

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

---

## Dancing and Deep Listening through Higher Education

CATHERINE ALTHAUS

*Dear Higher Education,*

Over 250 million people currently benefit in some form from higher education – a statistic that has more than doubled in two decades. So there is much growth and huge potential to deploy influence from the higher education sector, both in terms of sheer numbers as well as the bounty of ideas that might give effect to positive progress for global society. But many people and more diverse ideas are currently being missed, and as such, the entire world is deprived.

Self-reflection and review is critical. Higher education has created a certain bulwark of stability in the world through its institutional stasis over hundreds of years. Higher education is a ‘standing’ proposition. Now is the time for its movement; time for higher education to start dancing with the world.

One way I think it can start such dancing is through reflection on its identity, which is both inherited and created. The historical and intellectual inheritance of higher education is full of paradox and room for improvement. While it may have started in the East, the Academy became dominated by the powerful qualities of Western civilisation. That brought certain remarkable benefits, and temporary order and progress, but domination is never a sustainable or thriving solution. For higher education to start dancing, it needs to truly embrace the beauty and richness of its multi-civilisational character.

What we create now for the identity of higher education will help forge new options if we can move away from a worldview of domination towards one of respectful and open freedom, agency and solidarity.

---

### Who I am

I am a fourth-generation Irish-German Australian woman from a working class, service-oriented family full of teachers, nurses and rural labourers. Education, health, farming and creativity has always been part of my lineage. University education, however, has only come to my family in the last generation: it is a new phenomenon. The paradox of stability and movement has also been present. Some of us are travellers. Others in my family are moored to particular places.

My story is partly about fractured and forged identities. I am a will-of-the-wisp; not quite sure who I am. And in this I am a product of modernity; clear and stable identity is not something I find familiar. This is because I was born into a place that is not mine. And as the blood that runs through my veins struggles to return to its origins I am linked to my ancestors on the other side of the world. But I am not really known in those places. I am struck through the heart by the familiarity of these ancestral places and voices but I am also torn as my heart rests, too, in my created homes.

My gypsy-like existence makes me a global citizen, whatever I make of that reality. So I have learned to live with connection and disconnection: respect for the past, grief and passion for the present, and hope for the future. The landscape of my heart has broadened and deepened beyond what I knew was possible because it has enlarged beyond my blood family to include the love I have received from so many places, people and experiences across the world. Without all of them, I am not me.

Reviewing where I came from, who I am and who I want to be is not just a solo endeavor. Collective and institutional reviews are important quests, too, including higher education. Identity can powerfully bring rightful pride as well as harmful rigidity. It can bring understanding as well as grief. In the same way, if higher education cannot review its identity with humility and integrity, we miss opportunities to reform for change as well as draw on strength.

---

## My observations

I want to make four points. First, I think higher education is in the midst of reviewing its identity and how good a job it does is going to help or hinder societal progress; we can either keep standing still, we can fall down or we could start dancing. Second, I believe diversity, equity and inclusive (DEI) education encourages us to honour and celebrate multiplicity and paradox even if we haven't yet figured out yet how to operationalize multi-civilisational education as a reality. Third, we cannot truly achieve DEI education without also embedding time and place into our worldviews and practices; our planet and our purpose are wayfinders that nourish and guide us. Education has ignored or deprioritised these realities for too long. Finally, we are all implicated in DEI education – we are simultaneously all part of the problems and the solutions of our current status quo and what we aspire to achieve. In doing the work, we need to play different recalibrated roles, some of us needing to dampen down our voices and views and some of us needing to dial up our contributions.

---

## My story

*Dadirri* is from the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Daly River region in the Northern Territory of Australia. It is a practice and word given for the concept of 'deep listening', 'quiet stillness and awareness' and 'waiting'. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann – renowned Aboriginal artist and educator, 1998 Order of Australia Member and 2021 Senior Australian of the Year – says that *dadirri* is a unique gift offered by Australian Aboriginal peoples to the world. It offers healing, wisdom and regeneration. She says: "*Dadirri* is in everyone. It is not just an Aboriginal thing.... *Dadirri* also means awareness of where you've come from, why you are here, where are you going now and where you belong" (quoted in Korff 2023). For this I am truly grateful and I open myself up to what *dadirri* might mean, what it might invite me into, and what it might ask of me.

Aunty Miriam-Rose and the story of *dadirri* is what is important. It is my story for higher education. Not in the sense that it belongs to me. On the contrary, that it is intimately connected to some of the peoples of the place that today is called Australia: one of the oldest enduring civilisations on the planet. The reason why that is important is that *dadirri* teaches me to step respectfully and lightly into this world – literally and figuratively. For such a long time, Aunty Miriam-Rose's peoples have spent time learning about my peoples and their ways. This has been done through forced necessity due to colonization but also with great compassion and respectful resilience. With incredible generosity she invites me and the entire world to tap the deep water sounds of her country, to slow down, to listen, to grow, to marvel, to respect. In this way, she invites us to truly learn.

This shared story is a microcosm glimpse of what is possible for higher education. *Dadirri* invites learning and listening to go many ways. To the planet, to each other, to the seasons of time that ebb and flow to nourish us, to the mysteries of life and growth. It is gentle and kind as well as strong and embedded with deep responsibility

and accountability. It demands something of us, as much as it offers peace. Respect and understanding is what Aunty Miriam-Rose and her peoples continue to hope for. Surely this is an essential purpose for any higher education identity into the future? And here, the oldest civilization in our world offers us a wayfinder to help us experience it and embrace the relationships we need to thrive together.

---

### **My direction for higher education**

I believe higher education needs to move towards multi-civilisational education in order to achieve the full effects of diversity, equity and inclusion for ourselves, each other and our planet. *Dadirri* is but one of the many awe-inspiring insights and practices that are offered as alternative ways of being, doing and knowing. If higher education can open itself to new possibilities, ingenuities and authentic relational connections with the diverse civilisations of our world, then we might forge new hope for the peoples and the places we call home. Higher education might just begin to start dancing.

*In Hope,  
Catherine Althaus*

---

### **References**

Korff, Jens. Deep listening (*dadirri*). 18 March 2023. [www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/education/deep-listening-dadirri](http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/education/deep-listening-dadirri). Accessed 4 September 2024.

---

### **About the author**

[Professor Catherine Althaus](#) is Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) Chair of Public Service Leadership and Reform and member of the [PSRG](#) in the School of Business at University of New South Wales (UNSW) Canberra. She is a researcher and teacher of policy and leadership across public, defence, university and community settings, and is especially passionate about Indigenous and adaptive leadership practices.