of the university system. Your DLO may or may not have a disability themselves, but they should definitely be an ally (speak up if it becomes apparent that they are not – their colleagues may be needing your voice too).

If you are a postgraduate student with a disability, chances are you worked with a DLO during your undergraduate studies. You might be surprised to find out that access to funding for undergraduate students, postgraduate students and staff is often allocated differently. This means you could experience a range of access options during the course of your academic life. Even if you completed undergraduate coursework with support from note-takers, for example, there is no reason to expect that the same or similar support will be available to you as a postgraduate student who has successfully applied for funding to attend an important conference in another city.

At some universities, postgraduate researchers reside in a dead zone – neither undergraduate students nor staff. You may be eligible for only an inflexible bare minimum of support that is based on the needs of undergraduate students (such as interpreters for coursework and campus events, even though you may not be doing any coursework or even be on campus). At other universities, postgraduate researchers may be classified as staff with flexible arrangements and guaranteed funding to support access at one or two conferences every year. Your DLO will be able to clarify these details for you early on, but as much as they want you to succeed, they cannot do everything. You need to act too.

Pretend you are someone else and decide for yourself

Regardless of what you have found out by asking questions and talking to various people, the next step is to decide what you want. Easier said than done, you say. I totally agree. It's hard

to decide what you want if your identity is still developing, if you're unclear about what options might be available, or even what to expect at department seminars and conferences in Australia let alone in other countries. If you've internalised a stinking heap of rotten shame, it is impossible to think beyond the limits set up by the belief systems of every single person you've ever met (including yourself). Your inner voice might whisper, "I'm not worthy of causing all this trouble" or "I've gotten this far on the smell of an oily compromise so who am I to ask for more?"

Don't worry, because it is much easier to think of ideal solutions for other people than for yourself. All you have to do is pretend that you are the support personnel for another student in your circumstance with unlimited funds to spend on access. What opportunities are available to the other students in your client's program? How could your client achieve a situation equitable to theirs? Would they achieve this in the same way as other students or would they do it differently? What do you want for them? Write your ideas down and share them with people you trust. Talk about how you can make equity happen for your client (you). Not only will your support network help you make things possible, they will ask you to consider what else is possible. Doing this will also guide you through dealing with that shame, although that will probably take a lot longer than working out what you want.

Find money and spend it

You now have a goal of best practice equity for yourself that is based on what is known to happen and what should be happening. Now you need to work out how to pay for it. This responsibility should not be entirely up to you, but it might turn out that way. This is why it is important to apply for scholarships (such as the June Opie Fellowship) and other funding sources (especially philanthropy and community organisations) early on. Don't limit yourself only to funding opportunities with a disability or other specific focus; money does not discriminate. If you are classed as a staff member at your university, you can apply for funding through the Federal Government's JobAccess Employment Assistance Fund (EAF). However, your allocated EAF may not be enough to meet all of your needs and will only support professional activities in Australia. You might also need to spend it all before you are eligible for anything further from your university.

Once you have some options, allocate funds to your access needs as soon as you can. Exercise good judgement about sharing this information. Despite the fact that universities have a responsibility to not discriminate against their students, if the powers that be find out you have a stash of money available somewhere, they could use it as an excuse not to give you more on the basis that they think you don't need it. They hopefully won't say this to you in as many words, but this is what they might think. People are generally very good at disagreeing with how other people spend their own money. This is the logic that drives the institutional cogs in regard to financial decisions and therefore determines what happens to you. What you need is to get ticked through the boxes that ask "are there other options?" in order to present your case for "there are no other options and I need your support".

Workers united will never be defeated

Your best support will come from allies. Your support personnel and supervisors should be close allies. If not, don't work with them until they are. I am very grateful for my supervisor going beyond and above his job description in supporting me to engage with other researchers at conferences in Australia and overseas. At key points, he fought on my behalf where I could not go and did not know how: with the Faculty, in department meetings, in administrative emails with the university. A good ally will offer consistent support and helpful advice, letting you fight your battles and stepping in only when necessary. It is their first nature. They will also tell you how they did it afterwards, so you know how to do it next time.

It can also be beneficial to team up with other students with similar access requirements. Halfway through my PhD, I enquired about attending an excellent bootcamp at a respected

North American university, but they straight up refused to consider providing captioning or to discuss other alternatives (note that North America is extremely advanced in providing language access for deaf people). The answer was just "no". When I questioned this with an American colleague who is also deaf, she was outraged and took a different approach. Enrolling as an American citizen, she simply registered and asked them to provide access once they accepted her registration fee. This worked and we both attended the course with support from on-site captioners.

This strategy may be particularly useful for students who have limited access to financial assistance, especially international students. For example, one student at my university was frustrated with the lack of opportunities to further develop her English competency while studying in Australia. Her solution was to set up an informal co-operative of native speakers of Chinese learning English and native speakers of English learning Chinese, thus enabling a mutually beneficial exchange for everyone.

It might seem that striving for equity means leaning left of centre. However, a little bit of liberalism also goes a long way. While it makes sense to pool resources with others at times, it is also vital to do some things on your own. Not only is this important for your development as an independent researcher, it makes the point that you do not need to rely on a quota of people like you in order for you to achieve equity. Your postgraduate study is an opportunity for you and you alone. You got there on your own merit. Protect your opportunities. Hard work is sometimes rewarded with opportunity, and opportunities become assets.

Play the email game

One of the most important strategies to learn is how to play the email game. When you find out your application for funding to attend a conference has been successful, you need to email the conference organisers to ask what access (if any) they are providing. You also need to email your supervisor and your support personnel to let them know and to start enquiring about access for you at the conference. Ideally these people will be responsive and helpful, and you can work towards a solution together.

Worst case scenario is that you start an email conversation that goes on for weeks without resolution because you can't get a straight answer, wasting precious time that is needed for preparing access at the conference. This stalling pattern happened to me twice. The second time was more surprising that the first, not least because the person I had to ask had already been through a similar situation with me two years earlier. He had said "no" before, and even though I was later successful with funding some access for that conference, he said "no" again. Worse, he actually seemed to resent me even asking. I didn't deserve to go to two international conferences in my candidature, even though other students were. If he had his way originally, I wouldn't have gone to the first one either.

It is sometimes difficult to know the reasons for someone else's behaviour, especially if you are a distance student and can't talk with them face-to-face. It is important to give people the benefit of the doubt: a bad day, stress, something in your email irked us, your request is not covered by a policy in our system or our budget. And so it goes. The world is not equal and we are all imperfect humans. As with any email correspondence, always be polite, but be direct. Keep your sentences short and ask for clarification. If you receive an email that makes you angry and upset, wait a few hours before responding. When you do draft a response, fact will get you further than emotion. Don't say anything you wouldn't in person because emails are not burnt after reading. Save your draft and wait at least another hour before sending.

Most importantly–and I wish I had known this from the beginning–make sure you copy in someone important and relevant to your action. Your supervisor, your DLO, your admin support, your Head of Department who congratulated you on your successful application and offered their assistance. Anyone who might make your correspondent think twice about their response. This will let them know that other people more powerful than you know what is

going on. If you eventually need your supervisor to bring in the big guns (such as by meeting with the Dean and then the Vice Chancellor), don't leave it too late to get to your conference.

Prepare for other people to question your identity

Situations such as the one described above are confronting because another person is essentially questioning your identity. By denying your access, they are saying "you do not need this, you are not worthy, you ask for too much". It is painful, but take it as an opportunity for metamorphosis. In an institution resistant to change, you will have to do a lot of it. After the first time, and once you understand your emotions, think carefully about how you can respond the next time it happens. Instead of reacting defensively or not at all, can you ask a question that challenges the foundation upon which you were doubted? Prepare for confrontation and you will become more resilient.

Advocate from the bottom-up and the top-down

There is no easy answer to the question of whether it is better to advocate from the bottom-up or the top-down. Top-down (such as from the Vice Chancellor to everyone else) may be quicker and more effective, but this approach only comes with experience and knowing the right people. In the early days at your university, you will likely need to start at the bottom and work your way up. Although this takes longer, you will find out who is and is not an ally, which will be useful in the future. The people you approach at the top will also want to know that you started at the bottom. It shows that you respect the working order of things. The earlier you can do this, the better.

As the cost of sending support people overseas is often prohibitive (flights, accommodation, per diems and fees), it is possible that your ideal (such as having Auslan interpreters or English captioning) will not happen. However, you might be offered a workable compromise. I attended the most interesting conference of my candidature with generous support from one colleague, a New Zealand Sign Language interpreter who also uses Auslan. In return for the university paying for her flight and accommodation, she accepted a small honorarium for her interpreting work. This solution was negotiated by our department with a lot of effort from my supervisor. It wasn't perfect but it was enough.

Plan ahead for wasted time

As you need to find money, play the email game and advocate, it is a good idea to plan for other people to waste your time. Work out how much time you actually need to prepare and add some contingency. Timing really depends on when you need to book interpreters or captioners, flights and accommodation, and pay the conference registration fee. The deadline you tell other people should be earlier than the deadline you can comfortably work to.

Get cracking

So what do you do when you and your project don't fit into the mainstream structures you are expected to fit into? Build another one. Graft your place carefully and make it your own. Find out what your university has done before and what it can do in the future. Talk to people in and out of the system. Pretend you are someone else and decide what you want. Find out what is possible and organise. Do your sums and diversify potential avenues of funding, strategically. Work with other people and work alone. Protect your opportunity. Prepare for others to confront your world view. Advocate from the bottom, advocate at the top, and don't accept "no" if it seems unreasonable. Be proud, expect nothing, and pass it on.