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## Penny Jane Burke made UNESCO chair in Equity, Social Justice and Higher Education

ABC Newcastle / By Keely Johnson

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Penny Jane Burke is "honoured" to be appointed a UNESCO chair. (Supplied: University of Newcastle)

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A University of Newcastle professor who has dedicated her career to improving access to higher education for marginalised communities has been appointed a UNESCO chair.

Penny Jane Burke grew up in California but moved to England as a young adult with her son.

"I had no access to higher education as a young woman and found myself in a very vulnerable situation with my baby son," she said.

"I myself am a survivor of domestic violence and had recently fled a very severe domestic violence situation when I discovered an access to higher education pathway program, which completely changed my life."

Through the program, she met many diverse people who had accessed higher education against the odds, including many other domestic violence survivors, which left a lasting impression on her.

### Key points:

- University of Newcastle professor Penny Jane Burke has been appointed an UNESCO Chair
- Professor Burke has dedicated her career to improving equity in the higher education sector
- As chair, she will explore the impact of gender-based violence on higher education access and participation

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"I could see how life-changing higher education can be for people when they have access to it and they can participate in a really active way," she said.

"So it became kind of my life's work to contribute to this project of building equity and widening participation in higher education.

"We need to make it easier for people, especially from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, to access higher education."

## Work with UNESCO

Professor Burke gained her PhD from the University of London and went on to publish multiple books and research papers on access to, and equity within, the higher education sector.

In 2015, she became director of the University of Newcastle's Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education.

Much of her research within the centre has looked at which groups of people struggle to access higher education and what support could be put in place.

"From our research we have been able to create many programs ... that actually support students from marginalised communities to finish their studies," she said.

Now a UNESCO chair in Equity, Social Justice and Higher Education, Professor Burke hopes to extend the work she has been doing at the university to improve the lives of marginalised groups around the world, including victim-survivors of gender-based violence.

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An agency of the United Nations, UNESCO chairs specialise in connecting institutions across the globe with a common goal of reducing inequality and improving access to education.

"One of the key projects I'll be focusing on will be to generate new knowledge on the impact of gender-based violence on higher education access and participation," she said.

"And together with that knowledge, to produce specialised post-crisis strategies, through inter-agency collaboration with a strong focus on supporting victim-survivors and their families."

Professor Burke hopes to establish a hub that connects relevant experts and authorities to combat the access issues many people encounter when trying to study at a tertiary level.

"We'll be doing that in Australia and then want to put that in practice in Ghana too," she said.

"Hopefully then extending that work to other parts of the world as well."

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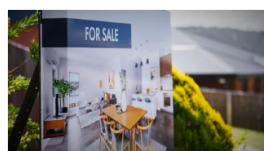
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