



Struggles and Strategies

Does social class matter in Higher Education?

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Struggles and Strategies: Does social class matter in Higher Education?

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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

This report explores to what extent universities, as providers of high skill credentials, add value to the social and cultural capital, resources, networks and strategies of students through their transitional experiences and processes. It investigates whether a student's background—such as belonging to one or more equity group as identified by Australian policy¹—impacts their graduate transitions; how they imagine, perceive and navigate university to work transitional processes; and how social inequalities shape and constrain their access to and transition from university to segmented labour markets.

The biggest employment growth in Australia has been in occupations requiring a bachelor degree and economic modelling expects this trend to continue (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2012; OECD 2015). Policy makers identify equity and widening participation in Higher Education (HE) as a key to economic productivity and fulfilment of labour market demands over the next decade. It is also seen as central to social justice, well-being and equity more broadly. Policy in this space has emphasised getting people into university and widening participation through bringing in more students from Low Socio-Economic Status (LSES) and other 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Little attention has then been paid to what happens to university students from historically under-represented backgrounds when they transition through their degrees, towards graduate futures and an insecure labour market. In fast-changing economies that need to innovate and restructure, and in a context in which large levels of fiscal and human investment are being made to widen participation in HE, there is a need to better understand the intricacies of the reproduction of social inequalities and, more specifically, how this might relate to graduates who are located differently socially, yet hold similar qualifications (Roberts, 2011).

This report moves beyond simple categories, such as socio-economic status, to develop an understanding of the multi-layered and nested equity issues informing students' experiences and practices. The preference for a clear-cut quantification of issues related to equity and disadvantage risks missing how these are played out in everyday lives. Students who experience disadvantage do not do so through a homogeneous experience, but must endure it in its inter-personal forms, whether through banal day-to-day activities or through structured forms of social closure. Theories of social class and intersectionality, especially feminist readings, allow for greater attention to the nuanced

and emotional ways that class and inequalities more broadly are constructed and enforced. We take these as a much needed, and stronger way to understand universities in the era of widening participation.

The report identifies that student 'backgrounds' are not shed as they enter university or adulthood, but instead influence their views and what they see as plausible and meaningful opportunities and strategies. Furthermore, structures of class (and its intersections with other inequalities such as gender) are embedded in social institutions such as universities. At every stage, from access, undergraduate study, and (sometimes after many delays) graduation, students are enmeshed within structures and trajectories that present certain paths and possibilities as more or less likely to be successful. We have found that many students from working class backgrounds will see a university degree itself as being enough for a pathway into a meaningful graduate position, but often misrecognise the scope and extent of competitive advantage required in a heavily saturated graduate labour market. Students from privileged backgrounds, in contrast, often have greater access to competitive forms of knowledge and networks that provide more opportunities to produce strategies for securing graduate employment.

Through understanding these issues we offer recommendations designed to support students from all social groups throughout their undergraduate study and into their transitions to graduate labour markets.

¹Six equity groups are recognised in Australia equity policy: low socio-economic status (LSES), Indigenous students, students with disabilities, regional students, remote students and non-English speaking background (NESB).

Key points

- Students from working class backgrounds have a much larger series of obstacles in entering HE. These include limited access to information about degrees, being constrained by secondary educational outcomes, and becoming orientated to, and knowing what to expect from, university study and lifestyle.
- Degree choices remain highly gendered and become compounded by classed backgrounds. Deep-seated gendered and/or classed perceptions of a good career heavily constrain what options people see as being available to them.
- Hence 'choice' is overemphasised in HE access, as access is overdetermined through privilege or disadvantage.
- Almost all of our participants expressed the idea that obtaining a university degree leads to more meaningful work, a more fulfilling life, and greater autonomy. The 'common good' of university study should be openly accessible for all people.
- Systems of class are not simply erased through university entry. Rather, class is often played out and struggled over in universities, and so university regularly entrenches class ideals.
- People in privileged class positions utilise access to 'higher status' degrees as a way of maintaining privilege. This is often performed through undermining the value and meaning of lower status degrees.
- Many students will experience disruptions throughout study that are the result of ongoing disadvantage, yet this is often made invisible through the internalisation of this as personal fault and responsibility.
- Privileged students will often consider that performing well throughout university study is a matter of choice, reflecting an inherent internal ability, rather than the result of internalised experiences.
- Employability discourses often favour privileged students who have the time to carefully plan their career pathways.
- As the graduate labour market becomes more competitive, students from working class and under-represented backgrounds are facing greater disadvantage in the extensive preparatory work (building recognisable forms of social and cultural capital) required to become 'employable'.
- Even with HE focusing on producing greater equity in access to study, the labour market still uses methods of recruitment that favour students from privileged backgrounds. More pressure needs to be put on industry to take responsibility to produce equitable practices and outcomes.

Literature review

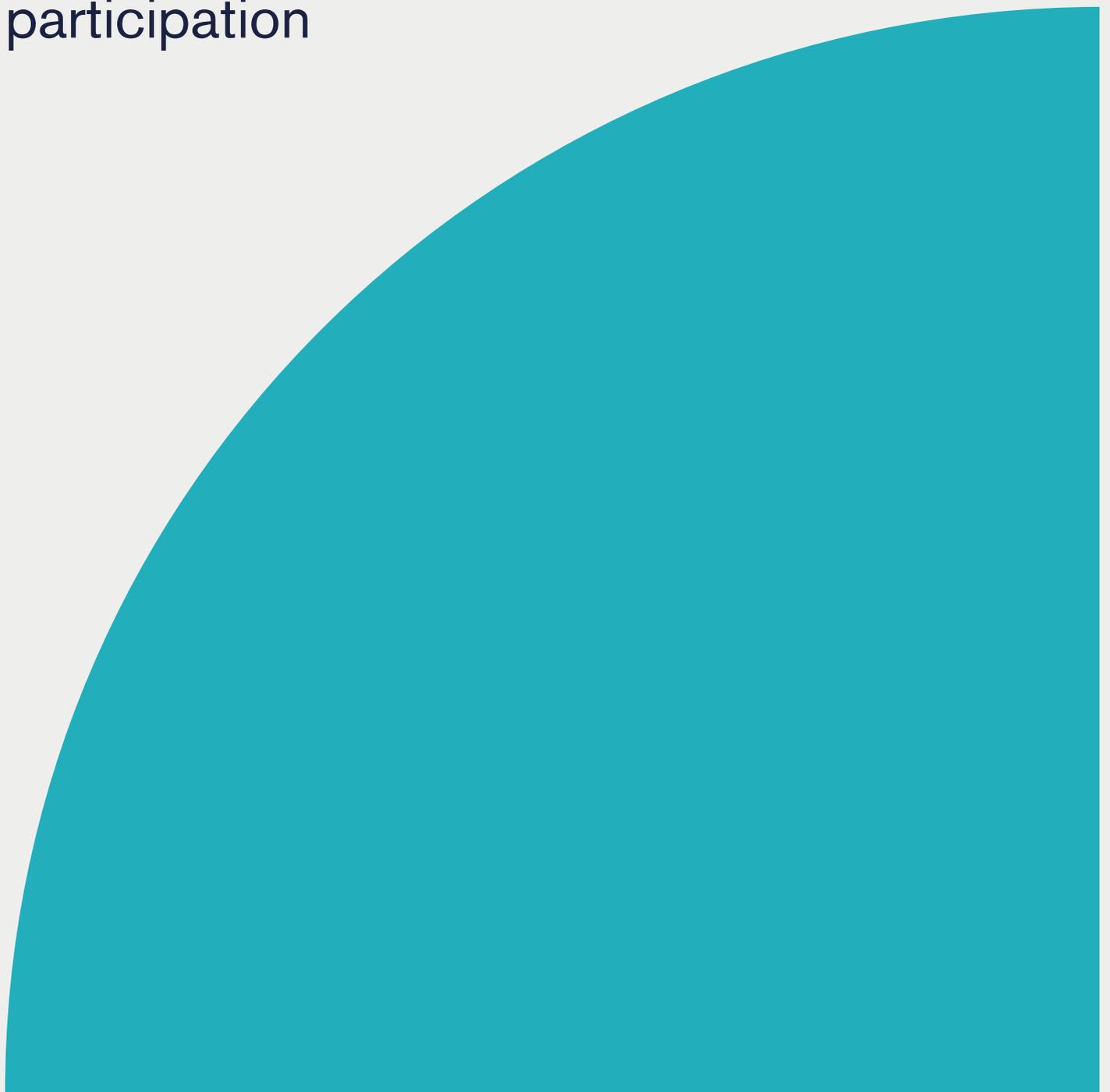
Higher Education

in Australia –

Major reforms

and widening

participation



Literature review

Higher Education in Australia – Major reforms and widening participation

Since the 1950s, Australian universities have moved to a system of higher education, where in 2002 it was estimated that “the lifetime probability of attending university in Australia was nearly 50%” (Gale & Tranter, 2011, p. 31). In 2015, the total number of students enrolled in Australian universities had reached 1 410 833, with 1 046 835 of these being domestic students (Robinson, 2015). The 2016 Australian census revealed that 25 per cent of Australians now hold a bachelor’s degree (Cook, 2017). These key reforms towards ‘widening participation’ began with the so-called ‘Dawkins reforms’ during the 1980s.²

While widening participation is often viewed as a means of achieving social justice, one of the key driving factors of this policy shift has been the need to train a workforce for ‘knowledge capitalism’ (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Australia has a “rapidly changing workforce and escalating demand for highly skilled labour” (Gale & Tranter, 2011, p. 31). Gale and Tranter (2011) acknowledge that the saturation point for students from ‘high-income’ families enrolment in higher education has possibly been reached, therefore requiring an expansion in the number of students with tertiary qualifications from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds in order to meet labour demands. Gale and Tranter (2011) go as far as to suggest that “equity in higher education has now become as much a matter of economic necessity as a matter of social justice” (p. 32).

The Bradley Review of Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008), expanding upon the Dawkins reforms, highlighted that in order to meet future demand, Australia needs to increase the participation of groups that are currently under-represented in higher education. The Australian government then attempted to create policy to expand higher education so that it would be more representative of people from all social groups and classes, including low socio-economic status backgrounds, as well as other disadvantaged groups (Lim, 2015, p. 8). In response to this review, the Australian Government, through the *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) report, set two major targets for higher education. These were that by 2025, 40 per cent of all 25–34 year olds will hold a qualification at bachelor level or above, and, by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level will be of people from a low SES backgrounds (Lim, 2015, p. 10). While this appears as a potential positive change, the outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds nevertheless continue to demonstrate a persistent stratification of access to HE.

Although governments have attempted to expand the representation of people across the Australian social spectrum in HE, these attempts mask many of the problems that underlie the Bradley review targets. Primarily, the gradient for involvement in HE quickly slides as socio-economic status drops, where currently “a student from a high socio-economic background is approximately three times more likely to attend university than a student from a low socio-economic background” (Harvey & Andrewartha, 2013, p. 113). Moreover, access to university still follows a geographic trend, where the further one lives from a metropolitan area, the less likely they are to attend university. Given that wealth, and the wealthy, are concentrated in metropolitan areas, they have greater access to HE, and along with this, access to the most prestigious institutions (Forsyth, 2014, p. 209).

While there are still challenges to face in HE access for under-represented groups, an under-researched area within Australia is how ‘non-traditional’ students experience and navigate HE *during* their study. Previously, it has been assumed that class inequalities are ameliorated once these students have entered HE. The Australian Government has acknowledged that students from historically under-represented backgrounds require higher levels of support, including financial and academic assistance, mentoring and counselling services (Australian Government, 2009), yet these still assume a level of social mobility, and eventual adaption. Yet, as Reay, David and Ball (2005) argue, one of the effects of that widening participation produces is internal differentiation of the value of different types of degrees and pathways. This differentiation maintains systems of prestige, albeit in altered forms, that reinforce and maintain traditional class distinctions. An example of this in Australia is the national trend towards students from equity groups enrolling in ‘lower status degrees’ (Richardson, Bennett & Roberts, 2016), whether through choice or access. This clusters people from disadvantaged/advantaged backgrounds in particular degree programs. Therefore, while access to HE has become more inclusive, there is a substantial divide in experiences during study. Testament to this is that increasing access to HE for LSES individuals has not necessarily translated into successful completion (Lim, 2015, p. 6), suggesting a need to pay more attention to supporting students from equity groups throughout their study.

²For a brief recount of changes brought implemented by the then federal education minister John Dawkins, see Gale and Tranter (2011).

These difficulties tend to intersect and affect people in equity groups depending upon multiple interacting experiences of disadvantage, such as LSES, disability, gender, Indigeneity and English as a second language. A recent National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) report (Richardson, Bennett & Roberts, 2016, p. 7) found that students who are part of an equity group (such as LSES) were often impacted by multiple disadvantages, and these produced a variety of different outcomes depending upon the intersection of disadvantages in question. This is supported by international scholarship investigating educational and social inequalities, which problematises homogenising categories (such as LSES) and demonstrates that greater complexity is required in analyses of equity issues. This scholarship points to the ways that intersecting social inequalities are complex formations, for example of class, gender and race, which are entangled to (re)produce often hidden inequalities at multiple levels of experience, structure, identity and practice (Burke, 2012; Stahl, 2013; Mirza, 2014/2015).

It is important to note that the expanding importance of tertiary qualifications also exaggerates some of the disadvantages experienced by those who do not attend. Through widening participation the traditional prestige of university study arguably has been reduced. Holding a degree is much more commonplace. Yet, while the privileges of attending university have shrunk, the pronouncement of this prestige has expanded as jobs within the Australian labour market increasingly require university qualifications. This includes established professional fields such as education and nursing, but also emerging occupational sectors such as technological industries (Forsyth, 2014, p. 203). In the pursuit of meaningful work and social and economic well-being, this trend produces a greater imperative for attending university as it becomes a central gateway to access broader opportunities, changing the status and life chances for those who have not attended.

Yet, with all of the purported benefits of university study, there is limited research on how transitions into the full-time labour market take place. Policy has placed much greater emphasis on enrolment targets (such as those cited earlier) than on graduate outcomes (Pitman et al., 2017, p. 2). Pitman et al. (2017) give a limited indication of some of the trends within the graduate labour market. For instance, students who are in paid work during their final year of study are more likely to be working in the six months after graduation. However, “more than 60% still worked for the same employer” and “less than a quarter of graduates who were still working for the same

employer were in a role for which their qualification was a formal requirement” (Pitman et al., 2017, p. 5). This finding suggests a limited availability of jobs requiring a qualification and gives a partial indication as to how equity groups access graduate-level jobs. This also suggests a dearth in knowledge of what takes place in the years after graduation, and whether people gain greater entry into graduate jobs as more time passes after graduation.

While not being the focus of this study, it is important to note postgraduate degrees, even in the midst of widening participation, have a much poorer representation of ‘non-traditional’ students than at the undergraduate level:

In Australia in 2008, only 8 per cent of continuing PhD students came from low socio-economic backgrounds, despite this group constituting 15 per cent of the overall university cohort and 25 per cent of the population. There is little evidence that the effect of class simply “washes out” through undergraduate level. (Harvey & Andrewartha, 2013, p. 113)

This suggests that students from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds may make it into the higher education sector, but post-degree are likely to still retain some of the aspects that put them at a disadvantage in entering HE. While it would be unclear what correlations there are between representation in postgraduate study and the labour market more broadly, this would indicate that areas that are traditionally dominated by people from privileged backgrounds are maintained, and that those using HE for social mobility are marginalised.

Class, gender and equity

This report examines how students' transitions from university to the labour market are shaped by intersecting and unequal social positions and locations (Crenshaw, 1991). Our conceptual approach is informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and refined through feminist theories of intersectionality and difference. Intersectionality is understood as power inequalities based on social identities such as gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity, produced through social practices, institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies. This illuminates how different dimensions of identity are complex and cannot be separated into fixed categories (Mirza 2014/2015). Understanding people's situated engagements with university allows us to recognise "the wider processes that generate such different outcomes for ... people ...: processes which continue to mean that some get a lot where others end up with very little" (MacDonald et al., 2001). Critical sociological accounts challenge deficit constructions of students from 'Other' historically under-represented backgrounds in widening participation policy and practice, and critique associated discourses of social mobility and employability (e.g., Burke, 2012; Waller et al., 2014). The experiences of transitioning through education to work require close analysis to illuminate the ways that *all forms of inequality* may well deepen during such processes. The most effective way to study this is through multiple frameworks such as intersectionality, *illusio*, and network capital.

Pierre Bourdieu has a strong legacy in educational research, most notably the concepts of habitus (a set of dispositions that individuals develop that delineates how one feels in specific situations), capital (mechanisms to lubricate success in specific situations) and field (specific social spaces that have their own logics, norms and competition, such as politics, economics, science, consumption and education). However in this research we have incorporated a more holistic use of Bourdieusian concepts (France & Threadgold, 2015; Webb et al., 2017). In particular, we draw on Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* as a way of understanding the intertwined nature of individual interests and social institutions where *illusio* is both the socially constructed stakes and the rewards of a field. When a person invests in a specific trajectory, they become cognisant of the 'gravity' of the situation, while at the same time they are pushed and pulled by forces beyond their control (Hage, 2011). As they make decisions about their lives and invest in those choices, the gravity of their situation thickens. A sequence of 'choices' creates a trajectory. Once this trajectory has momentum, it is much more difficult for the person to get off that path just by making different choices, they do not want to waste prior expenditure of time, effort and emotion.

By drawing together a wider range of Bourdieu's concepts including *illusio*, social gravity, misrecognition and *doxa* with consideration of habitus, capitals and field than are often employed, we can develop a deeper account of people's motivations, commitments and investments in certain trajectories and the impacts this has on broader questions of equity and processes of social mobility that are of key interest to policy makers and university leaders. Hence, the research will move beyond questions about how people are positioned in social space according to their possession of various types of capital. By investigating the struggles that people face we can begin to think about how the interplay between individual dispositions and the possible positions in social space one may occupy are mutually constituted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Stahl, 2013).

This report builds further on Bourdieu to understand how social and cultural differences (e.g. age, socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity) and inequalities (e.g. of access to and participation in HE and paid work) "are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society" (Collins, 2000, p. 42). Intersectionality enables us to see that social identities, power and inequalities cannot be separated into homogenous categories. It avoids falling into over-simplifying the problem of equity through 'inadequate additive models' and sheds light on how difference is systematically organised and discursively produced through social relations in our political and economic structures, policies and practices (Mirza, 2014/2015). This lens helps to uncover how socioeconomic status is bound together with social and cultural differences in the educational and work structures that people navigate on their transitional journeys. The mechanisms by which social class, ethnicity and gender interact and overlap to produce highly differentiated participant and employment outcomes for students in diverse types of HE, and different local and regional labour market contexts are poorly understood and under-researched. This intersectional approach can be transposed into a Bourdieusian framework, as feminist re-workings of Bourdieu (Adkins & Skeggs, 2005) and scholars exploring ideas around ethnicity capital have shown (Shah et al., 2010; Webb, 2015; Wallace, 2017). Such an approach highlights that inequalities are not only reproduced through material differences but are also produced at the lived, material, embodied and emotional levels of subjective and affective experience (Burke, 2012; Threadgold, 2018). The theoretical framework, embedded in the innovative methodology proposed below, has the potential to significantly shape knowledge about policy and practice that challenges the growing inequities in Australia.

Theoretical innovations such as Urry's (2007) account of network capital allows for a more gradated understanding of how social networks that people accrue over time can be mobilised to gain information about opportunities and give access to resources. But, crucially, also how co-presence and trust can be generated at both a distance and in close proximity, which requires new skills and capacities (or forms of cultural capital). This conceptual approach will facilitate an intricate analysis of the ways that capitals are not simply resources acquired by individuals but are deeply entwined relationally in networks and with intersectional ways of being. Simultaneously it provides for a more cogent analysis of how students not only learn or, on the other hand, perhaps misrecognise the 'rules of the game', but also how they develop the variable resources or navigational capacity to pursue their ambitions.

Methodology



Methodology

This study draws from 32 in-depth interviews with students from a regional university in Australia. These consist of three groups: current third-year students (16); recently graduated students (9) and; students who had deferred or left their degree (7). Third-or final-year students were drawn primarily from degrees in social science and the combined business/commerce program, which requires an extra year of study. A small number of students from other degree programs were also included, primarily those who had left university during their studies.

Further, a total of 8 students had taken (or were taking) longer than the three-to four-year timeframe to complete university, or had taken longer than they had expected. This sometimes included doing courses in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges while wrestling with what path of study suited them best. The non-linear pathways of these participants were considered to be important in this study in trying to gauge graduate outcomes. While most of the official reporting focuses on students leaving after graduation, this obscures the disparities and inequities that exist for students who leave university (even if they would prefer to remain) and for those who take longer to complete. This is a crucial area for research, as the amount of additional time that these disruptions take could have considerable impacts upon the overall career and life trajectories of under-represented HE students.

We have drawn inspiration from the UK-based 'paired peers' research (Bathmaker et al., 2016). This research utilised an extensive matrix of students' attributes in order to identify students within certain class positions throughout recruitment. One of the difficulties in utilising this approach, however, is how to pre-emptively place students in a particular category in a small pilot study. These more robust or categorised system of class would require an intensive recruitment model and strategy. In this research we have utilised a series of demographic categories (such as postcode/city/suburb of family home, familial occupations and levels of education) in order to support the identification of class positions. Importantly, we do not claim that individual students are 'in' a particular class, but will have strong homologies with aspects and attributes of working and middle class positions in social space. These have been supported through careful attention paid during interviews and analysis to the more subtle signifiers of class. Many of the students in this study are difficult to narrowly define as belonging to a particular class, as they would have experiences that would regularly exceed attempts at categorisation. As such, the terms 'working class' and 'middle class' are here used to generally indicate towards classed experiences, without attempting to produce this as an immutable category.

Although homogenising students through class categories can itself be a form of symbolic violence, this research recognises the shared and at times homogenous experiences and struggles – and strategies and opportunities – that students have. We thus use class as a form of analysis with the aim of grouping experiences to demonstrate patterns that are correlative with experiences of disadvantage and privilege. However, it should be stressed that class is not a 'thing' in the world. Class is used here as a heuristic system for which to make sense of social inequality. Moreover, while we argue that class generally structures patterns of advantage and disadvantage, working class culture and experience should not be crudely equated to disadvantage. Students from working class backgrounds spoke from a range of perspectives about parental support and experiences that were regularly positive. However, the common point of disadvantage is being frozen out of social institutions, such as university, that favour middle class culture.

By recruiting participants from a vast range of demographics and backgrounds, we explore the breadth of university experience, and, more specifically, what struggles and strategies are utilised as a means of adapting to that experience. We opened spaces for participants to 'speak for themselves' to demonstrate the way that factors such as class and gender impact upon the experience of university. Through the analysis of the data, the importance of these backgrounds becomes clearer, but also demonstrates the complex character of students' struggles with study and their strategies for gaining employment.

One of the limitations of this pilot study is the two main degrees that were chosen to select students from, these being Business/Commerce on one hand, and Social Science on the other. Social science has consistently had a much lower entry Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR) than Business/Commerce (however the Bachelor of Business without the combined Commerce degree has an ATAR cut-off comparable with Social Science), and appears to be treated as a degree that students enter because it is one of the few options available to them.³ Strong and sustained critiques exist within research (Brown, 2013) for the way in which the ATAR tends to follow lines of advantage and disadvantage. Because of this, students from working class backgrounds who have received a low ATAR are more likely to enter these degrees programs. This is a discussion that requires more space to explore than is available here. The key point to raise is that there is a disproportionate number of working class students in the Social Science degree than in the Business/Commerce area.

A further limitation of this research is the focus on only one institution. As is shown in studies such as Bathmaker et al. (2016), where a comparison between institutions is made, nuances of institutional approaches and policies can have a significant impact on equity outcomes. The findings of this research could be deepened through analysis of multiple universities that correspond to different regions and institutional status and prestige to give a more rounded and nuanced understanding of the way that embedded inequalities are changed, ameliorated or entrenched throughout university study.

³For the 2018 round of offers, the Bachelor of Social Science had an ATAR cut-off of 60.20, while the Bachelor of Business and Commerce had a cut-off of 73.15 (see <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/degrees>). While this is still a relatively low cut-off, it nevertheless occurs across an important section of ATAR scores.

Part 01: Choosing a Degree



Key points

- *Students from working class backgrounds have a much larger series of obstacles in entering HE. These include limited access to information about degrees, being constrained by secondary educational outcomes, and becoming orientated to, and knowing what to expect from, university study and lifestyle.*
- *Degree choices remain highly gendered and become compounded by classed backgrounds. Deep-seated gendered and/or classed perceptions of a 'good' career heavily constrain what options people see as being available to them.*
- *Hence 'choice' is overemphasised in HE access, as access is overdetermined through privilege or disadvantage.*
- *Almost all of our participants expressed the idea that obtaining a university degree leads to more meaningful work, a more fulfilling life, and greater autonomy. The 'common good' of university study should be openly accessible for all people.*

Introduction

While university entry often rests upon restrictive admissions factors such as the ATAR or the availability of alternative pathways (such as Enabling programs), as well as the university/program a student wishes to attend, accessing a degree program is still presented largely as a matter of individual choice. As the sector has moved to a demand-driven entry system, individual universities invest much greater time, energy and resources in presenting degrees as universally beneficial for their holders. More popular degrees, or degree programs that carry higher status and higher earning potential, select smaller numbers of students, and tend to have much higher ATAR entry levels. This can be a challenging terrain to traverse, and many will do so with limited social, cultural and economic resources. Socio-economic background and other intersecting social and cultural differences continue to be strong predictors of academic success at all stages from readiness for school, to entry to university in Australia (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo, 2015). Yet for those from more socially advantaged backgrounds, this process is seen as almost natural, and a crucial component in their aspirational and future trajectories (see e.g., Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Below, we explore the reasons that participants had to study, and how these intersected with the options available to them at university, as well as gendered and classed inequalities. We examine how students' backgrounds restrict or expand various opportunities, and how this affects their outlook towards tertiary study.

One of the challenges in choosing a pathway towards a career is the increasing precariousness of the labour market (Standing, 2011), combined with the saturation of graduate qualifications. These make choices, opportunities and possibilities far more ambiguous. Many young people have to make a choice about a degree in a limited time, with very few resources, based upon a series of factors that are difficult to predict, or even to understand. This is complicated further for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and for students who have limited or no access to networks of advice and support about possible pathways. While arguments are often made at policy level to suggest that students should make an informed choice, and that making the 'right choice' is key to successful completion of a degree (Department of Education and Training, 2017), students rely on their life experiences and social trajectory to inform what they are best suited to, and consequently, what would be the best degree choice. As Brynin (2012) suggests:

It is unlikely that many young people calculate the economic value of education relative to an expected career. They are likely to have a notion of a 'good' job, which would partially be based on some (often vague) idea of expected pay, but also on the job's prestige and the skills it requires. (p. 285)

As will be shown below, our participants demonstrate a wide range of reasons to attend university, yet it is students from more advantaged backgrounds who have the available resources to give greater attention to ideas around 'employability' and the quality of programs on offer.

Some students make evaluations of their degree program based upon factors such as the university and its reputation; whether they will need to move; if they will have support; and the quality of the program that they are entering. Posie, a law student, comes from a regional town, that is nearby a regional university. Although she could have remained nearby her home and studied at this university, she opted to move a number of hours away from home and family to the town of the university where this study took place because of the reputational quality of its law program:

Well I think for me I didn't want to stay in (hometown) because I don't think they offered the law program ... there's also a [campus of the closest university] in (hometown), but I think it just focuses mainly on dental, teaching and some other things. It could offer law, but at the time ... the program wasn't as good. (Posie: Law)

Following on from above, students who came from more privileged backgrounds often had access to both formal forms of high quality information, guidance and advice, as well as informal 'hot' knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998), to help them make key decisions about what and where they wanted to study. This was often met with either an understanding of how to position oneself to be successful in building a career, or a general confidence that the future would work out in their favour. Students who studied Business/Commerce and perceived clear career pathways, were often encouraged by parents to take their time and to be sure about what they wanted to study. This also includes encouragement to have gap years, travel, and gain 'life experience' before commencing studies. Attending university for these students is often seen as a given. Yet, this experience indicated a privileged access to HE planning, as will be explored below.

Preparing for Higher Education

The Australian Tertiary Admission's Ranking (ATAR) is the primary measure for what degrees and institutions are available for students. Yet, opportunities for success with Higher School Certificate (HSC)⁴ exams are heavily dependent upon social indicators and already produce unequal results for HE entry and access opportunities as much sociological research has illustrated (e.g., Cardak, Bowden & Bahtsevanoglou, 2015). Participants who attended disadvantaged high schools felt that school resources, and teachers, were specifically focused upon those students already deemed as likely to enter university, thereby allowing a select few students to achieve a high ATAR to represent the high school, rather than focus on all the Year 12 group for a more utilitarian, but perhaps lower, ATAR outcome. Research in the UK has shown that the marketisation of education with an increased focus on 'choice', leading to the publication of league table rankings, pushes teachers to 'ration' educational opportunities in the ways that the participants in our study describe (see Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). For example, Carrie explains that part of the reason she did not gain entry into her local university immediately following on from Year 12 was because of the selective way in which support and investment in students occurred within her high school:

My opinion of it is that certain students in high school outshine other students – it was told to those students 'you're going to go to university'. Other students that lacked the straighter academic of it, were kind of overlooked a little bit ... That's how I feel ... I feel I achieved well academically but I was also overlooked. Because I think once we go to Year 11 and 12 it got a lot more selective in how they were going to progress other students.
(Carrie: Childcare – Deferred)

Carrie also lamented that it was specifically the 'advanced classes' – classes specifically comprising students who were supposedly 'smarter' and more 'capable' than the others – that were especially focused upon:

I feel like Advanced English was the only English subject looked at. Everyone that was in Standard was like, 'well you're not going to get higher than a 60 so we're [not going to help]!'
(Carrie: Childcare – Deferred)

⁴The Higher School Certificate is the highest award offered in schools in NSW and is used as the basis for the calculation of an ATAR. More information is available at: <https://ace.nesa.nsw.edu.au/higher-school-certificate>

Corinne, a social science graduate who attended a disadvantaged high school, revealed another aspect of these perceived teaching strategies. Although she was (judged to be) a capable student, she also did not fit these criteria of the 'right kind' of student, and therefore was also largely ignored by teachers during her senior years:

So, then I took Advanced English, Extension 1 and English Extension 2, when I got to senior. And I also became quite good at modern history and was topping that class. But similarly, my teacher continuously told me that I was going to waste it [...] I feel like teachers like to categorise their students ... I did quite well but I used to [skip class] more often than I went, I was rude to the teachers. So, I was kind of in the bad kids' social group but then in all the smart classes with the smart kids. So, I think I kind of fell through the gaps [...]. (Corinne: Social Science–Grad)

Corinne speaks of doing well in classes but still experiencing forms of misrecognition and exclusion from teachers. These students are reflexive about attending a school predominately constituted of working class students and report a strategic selectivity by teaching staff about how students are chosen for greater support and investment based on a preconceived evaluation of their likelihood of success (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Yet, as Corinne suggests, one of the difficulties for these students is a lack of interest, or a wilful disobedience, that is used to confirm that they are not worthy of limited resources that reflects the traditional 'anti-school culture' ethnographically captured in rich detail by Willis (1977) decades ago. It is important to keep this in mind, as it contributes to the teacher's perception and approach, located in and propelled by wider schooling structures and practices, and so needs to be considered as a factor well beyond the confines of the last years of secondary education. These factors affect how students become oriented towards and situated in relation to the HSC, especially when students may begin to incorporate these power relations and misrecognitions into their own subjectivities.

Alongside these complex relations between students, teachers and institutions, there are an array of well-established material concerns for students from LSES backgrounds to overcome. For instance, Carrie speaks of her living situation during her final year of schooling:

So when school finished I'd actually moved out of home halfway or the start of Year 12. I was actually out of home and when high school finished I went home for a little bit, it wasn't meant to be, so I moved back out. A girl I went to school with, I actually moved in with her and her boyfriend [...] Because we were out of home, we were renting so it was like we need money and then got money. (Carrie: Childcare–Deferred)

These material, educational and symbolic inequalities suggest that the social trajectories that young people bring into and build upon throughout HE differs widely. Importantly, through systems such as the ATAR, together with a range of other complex social, cultural and symbolic inequalities, there are deep restrictions on the 'choices' that are available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Trajectories in HE often begin with disadvantage at secondary school level, which then affects how the individual student perceives, makes sense of and acts upon any opportunities, choices and decisions that they are presented with in HE and beyond.

The value of Higher Education

Considering these issues experienced before university, it is surprising that so many young people commit to taking on university study. This is especially true given that the promise of high-income graduate employment through gaining a degree is increasingly being broken (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011). Yet, students enrol for more than the strictly quantifiable and economic opportunities that universities (sometimes) afford. Higher education qualifications are treated as an unerring good across the political spectrum. Universities themselves promote this public discourse optimistically and drive strong campaigns for the benefits that degree qualifications provide to students from both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' backgrounds alike. For the students in this study, university offers a less tangible, but no less important idea of meaning and value. Indeed, nearly all participants expressed the idea that university acts as a gateway to a better, more fulfilling life. A university degree could give access to more meaningful occupations, life chances and greater autonomy. As in Burke's (e.g., Burke, 2002; 2006) earlier research, our participants –irrespective of background– wanted to escape the monotony, repetition and bodily deterioration associated with lower skilled work. Most of our participants reflected upon their experiences during their early lives to demonstrate the lack of value that they ascribed to low status occupations. This idea is expressed by Lorie, who thought that attaining a university degree generally led to a better life:

If you don't go to university, you generally won't succeed in life, you know? [...] It just seemed like a better way of life, really. It's better to work with your head than your hands. [...] Like I said, it's the culture, you know? University is synonymous with success. (Lorie: Design–Deferred)

While this thought was expressed by almost all participants, the tenor of the point varied. In the case of many working class students, job security, satisfaction and meaning were chief concerns. Yet, for more privileged students, as in the case of Bertha, this was sometimes directed towards a focus specifically on concepts of 'career' and 'earning potential':

I grew up knowing that if you wanted to get a good career, if you wanted to have a good opportunity in life you had to get a university degree. If you didn't get a university degree your earning potential, your opportunities would be restricted. (Bertha: Business/Commerce)

Evidently, this idea is a common one among the students across their different social and cultural backgrounds. However, for those from middle class backgrounds, experiences leading into and forming their entry in HE was often substantially different from their working class counterparts. Reay (2017), reflecting on her own experience and decades of research on working class educational participation, suggests that:

So many of us from working-class backgrounds invest heavily in the fantasy that our relentless efforts will bring us love, care, intimacy, success, security and well-being, even when they are highly unlikely to do so because, in doing so, we are forming optimistic attachments to the very power structures that have oppressed us, and our families before us. (p. 102)

Higher Education offers a challenging terrain to navigate on the path to the good life. For some, it will mean struggles to abandon classed backgrounds in the pursuit of social mobility (Friedman, 2013), and for others a painful period of attempts (often failed) at adjusting to a system organised by unfamiliar and alienating rules, in many ways organised to curtail their success (Reay, 2017). Yet, for some of our participants who at first did not necessarily see the value in pursuing university, it was their parents who held to the idea that the best way to ensure their children's success was for them to attend university. For students from less privileged backgrounds (often women), their parents would pressure or encourage going to university, even when their child was unsure. In a lot of cases, this stemmed from parents who had not had the opportunity to attend university themselves, and therefore perceived it as an important prospect to ensure a better life for their children. As Corinne suggests, her father had left school early, even though he was aware of his capability for HE:

[He was] similar to me in school but his parents didn't –like they wouldn't care if he [skipped class] –which, mine didn't care if I [skipped class] either, but I think my dad just didn't want to see me do what he did. Because my mum left in Year 9 and then my dad left before he finished Year 10. Dad always says, you know, 'I now wish I'd done this and I could have done this...' Because he's really great at maths and he used to want to be a vet and he would have been really great at it, but his family was like crazy poor. [...] So, I think he just really didn't want to see me do what he did ... but it's almost like he didn't know how to be one of those parents because he didn't see himself like that, I think he saw himself as a kind of lower class kind of thing. (Corinne: Social Science–Grad)

Corinne here is articulating the 'reflexive experience of inequality' (Threadgold, 2011, p. 388). She discusses how her parents were working class, and because of this, Corinne's father encouraged her study but did not have much experience with university entry and pathways. This is exemplified by the way that she chose the degree she would study:

I saw when I was picking them [degree preferences] and then I can't remember what came first but I know that at one stage there was a list and my dad said, 'you know, these are the ones that you got into or that you could get in.'—I can't remember but yeah, and he said, you know, 'Pick one.' And I was like, 'I don't know, I want a gap year.' And he said, 'Well just close your eyes, like you know, put my finger on one,' and it turned out to be social science.

(Corinne: Social Science – Grad)

While not as emblematic as the method of chance described above, many students had limited access to knowledge and experience about entering university, the processes involved, and the implications of how specific degree programs relate to the labour market. This finding highlights that the key difficulties students from disadvantaged backgrounds face in terms of navigating university entry is often related to intergenerational social disadvantage. Including and informing parents more in the application processes for HE and its pathways – incorporating more honesty and transparency in terms of outcomes – may be one way to help alleviate this problem.

Reasons to choose a degree

Educational choice-making has been shown to be highly gendered, with women often accessing degree programs historically associated with feminised attributes (e.g., 'caring professions' such as Education and Nursing) and men often making choices in relation to degrees and related career trajectories associated with masculinity (such as Business, Engineering and Physics) (see, for example, Jackson et al., 2011; Burke et al., 2017a). A common theme across our study was participants' desires to follow gendered patterns of study. The aspiration to nurture, care for and help others was particularly exhibited by female participants. Carrie, who comes from what she describes as a 'broken home', explains how attending university was so important to her because she longed to help others when they needed it most:

I've always had an idea of what avenue of study I wanted. It was either nursing or primary school. To this day it's still the same. [...] I like the compassionate side, the caring. I like being able to care for someone or provide the wider stability for someone. So if you've got someone in hospital they're scared. They want to know that they're going to be okay. I want to be that person to be there to say 'you are going to be okay, I'm going to make sure of it.' (Carrie: Childcare–Deferred)

Choice-making processes are shaped by personal experiences as well as gendered identities and aspirations, which are relational, fluid and dynamic and tied to complex intersections of class, gender and race (Burke, 2006). In our study, some of the male students also expressed a desire to help others. For some, this was shaped by experiences of mental illness and the difficulties associated with this. After struggling with depression during his time at high school, which was characterised by social and economic disadvantage, Harrison decided that he wanted to study psychology so that he could help others who also experienced mental illness:

I dealt with a bit of mental illness during high school, depression and all that, and I kind of worked myself out of it and I thought, you know, that's something I now understand for me personally, and I might be able to use that to help people. That was wishful thinking. (Harrison: Psychology–Deferred)

While many students moving into traditionally feminised degrees and professions cited an empathetic motivation, students who chose to study in more masculinised areas cited a feeling of an aptitude towards the study area. Participants regularly demonstrated that they chose a degree because it was something they enjoyed or felt that they were good at.

Pressure and confusion

I suppose it's kind of a double-edged sword with choice. Just because there's so much of it, it's easy to become confused or indecisive.
(Lorie: Design—Deferred)

One of the challenges for students coming into university is the perceived make-or-break nature of an ATAR. Substantial consequences ride on this quantitative rationalisation of over a decade's worth of schooling. The results can mean excitement at the pathways now open, or devastation and confusion, as desired pathways are closed, and new pathways need to be constructed in their wake. As the first person in her family to attend university, Carrie had limited resources that could facilitate achieving the kind of marks that would enable her to gain entry into university. Her limited access to resources at home, in addition to the favouritism exhibited by the teachers within her high school, meant that Carrie was severely limited in her capacity to make space for study. Despite this, she believed she had been a good, hard working student throughout her senior high school years, and was fairly certain this effort would 'pay off', allowing her entry into the university course she had applied for. Therefore, upon finding out her ATAR was lower than what she had anticipated, Carrie was met with a sense of hopelessness and despair, not only for her plans for her immediate future, but the long term too:

So, when I found out about my ATAR I think it was email or computer. I logged onto the computer and I got I think 64 or something, 64.8 or something like that. All the courses that I wanted were 75 or 80 plus. So I saw my ATAR and straight away broke down. Straight away started crying and basically got in my car, drove as far as I could until Dad called me and was like 'what's going on?' I was like 'I failed. I can't go to university.' I think we sat there for two hours trying to find a way to go to university because it was a big thing for me. To go to university that was what I was going to do. (Carrie: Childcare—Deferred)

Similarly, Ariel, a participant currently doing a Bachelor of Teaching, assumed that she would gain entry into her preferred degree choice at the research site university based on the marks she received throughout her senior years of high school. Years later, after a complex series of delays, and partial study at another university, she eventually gained enrolment at the research site university. Ariel is another example of a student from a high school in a disadvantaged area with hopes of pursuing HE who feels they were misguided in their high school marks leading up to the final high school exams. The end result was an ATAR lower than expected:

I got really good marks, for everything but then my ATAR was so weak that I couldn't get in. [...] Yeah, and based on like my half yearlies and things like that I thought that I was a shoe-in [...]. (Ariel: Teaching)

Still determined to pursue HE despite this setback, Ariel then put in a late application to a regional university situated five hours away from her hometown. As the application had been a last resort to pursue her chosen career path, Ariel only found she had been accepted at this university two weeks before she was due to begin her studies. Determined nonetheless, she left her job, home, family and friends and moved to her new home on campus:

The plan was always to go to [this university], I didn't even consider [going to another university] because otherwise I could have applied for like an early acceptance but I didn't even think about it. Then one of my friends she was going to [other university] and I thought, 'why not', so I changed my preferences and we went together ... I didn't get into [research site university] and I got a late offer into [other university] and I thought if I don't go now I'll never go ... so with two weeks notice I got up and left. (Ariel: Teaching)

Ariel's resolve to gain a university degree and the subsequent abrupt and drastic change of plans for her future did not only impact upon Ariel herself, but also her family. She explained that due to her marks leading up to her final year exams neither she nor her parents had anticipated that she might not be accepted into her local university. Moving towns held serious ramifications for Ariel and her family, who she had lived with up to the day she left:

Devastated, because both my older sisters went to [research site university] and that was always the plan and it was a shock to them too because I'd never ever spoken about wanting to go (to Armidale university). (Ariel: Teaching)

The limiting of options in potential study areas was often damaging to a sense of worth for students from working class backgrounds. Participants such as Carrie and Ariel, who both attended a disadvantaged high school, considered themselves to be 'smart' within that context. They had viewed themselves as 'likely to go far' in life but were shocked by their low ATAR rankings, and plans were abruptly shifted because of the change in possible HE trajectories.

In trying to make the transition from high school to university, a small number of working class participants recounted the challenge this presented for maintaining existing social networks. These students would also have to reorientate to the university, already part of an unfamiliar trajectory, as they struggled to maintain friends who regarded HE study suspiciously. For Lennon, another participant who was the first among her friends and family to be accepted into university, attendance was viewed as elitist amongst her peers:

I actually lost quite a lot of friends who didn't go to uni when I first went to uni, because I got really passionate about things and then they viewed that as me being a bitch and I'm like – well that's not what I'm being, I'm trying to help you but – yeah I just associate with different people now to what I used to.
(Lennon: Social Science)

Lennon also expresses a similar hostility from her parents, who actively criticised her decision to attend university. Rather than being supported, she made the decision to attend university *in spite of* her social position. While in this study most working class participants had parents who supported, if not actively persuaded, their children to attend, this example demonstrates a deeply held suspicion that also remains towards these pathways from those who feel excluded from them, resonating with Bourdieu's notion of "refusing what one is refused" because "that's not for the likes of us" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471). Students from these backgrounds have less support and resources to pursue study, yet must compete within a university system that treats students 'equally' (with a focus on treating all individuals the same, disregarding their different histories, backgrounds and experiences). In this example, Lennon continued to struggle to find a suitable pathway throughout her study.

Lennon's story contrasts sharply with the stories of students who come from middle class backgrounds. For these students, university was regarded as a 'natural' progression, and was built into the attitudes and expectations of family, friends and educators. This allowed for a stable sense of identity and capability (see Burke et al., 2016). The transition from high school to university reasserted already held positive feelings, such as notions of being 'smart', 'capable' and 'valid'. For example, Lucy's family always expected her to attend university and she was deemed a great learner all through school. At 17 years of age she began her degree through direct entry from high school and, by the age of 22 will be accepted as a solicitor.

[...] my parents are teachers. Always liked reading, reading gets you into reading and lots of different things. [I] had a good experience at high school, I guess, a couple of really good teachers there who introduced me to more literature and philosophy and things like that. (Lucy: Business/Commerce)

Lucy's experience shows a sense of nurturing, recognition and normalcy, in the pathway towards university. Parents and teachers had engaged with her with interest and support, encouraging her to take an interest in learning and fostering a sense of her as intelligent and capable. For some, experiences of having pathways and aspirations encouraged and fostered was normal, and lacked the pressure perceived by working class students as successful navigations of HE were often viewed as likely, if not inevitable outcomes. Yet, for working class students a significant amount of time was spent in adjusting to the very idea of university and being a higher education student. Hence, understandings of outcomes for graduates need to include careful consideration of the background, educational experiences, available resources and support and pathways that facilitate HE access and experiences. Students must contend in an uneven playing field, shaped through the enduring advantages and disadvantages that they bring into the university.

Making a 'choice'

These experiences of access to university and ATAR suggests that ATAR scores generally follow patterns of advantage and disadvantage (Cardak et al., 2015, pp. 4–5). Reflected in the discussion above are, on the one hand, many of the obstacles and challenges that face disadvantaged students who are trying to gain access to and participate in university study, and on the other, the more straightforward and normalised experience of students from middle class backgrounds. Moreover, following receipt of ATAR results, students from more advantaged backgrounds are in a far better position than students from disadvantaged backgrounds to engage in reorganising their applications for their personal benefit:

Low SES students come from backgrounds where families have less experience and familiarity with higher education and the university application process. Notwithstanding the prevalence of online information, these students are at a disadvantage when trying to understand the complex task of preparing a university application portfolio. (Cardak et al., 2015, pp. 4–5)

Students from more disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrate reflexivity about the choices they can make, and why they make them, but feel constrained by their structural conditions. These include the limits and resources of their parents and schools, and their own access to support via family and other social networks. This challenges the idea that students can make the 'right' choices by simply being given access to formal (and often coded) information.

Yet, one of the prevailing forms of symbolic violence inherent in discourses of choice is the means to blame individuals for making poor decisions that are governed by circumstances beyond their control. The following is a quote from Humphrey, a third year Business student at the research site university Growing up, Humphrey had extensive exposure to the medical industry, with both his parents working as general practitioners and other members of his family working as doctors and business advisors within hospitals. Rather than follow family members into the health care industry however, Humphrey developed a love of tourism. He attributes this interest to his frequent international travel with his family growing up, which, subsequently, resulted in part-time work as a scuba diving instructor. After receiving offers from three universities in Australia, Humphrey took a gap year during which he travelled. Humphrey is a firm believer in 'experience', a trait demonstrated in the quote below:

I jumped on the computer and looked up Lord Howe Island, this mysterious place. I wrote to them, and I got accepted, and next thing, I was flying over there. (Humphrey: Business/Tourism)

Humphrey's ability to 'make something happen', simply because he wanted it to, points to an attitude of individual choice that aligns with his relatively economically privileged position. This is captured by the way he universalises his own experience:

I think if you're motivated enough and you're passionate enough about something, you will get there eventually. [...] I think it's the type of person, the personality, not how wealthy you are or anything like that, dictates where or what's going to happen to you. I think it's really how you approach things because I've met some amazing people that are doing incredible things, and never will you hear them complain about how stressful it might be, all of the things to do. That's not to say it isn't stressful. It is, and any normal person would find some of those sorts of things stressful. It's just how they approach it [...] I think opportunities, and I speak very broadly about this in terms of jobs and all of that sort of thing, are available to everyone regardless of their nationality, their race, their gender, their sexuality, anything like that. But at uni, stress is a big factor and how stress affects people differently is ... I think it's definitely addressed. I'm not sure if it's addressed enough or in the right way or anything like that, but if someone has to work full time and study full time, I would say they're not at a disadvantage, but I think it's definitely challenging. (Humphrey: Business/Tourism)

When compared to other participants in this study, Humphrey demonstrates a lack of self-imposed restriction of aspiration because he is in a social position to access opportunities and possibilities through an attitude and 'approach' that is culturally legitimised. One of the challenges to policy that Humphrey's account raises is that choice is simply made through rational evaluations of available options. Yet as Skeggs (2004) notes:

Those who suggest that choice is universal betray the social position from which their perspective emerged. Choice is a resource, to which some lack access and which they cannot see as a possibility; it is not within their field of vision, their plausibility structure. (p. 139)

Choices are made through being situated in a social trajectory and are also deeply shaped by classed, gendered and racialised inequalities and differences (Jackson et al., 2011). In our study, boundaries to achievement are more heavily felt by participants whose social networks do not include others who have attended university, particularly those who are first in family to study at university. These include restrictions such as time, financial and material resources, sensibilities of confidence and capability and emotional and psychological experiences. In the next section, we will explore how discourses of student choice produce, enforce and maintain social trajectories through practices of social closure within and through university participation.

Part 02:

Study Experiences



Key points

- *Systems of class are not simply erased through university entry. Rather, class is often played out and struggled over in universities, and so university regularly entrenches class ideals.*
- *People in privileged class positions utilise access to 'higher status' degrees as a way of maintaining privilege. This is often performed through undermining the value and meaning of lower status degrees.*
- *Many students will experience disruptions throughout study that are the result of ongoing disadvantage, yet this is often made invisible through the internalisation of this as personal fault and responsibility.*
- *Privileged students will often consider that performing well throughout university study is a matter of choice, reflecting an inherent internal ability, rather than the result of internalised experiences.*

Introduction

Universities are often thought of as ameliorating the impacts of class and equity backgrounds (for instance, the generally higher average income of graduates, see Norton, 2012). Yet, as the previous section has demonstrated, students make decisions about their entry into university that reflect their different social, cultural and economic backgrounds and the opportunities and restrictions that these create. Far from levelling the playing field, HE reflects many of the systems of inequality in society more broadly, and so tends to offer greater opportunities for those who have access to the implicit and coded 'rules of the game'. While HE offers opportunities for social mobility in many instances, it also gives preference to those who have been socialised into learning the way in which the game is played, and how to adjust into the expectations required for particular forms of 'success'. In most cases working class students must figure out how to exploit these opportunities simultaneously as they act upon them. Many, as Bathmaker et al. (2016) argue, become 'drifters', or in other words, *hope* that they will find a pathway, without being in a position to actively construct one.

Once students have gained a place within the university, they are expected to adapt to a new form of study, learning and lifestyle. Existing expectations of university can be confirmed or dismantled and degree pathways that seemed like opportunities can feel like prisons, constraining a sense of self. Some students will finish a degree relatively smoothly while others move in and out of part- and full-time study, periods of deferment, and sometimes even spend years moving between degrees. This comes down to a number of factors that include being interested in the chosen degree program; feeling connected within the particular pedagogical spaces the student is located; finding the study appropriately challenging and meaningful; and discovering a career pathway the student feels is worthwhile and achievable. Yet, one of the challenges for students to deeply invest in study is the symbolic hierarchy that is built around degrees and professions. These manifest in day-to-day relationships, conversations and practices that establish social closure within the university, and so bring social class and intersecting inequalities *into* universities, rather than these beings spaces of the amelioration of social inequalities.

Getting into the right degree and knowing what to expect

One of the challenges of university is being prepared for the nature of HE study and learning within particular disciplinary/subject contexts. Students are expected to be 'independent learners', which carries with it particular gendered connotations (see e.g., Leathwood & Read, 2009). Developing the expected academic literacies (which are shaped by the social practices within a particular discipline/subject) often remains out of reach because these are not made explicit and remain highly mystified and coded (Lillis, 2001). This period can be facilitated by informal and formal knowledge networks and, for some, this experience will seem normal and fluid. For others, it will be littered with surprises, uncertainties and obstacles. These experiences are skewed toward those who already experience social disadvantage and often resonates with residual memories of misrecognition, exclusion and feelings of not belonging. Crozier and Reay (2011) explain that working class students:

Start out with little or limited knowledge of what to expect or what is expected of them and little understanding of the structure and overall requirements of their course. They also have limited understanding of what might be at their disposal either to further their studies or to enhance their social enjoyment. (p. 148)

Many of the students from working class backgrounds in our study initially saw university as something that provided automatic benefits and value. Yet, students often experience non-linear, disrupted pathways through study. Students might transfer degrees, defer, drop out (and later return) or fail courses that will need to be repeated. These events come with a deepening student debt, but perhaps even more importantly, consume large amounts of students' lives, and can entrench negative self-perceptions regarding their sense of personal capability.

The circumstances and conditions that shape non-linear, disrupted pathways are varied and are not reducible to quantifiable and/or decontextualised explanations. As discussed in the previous section, a student's ATAR often defines the possibilities for study, although Enabling and other non-standard pathways provide alternative entry routes. With a low, or lower-than-expected ATAR, different options for study will often have to be considered quickly. Ariel, who had not received her expected ATAR to enter a teaching degree, had rapidly made the decision to attend a regional university some four hours away. Yet, this did not go as planned:

So I've been a little bit of a mix up because I started at [another university] and now I'm at [research site university] ... I got assaulted in [first university] and [...] Yeah and someone stalked me for six months, so the police were basically like get out of here, or otherwise I would have stayed and finished my degree [...] I actually did a bridging degree at [first university] in 2011 and 2012 I started Bachelor of Primary Education, Bachelor of Arts and then I had time off as well and now I'm back at [research site university] [...] I found it really hard to get into [research site university]. (Ariel: Teaching)

After Ariel returned to the regional university in this research, she completed (yet another) bridging/enabling course to allow her access to a teaching degree. Despite starting her university studies immediately after leaving high school, Ariel now finds herself in her seventh year of tertiary study. She laments that others with whom she had begun her initial bridging course had now attained jobs, leaving her as the last within her network of friends still to complete her degree. These struggles and challenges, and her subsequent disrupted path throughout her studies, have led to Ariel feeling uncertain about her own self-worth:

Because I feel like I should be finished uni, there's a bit of embarrassment as well, it's like I don't want to talk about it because people are like, 'Oh, she's still at uni' ... I feel like it's a kick in the guts, like thinking now I could have finished my degree and be teaching now and like that, so that's hard to think about but at the end of the day it's going to get done so I just need to. (Ariel: Teaching)

Another challenge is enrolling in a degree program that is experienced as different from what had been expected. This could be that the degree is experienced as too challenging or abstract; that the career pathway is not as desirable as the student had thought; or that the student had come to believe better outcomes can be gained through a different degree.

I was interested in doing welfare work. But I think once I sort of immersed myself in it I think I sort of—I think I would have found it really depressing, like you know. It's nice to help people but I don't know I could have done that day in, day out. So that was probably why I chose that course. Then I think I probably went into psychology when I was that age, because I was probably self-analysing. Then primary school teaching I honestly did that out of practicality, because I thought 'good hours, there's work available'. I thought as a responsible adult, that would be a good career choice as a single parent. You know, I'd have holidays and stuff off. So yeah, it was purely a practicality decision that one. But yeah, didn't work out. (Bianca: Social Science—Deferred)

In Bianca's case, as with many working class students, one of the challenges that are faced is knowing what to expect within a degree. In many cases, disadvantaged students face a struggle to envision the 'possible selves' (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011) that degrees could lead to. When struggling with limited access to support and information and networks, it can take time to realise these possibilities, often coming much later in the process of HE study. Similarly, some participants had chosen a degree based on what their ATAR ranking allowed but they quickly found that the content, or simply the way in which that particular course was taught and organised, did not suit their study needs. Social science student, Lennon, explains that, for her, a business degree was something she had been able to 'get into' but not something that she was truly interested in:

The first degree I started was business, business degree. [...] About a year I was officially enrolled in it, but I never used to go to class, I just hated the whole degree. I didn't really want to be there, I didn't know what I was doing with it. I just did it because I got into that. (Lennon: Social Science)

For many students, choosing the 'wrong' degree in the beginning can lead to a tumultuous journey through university. Now enrolled and completing a degree in Social Science, Lennon explains that the journey to finding a degree she was passionate about has been long, but had often been prompted by the opportunity to explore different options once she had commenced study:

So, I did business in 2010 and then in 2011 I did the teaching thing, and I kind of enjoyed it but that's kind of what led me into wanting to do social work, because I'd often hear about the disadvantaged kids that the teachers would teach and I'm like —no, I really want to go and explore that instead of just teaching. (Lennon: Social Science)

This is an important consideration, as students with limited experiences and understandings of HE have the opportunity, once study commences, to become better orientated around their own interests, abilities and motivations over time, but this means that their progression through HE becomes prolonged, frustrated and expensive.

Struggling to study

I just think you know, for someone that's got no car, and are on Centrelink and live an hour from university, and they're worried about what they're going to have for dinner, and you know, completing their assessments really does fall to the back of the list when you're sort of just trying to survive.
(Bianca: Social Science—Deferred)

One of the most obvious places for student experience to be hindered is through their access to economic and material resources. Being able to meet the cost of living, including having an appropriate place to live, strongly affects a student's journey through HE. Yet these resources are plentiful for some and significantly restricted for others. Moreover, social capital will be an important determinant of these resources. Students who can live at home to study, have strong educational support from parents. Those who have financial support to live away from home will have more freedom to focus on the challenges of study. As Burke et al. (2017b) demonstrate for regional students who have had to move away from home to study and who don't have full financial support from parents, there is a real need to spend more time in paid work and domestic labour that is not a simple process of 'effective time management'. These challenges seep into study, especially with an urge for 'flexibility' in course delivery, which produces less external pressure for students to attend classes but rather to 'make' their own study time and to exercise discipline in relation to it. This is often exacerbated by multiple other challenges, including traumatic experiences, which impact students' participation in university study. University systems are often not designed to recognise and manage this array of challenges.

Throughout the course of our research, several participants demonstrated that there is a distinct difference in how those with fewer resources conceptualise time and the prospect of 'future' in regard to those with more resources available to them (Burke et al. 2017b). Students with access to material resources, as well as to cultural resources and networks given social and symbolic legitimacy, also tend to plan for the long term. This future-oriented disposition, privileged in HE, is often embedded in (middle-classed, white racialised and masculinised) cultural practices. These practices include identifying the career as individual aims to pursue, and carefully planning and structuring a life trajectory toward achieving this goal. Conversely, those without access to the resources and dispositions that carry social, cultural and symbolic esteem, whilst often having high aspirations for their future, tend to be more focused on the day-to-day. Students from working class backgrounds might know what they want to pursue but are unable to alter their current life trajectory in order to begin strategic manoeuvring towards this specific goal. In relation to this (and other complex politics of misrecognition and exclusion), working class students are often in a constant state of reasserting their sense of worth in the struggle to 'fit into' HE. For instance, Lorie has left his degree in graphic design and is currently working full time at a major supermarket. Struggling with having enough money to cover living and housing costs, for now he 'lives day to day' but thinks of the 'someday' when he will be doing something he enjoys for a career.

It's just if you go that route, though, that's going to be your career for the rest of your life, you know? And I don't really ever want to see myself working there for the rest of my life, so ... (Lorie: Design—Deferred)

Some students face further complex challenges in their lives, including experiences of domestic violence, which is a largely hidden form of inequality that impacts students' university experiences and transitional processes. For example, Bianca explains:

Yes, okay, so when I was—one of the issues I had was I was in a pretty like violent and volatile relationship at the time and I was sort of—one of my priorities was sort of caught up in that yeah. There was a lot of other outside dramas and that were affecting my life meant that I couldn't sort of focus on myself and moving forward.
(Bianca: Social Science—Deferred)

The great resilience demonstrated by students from working class students in order to contend with and through a complex web of struggles and strategies is mainly invisible due to the normative perceptions of what 'indicators' of 'resilience' matter. The students in our study demonstrate their determination to attain a university degree no matter what other life challenges present themselves. In Sunny's case, for example, this meant accruing money just to make it through the next semester, and to live one semester at a time. She laments that she is unable to move out of home whilst still studying, even though her family and living situation is troubled:

Because [my parents] would've recommended me to move out of home but I can't afford that. To move away from the situation, can't afford that so—yeah [...] and that's also another reason why I took breaks as well because I had no money. Centrelink didn't give me money, so I had to go and work and sort of get me through the next semester. (Sunny: Social Science)

The economic hardships that confront many students make the straightforward, linear pathways through study underpinning hegemonic discourses of 'success', impossible. These are especially pronounced when they tie into difficult and violent experiences such as those Sunny faces. In such contexts, even with 'aspiration', the brute conditions that some disadvantaged students confront betray these. And, as Lennon suggests below, sometimes students still experience a sense of homelessness even while remaining at home:

I mean, I don't know, but I think if I'd had a bit more emotional support at home I think I would already be finished. But I've just had such a fractured relationship with my family and I haven't been in the position to move out and at the moment I'm living between about two or three houses, so that makes it hard. You know, I live out of a suitcase, so how do I study? I don't. (Lennon: Social Science)

Lennon, while still technically living at home with her parents, also suggests that home life is too difficult to remain in for long periods, and so erodes a sense of security. Yet, moving out, as many regional students experience (Burke et al., 2017b) is a challenging course of action, which demands large amounts of time, money and commitment to carefully balance obligations and be able to remain successful at university.

Symbolic systems

Even where students manage to sustain their commitment to study, despite the myriad of challenges they face at multiple and intersecting levels of disadvantage and inequality, students are regularly misrecognised as 'making the wrong choices', as being lazy or unmotivated, or not having their priorities in the right place. These become 'insidious' parts of the daily experience of students in university:

Close attention must be paid not only to *numbers* of (male and female) pedagogic participants and their socio-economic background in and across HE disciplinary contexts. Analysis must also be developed to shed light on the subtle ways that *insidious misrecognitions* play out through the politics of emotion and shame. (Burke, 2017, p. 431)

In the UK context, it has been shown that policy conflates the idea of becoming educated and creating possibilities for social mobility. Hence students from working class backgrounds are assumed to enter university to be socially mobile (Loveday, 2015). Or, to put this more bluntly, policy assumes that the working class pursue HE to become middle class. While rigorous and close analytical attention is not often paid to the terminology used within HE policy, this focus is likely to be similar in the Australian context because of the strong emphasis on access to HE with far less attention paid to the outcomes of students from working class or other equity backgrounds and the ways these transitional processes are likely to continue to be shaped by intersecting inequalities. Yet, inequalities of class and other intersecting disadvantages are assumed to disappear after admissions (Coulson et al., 2018) and so are rarely acknowledged in policy. Research on HE regularly overlooks how disadvantage is produced through dynamic and day-to-day practices.

Little attention has been paid to the subtle ways in which an individual's sense of worth can be developed or eroded throughout university study. Coming into a university with limited understanding of what to expect, and what is expected, hides the symbolic systems of meaning, value and taste that are written informally into university life. Students choose degrees based upon a series of complex constraints, restrictions and opportunities un/available to them. Further, students from more privileged backgrounds often have greater access to programs and institutions that are perceived as being of higher status.

Widening participation also opens a challenging terrain for systems of privilege that HE traditionally supported. As Gale and Parker (2017) point out “increased access to and participation in higher education no longer ascribes its graduates with distinction” (p. 91). Because of this, middle and elite classes struggle to maintain their distinction. This, as has already been shown, is supported through the ATAR, which allows for students from more advantaged backgrounds to gain access to more prestigious institutions and degrees, and to postgraduate qualifications.

Moreover, *within* the university, where highly-represented and under-represented students now share similar spaces, there is a greater perception that there is porousness between advantaged and disadvantaged social positions. Rather than being an opportunity for an expanded tolerance and egalitarian disposition and practice, this largely leads to strategies aimed at social closure and the reinforcement of class boundaries. As Skeggs (2004) argues, “it is the ability of energy to leak beyond its inscribed containment that makes a class struggle. The refusal to accept inscription and be bound by its value is a significant act in challenging the dominant symbolic order” (p. 13). Widening participation threatens the privilege gained through what is traditionally a core middle class institution. The reactions to these changes, are to position working class students as being undeserving of these pathways:

As higher education is becoming increasingly characterised by diversity, the anxiety about closeness of the “Other” to those deemed to be worthy of higher education participation is expressed through narratives about the contamination of pedagogical spaces—by those Other bodies who do not know how to be or act as university students. (Burke & Crozier 2014, p. 63)

“Marking out difference” (Burke & Crozier, 2014, p. 64) takes place through judgements of aptitude, motivation, aspiration and employability—essentially value and worth. These pernicious ways of maintaining separation and privilege are already observable elsewhere in Australian culture, where, for instance, the mining boom has produced discourses surrounding the ‘cashed-up bogan’ as undeserving of their wealth, who subsequently attempt to imitate middle class norms and identities (Pini et al., 2012). Thus, students from working class backgrounds are judged as “ultimately inferior or lacking” (Pini et al., 2012, p. 150) and this misrecognition functions as means to maintain the symbolic status and power of the middle class.

These judgements are especially damaging in HE, as working class positionality is still perceived through the “dominant historical notions of the working classes as intellectually deficient/inferior” (Stitch & Freie, 2015, p. 3). In acknowledging this, one of the challenges in HE research is understanding how working class culture is brought into universities, and how it relates to, and is largely contested by, the dominant middle class, patriarchal and neo-colonial culture of the university. This internal differentiation, or the making of class *within the university*, is under theorised in the Australian context. Differentiation occurs along class lines, but also this produces a durability of class within HE institutions, as processes of symbolic violence and exclusion classify different students in terms of their career prospects, capabilities and ultimately, the kind of ‘self’ they are. Rather than ameliorating class difference, universities have become a poorly understood site of its *generation*.

In our research, middle class students primarily focused on the perceived status and employability of particular degree programs when choosing a path of study, but a small number of students directly considered the symbolic or classed status attributed to study areas. Lucy, who is studying a double degree in Law/Arts, reflects on choosing a major for her Arts degree. While she considers Sociology, she opts for Politics because of her perception of it being more ‘highbrow’:

But the study of politics tends to look down upon sociology as a theory, well... They were very, they just knew that they were, this was correct, and anything that wasn't their, I don't know, what they believed in. It was very highbrow and they thought they were the best and, yeah. Whereas I think in sociology it's not as much like that, but maybe because it's a more... I don't know, could you call it a newer, a more new sort of... I don't know. It's less highbrow maybe. (Lucy: Arts/Law)

Although this reflection focuses more directly on disciplinary value, there is an implication of a devaluation of Sociology as a study area. Lucy opts towards studying Politics and in so doing develops her position to reflect these ‘highbrow’ tastes. These perceptions of the value of disciplinary knowledge have limited means of access to an epistemological critique and focus on signs of distinction. Another participant, Miranda, suggests that these classifications rely on suggestions of intellectual inferiority:

[...] people in psychology say, ‘people who aren't smart enough to do psychology, they do social work’. So, psychologists don't like social workers. (Miranda: Psychology—Deferred)

Suggestions of intellectual aptitude and capability form key parts of establishing social and class boundaries in relation to degree 'choice' and the subjective positioning of the student across discourses of difference and esteem. This is also reflected in constructing the motivation and engagement of peers. Dallas, who is studying a double degree of Law and Social Science, reflects on how many students in the Social Science program are disengaged from their study.

In my opinion, like in Social Sciences, there's two kinds of students, like the ones that can't wait to go and talk to every person in that class about what they think about it every time, or the people that just go there and don't actually do anything, and just kind of float. (Dallas: Law/Social Science)

Dallas implicitly draws on contested polarising discourses of 'participation' as framed by notions of 'voice' and the 'active' versus 'passive' learner. Through such value-laden discourses, she constructs a group of students who seemingly do not belong in HE. Their aptitudes and interests are perceived as stunted, and they appear to lack a clear understanding of the reasons they have taken on study, subtly reinforcing deficit discourses of the 'widening participation' student (Burke, 2012) and circulating narratives of 'shame' (Burke, 2015; 2017).

Shame is hidden through individualizing discourses that locate the problem of pedagogical participation in the individual participant. 'Failure' and 'success' are perceived as located in the individual, through judgements about a person's capability, motivation and resilience. Such judgements are made against subjective notions about what pedagogic participation entails and what a university participant 'is'. (Burke, 2017, p. 430)

While day-to-day struggles over the value of study (and of the student) can appear superfluous, the position of privileged students and the potentially reasonable critiques made hide how derision is projected on to working class student bodies to suggest their lack of deservingness. Lennon (Social Science) reflects on people in more vocationally orientated degrees, suggesting that *"If you talk to someone else like engineering or social work, it's like – 'you won't get a job out of that'. I've met people like that."* Embedded in the tone of this statement is judgement of meaninglessness, and dismissiveness of the degree being studied, and ultimately the trajectory that Lennon has taken. Another student, Daphne, also focuses on the worthlessness ascribed to her study from students from vocational/professionally orientated degrees.

I mean they were doing law and business and I mean every time I said I did social science people were like – 'What's that, but what kind of job will you get from that, like isn't that a bit of a waste of time' – and so everyone sort of looked down on me a bit doing that degree.

(Daphne: Social Science–Grad)

Lennon draws this sense of shame out further. She believes that having more positive/empowering stories about people with Social Science degrees successfully securing work will alleviate some of the idea that the degree holds no meaning beyond study:

I'm not saying social science isn't valuable, but people just need to be – like have a bit more faith, a bit more positivity around it. Some more positive stories because all we hear like when we talk to other students is it's like an arts degree, you won't get a job, and I think that makes people feel really down on themselves and the degree and then they worry. So more uplifting stuff, like some people could come in and do like lectures and be like – look I did this degree and then I got this job and – Instead of just you won't get a job, you'll be a bum, you'll never pay off your HECS.

(Lennon: Social Science)

Working-class students pursue HE as a way of securing opportunities for meaningful and fulfilling work and lives. Yet, Lennon suggests that as she nears graduation, there is a sense of shame and futility attached to her trajectory. This is entangled with the judgements of people she perceives to represent successful students, even though most of these have had much more support throughout their study.

As Burke (2017) and Loveday (2016) demonstrate, shame is not only classed, but is also formed through gendered inequalities and misrecognitions. This is connected to the derogatory histories and discourses associated with women's bodies and feminised practices that seep into ways of constructing different university degrees and their status in hierarchical fields of practice. Those degrees that are constructed as 'soft' are subtly downgraded in status by their attachment to the feminised realm (to be 'soft' is historically associated with women's bodies). To be connected to 'soft' degree programs and to have been seen to have made 'softer' choices about future aspirations is entangled with the politics of difference, perpetuated through language used to denote worth and legitimacy through 'rational', 'strategic' goal-oriented and 'hard' choices.

Part 03: Strategies and Transitions



Key points

- *Employability discourses often favour privileged students who have the time to carefully plan their career pathways.*
- *As the graduate labour market becomes more competitive, students from working class and under-represented backgrounds are facing greater disadvantage in the extensive preparatory work (building recognisable forms of social and cultural capital) required to become 'employable'.*
- *Even with HE focusing on producing greater equity in access to study, the labour market still uses methods of recruitment that favour students from privileged backgrounds. More pressure needs to be put on industry to take responsibility to produce equitable practices and outcomes.*

Introduction

Understanding the labour market necessities and learning to reflexively adjust towards certain pathways and outcomes is a key element of preparing for the transition to work. Yet, for many students, the obstacles experienced while undertaking a degree – such as paid work, living conditions and study – were a core focus, with less attention paid to building a strategy for post-university life. As Threadgold and Nilan (2009) note, reflexivity becomes a key resource in labour market pathways for middle class students.

A competitive applicant

Students require more than a degree to be competitive in the graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2008; Bathmaker et al., 2016). 'Employable' graduates must orientate much of their extracurricular time to acquiring skills, experience and networks relevant to the labour market. Students were aware that they needed extra factors to make their CVs 'stand out'. As Beatrice remarks, this is increasingly identified as a crucial component of applying for work:

At the moment I'm [applying] for grad jobs and they always say, what extra curricula things are you doing. So, I'm like oh, yes, International Leadership volunteering, because it's always good to help out the community. I guess the I-LEAD programme has actually given me opportunity and also driven me to do these extra little things. Like go to these little lectures and events. (Beatrice: Business/Tourism)

Many of the middle class students in this study, most notably those in a Business/Commerce (or similar) degree, were aware of the demands and competitiveness of the graduate labour market and were expected to invest themselves in activities they thought would enhance their employability. For Bertha, even before choosing a degree, she had expectations of what would be important for her in securing work:

When I was first choosing what degree to study, I had no idea what I really wanted to study but then these two courses kind of jumped out at me and then when I saw I could do them both together, I thought it would give me a broader opportunity once I graduated. I wasn't so focused on one specific career direction. I thought it would give me a bit of flexibility and increase my employability. (Bertha: Business/Commerce)

Bertha's decisions revolved around her personal interest in study, but are metered by her ideas of what pathways are possible and available within the labour market. As such, some students become vocationally orientated very early in their labour market strategies. This sentiment was also reflected by Ernie, who had demonstrated a strategic understanding of what was important to be added to a CV, and when it was important to focus upon it:

I guess my first three years of uni were more geared towards academic, so just focusing on maintaining a good academic record to get my foot in the door. Mostly because there's not much professional experience available for economics or finance until you get to about the end of third year. Or if you're doing straight commerce, maybe the end of second year. But because of that, one of the major selling points as a graduate is your academic transcripts, so I put most of my attention there to the first few years of my degree. This year now that I've got to a place with my academic transcript that is comfortable, I've over loaded my timetable with a lot more extracurricular stuff. (Ernie: Business/Commerce)

Third year business student, Catalina, demonstrates the importance of strategising for future employment in her reflection on the importance of a student's academic transcript:

It became quite clear by third year that it was quite important for applying for jobs. You know, you had to hand in your transcript and you had to have – there was a credit average at least, to apply. (Catalina: Business/Commerce)

As she suggests, merely obtaining a degree does not have substantial value, but students are also expected to be able to demonstrate their capability as a student. This awareness and knowledge about securing employment before leaving university has benefited Catalina already as, despite the fact that she has not yet finished her degree, she has already been offered a position with the Reserve Bank of Australia.

Students who came from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds showed a much greater orientation toward the vocational outcomes of their degree. These students demonstrate a strong anticipatory awareness of outcomes and tend to possess forms of network capital. Young people who anticipate these requirements and have the opportunity to establish these trajectories are more likely to be able to identify successful strategies to advance their labour market transition. It is important here to note that this is not about individuals making right or wrong choices. 'Good choices' in this regard are the result of an advantaged position, and being able to invest more time and resources in the struggle to maintain and improve one's social position (France & Threadgold, 2015). In so doing, these students begin with an advantage in establishing an ideal trajectory for their desired graduate outcomes.

In developing a clear future orientation, advantaged students demonstrated a strong understanding of the role of extracurricular activities, and how these would become relevant to their employability. The need to demonstrate extracurricular activities as a form of CV building, as has been noted in other studies (Allen et al., 2013; Abrahams, 2017; Tomlinson, 2008; Bathmaker et al., 2016), has become much more important because of the saturation of the graduate labour market. This requires students to become more orientated toward an enhancement of their own exploitability, as it requires that their 'spare' time also be consumed by preparation and anticipation of abstract futures that are hoped will arrive. This is well demonstrated by Ronald, a recently graduated Business/Commerce student now working in a role in a business. During undergraduate study, he started an internet business with some friends as a method of CV building:

So just me and a couple of boys at uni, just to start something, you know, add something else to that Resume, started up like a clothing line. So, like a street wear brand. Everything we do, we just reinvest. Any of the money we just put it there. It's literally just to—just a project on the side really. We don't really expect to get any money out of it or anything like that. We just leave it there. It's more of a beer fund, you know, if we're going out for the weekend or whatever. It was definitely an important part for me getting in this job. It did everything it needs to do for me to date, which is really good. I can't complain at all.

(Ronald: Business/Commerce/Management)

Extracurricular activities, especially entrepreneurial ones, are seen as central to becoming employed in a graduate position. As Ronald suggests here, these activities are rarely recognised simply for their intrinsic value, where even running a business was not intended to produce any significant return. Rather, this practice was aimed at a perceived future, whereby demonstrable business experience could be used to 'stand out'. This reflects an attitude found by Stevenson and Clegg (2011) where students would focus on the next 'possible self', envisioning themselves as entering "highly skilled employment, earning a regular income and achieving personal fulfilment and satisfaction" (p. 238). Yet, this also suggests an exploitation of students both in terms of the time available and the labour investment necessary for securing a job. For Ronald, this was orientated towards maximising 'employability':

For me, like I wanted the skills, but the biggest thing was my employability. I need to look very different to every single other person. You know, every time I say to someone, I did triple major, they say, that's so cool. When I bring that up with employers, they think, that's definitely different and it shows the commitment, and all of those kind of skills that they look for, which is great as well.
(Ronald: Business/Commerce/Management)

Yet, to invest in extracurricular activities, students required a substantial amount of free time. In some cases, such as international internships, students must be able to 'free themselves' of social, caring and economic commitments. In Bertha's case, a competitive advantage was an international internship program:

I felt for me going to do that internship in Beijing, I found it was helpful to be able to put that on to my resume – it looked good. The actual experience itself, was just more of a fun holiday but the ability to put it on resume looked more impressive than it actually was, which helped me to stand out when applying for different graduate positions.
(Bertha: Business/Commerce)

A common theme across these aspects of employability is also to adopt a reflexive perspective on 'what an employer would think'. The apparent quality of employability can be written into one's self-construction and CV as a way of standing out from the crowd. But, the very ability to have the time to participate in volunteer work or having the financial and temporal freedom to take up an overseas internship, rely on possessing elevated levels of cultural, social and economic capital.

In terms of social capital, a core skill in building a pathway post-study, is building networks. Humphrey, who was deeply involved in extracurricular networking groups, suggests that:

You should always respect those above you and always respect those below you because you never know who someone knows or what might happen.
(Humphrey: Business/Tourism)

Humphrey's use of being respectful here is strategic: relationships can be used to leverage opportunities. Even when a person may appear to be below you in a hierarchy, you can never be sure what their connections are, and what disrespectful or arrogant behaviour could do damage to your opportunities in the future. Humphrey demonstrates an awareness of the value of social capital and that this needs to be actively, strategically and carefully cultivated. Much like the middle class students in Abrahams' (2017) research, this demonstrates an understanding that moving into a competitive labour market is as much, if not more, about who you know as what you know (Whitty & Clements, 2015). The value of a degree is based not only on the qualification, but how it is placed in a narrative that includes achievements, networks and demonstrable capability.

Students from working class backgrounds were less certain of the skills and understanding required of the graduate labour market. This was pronounced for Lennon, who, working as a youth carer, realised that getting a job that utilised a degree requires more than the qualification itself:

I think people don't have a strong enough plan and I think people just kind of give up, like they think they're going to get a job straight away. Realistically we live in [town of research site university], we don't live in Sydney, so you've got to be a bit realistic about things. I met a guy who did a whole social science degree who works with me and then now he's doing social work because he says that he can't get a job. My question is though like have you gone and volunteered [in extracurricular activities]?
(Lennon: Social Science)

Working class students showed a less intense and anticipatory relation to the future. While they were obviously thinking about what jobs they would like to pursue, they were less likely to be engaging in the extracurricular and voluntary activities that middle class students with greater time and network capital pursued. If they did begin to think about volunteering or pursuing extracurricular activities, it was often much later in their degree. As Bathmaker et al. (2016) point out, “awareness of these limitations (in terms of future employment) is not the same as having a ‘feel for the game’ of constructing employable selves” (p. 740). Working class students demonstrate reflexivity about what is required to secure work, but often struggle to mobilise this reflexivity as social or cultural capital (Threadgold & Nilan, 2009). Both Business/Commerce and Social Science degrees have a generalist structure without a vocational/professional accreditation pathway built into the degree program. Yet, in our research there are many more middle class students who study in the Business/Commerce pathway, while a higher proportion of working class students study in the Social Sciences. However, given the higher proportion of working class students in Social Science, a part of the challenge, as noted above, is determining how to develop the very networks or finding extracurricular activities that would make them more employable in a crowded market.

For example, some students in this study point towards degrees such as Social Work as having a direct vocational applicability which they perceive as providing better labour market connections.

My housemate is doing speech path, so you have a prescribed way to get through those years and then you have placements and things like that and when you come out of it, you're a speech pathologist or a physio or something like that. Whereas, I guess social sciences, it's a bit more ambiguous and you have no real title. But at the same time, I think it's to the point where a lot of people think that they're not going to get a job, so they go back and do something else, which I've seen a lot of people do or they just do something completely different and don't use their degree at all. My boyfriend doesn't use his degree. (Erin: Social Science–Grad)

Students within the Social Science degree come to an expectation that the degree itself should have a more vocational orientation, like some other degrees. As Erin suggests above, her boyfriend does not *use* his degree, that is, it does not have a direct applicability in his work. This is a challenging assertion as it suggests that students place a low value on ‘powerful knowledge’, or the more general, abstract principles of knowledge and knowledge structure within disciplines (Wheelahan, 2007). In many cases, Social Science students felt that, in line with the idea that a degree works towards a particular vocational pathway, that the only possibility was to pursue an academic or research career:

There wasn't really anyone to talk about where you were going and the lecturers would—they'd talk about social science degrees and becoming lecturers or becoming researchers that it's like—so what else can it give me. Surely that's not my only option. (Daphne: Social Science–Grad)

Because there are lots of people, like in my third year class are just doing Social Science and majoring in Sociology and Anthropology. I just think—like I just can't even—like even Googling other jobs—Because if you major in Social Work, obviously you're a Social Worker. That's great, but I'm just not sure because there are lots of kids who go—a lot of people who are doing that degree and major. They can't all be researchers. (Dallas: Law/Social Science)

As these excerpts demonstrate, the most immediately obvious pathway to a vocation through a Social Science degree is social research. But students do not seem to be aware of the degree's vocational transferability where Social Science skills are increasingly sought in marketing and public relations, social media and digital industries, and public policy. In comparison with the middle class Business/Commerce students, Social Science students do not seem to recognise that a generalist degree can be vocationally orientated. Arguably, although the opportunities are different, a Social Science degree can create as many labour market opportunities as the Business degree and could be made to work in a social trajectory—provided the same time and energy are invested in extracurricular activities and CV building that was seen by the Business/Commerce students above. This suggests that one of the challenges that working class graduates face is not only moving into a competitive graduate labour market, and not only beginning to develop the necessary networks and resources within their degree program, but doing this from the beginning and doing it as intensely. To be clear, we are not saying that working class students need to just try harder, which corresponds to an individualised neoliberal discourse. There are obvious classed, gendered, and ethnicity related inequalities that make this more possible for some students than others, and hence, defies the idea of a meritocratic discourse. This is certainly something that degree programs need to consider to ensure that their degrees maintain vitality and speak to the 'employability' discourse that most students have towards their HE experience.

'Non-traditional' students often commit to a pathway of study out of the constrained choices available (based upon their ATAR) combined with access to a very limited knowledge of the career pathways available. Many students come to understand these available pathways *during* study, but have already made substantial commitments of time and energy. As France and Threadgold (2015) note, once a social trajectory has momentum "it is much more difficult for the young person to get off that path just by making different choices" (p. 624). Students do not want to "waste prior expenditure of time, effort and emotion" (p. 624), and would struggle to find ways to make these investments work in their favour. Yet, as is clear from the above discussion, the disadvantages that working class students face during study regularly result in requiring greater investments of time in developing a trajectory than those from middle class backgrounds. In the example above, Lennon, who has transferred from a Social Science to a Social Work degree, has sacrificed a large amount of time moving through different paths of study in order to pursue what she thinks will be the most desirable outcome.

These temporal inequalities generate anxieties as demonstrated by Beatrice, a working class Business/Tourism student, who attended university as a means of 'following her passion' and making her parents proud. As the first person in her family to attend university, Beatrice was encouraged to attend university rather than going straight into the labour market. Her mother, who personally had never had the opportunity to attend university, was adamant that Beatrice should hold out for 'a real career'. Beatrice expresses this anxiety regarding what constitutes a 'real career' through wanting to resist gaining employment as a travel agent:

*I don't want to be working in a retail shop,
Flight Centre or, you know, that kind of stuff.*
(Beatrice: Business/Tourism)

Yet, the highest status, salaried and apparently 'meaningful' work is scarce and competitive. In the selling of the ideal life that is unlocked through HE, many students come to realise that outcomes will not be nearly as exciting or satisfying as they thought, a relationship to HE transitions that is characterised by 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011). Beatrice again explains the struggle of having the right experience even to gain an entry-level position:

So that's always hard and when you're applying for jobs, they always say, must have three years' experience. Well I'm a graduate how can I have three years' experience kind of thing.

(Beatrice: Business/Tourism)

Dorothy suggests that the ideal—one promoted before entry to university and maintained throughout—of being able to follow a career path of her own choosing was not what awaited in the reality of the labour market, and it wasn't until quite late in her program that she realised more needed to be done.

I mean not that I looked into too much myself, but it never occurred to me at all that just because I had a dream and I finished, that wasn't going to mean that I could get work. And that didn't even cross my mind at all, it wasn't until I started thinking at the end of the degree that I went, well I need to start doing something.

(Dorothy: Business/Management—Grad)

Another participant, Willy, is disappointed that the reality of holding a degree is not one of living a more fulfilling or enlightened life. Rather, the skills and ideas that he has developed during study must be put aside in the labour market:

It does make me sad. Like the idea of going and having to work in a job that doesn't relate to my degree, or in a job that sucks, even if it relates to my degree is a kind of depressing point. It's probably the worst outcome I think, because then it would be like, you know, you have these skills in critical thought or whatever, and you can use them on your own time, but you know, you can't get paid for them. That would be a bit sad I think.

(Willy: Social Science)

Willy suggests an important counterpoint to the intense focus on vocationalisation that students have demonstrated throughout this report. His concern is that the critical forms of knowledge and capability gained through studying the social sciences will need to be *suppressed* moving into the labour market. This seems to be an example of a relationship of cruel optimism, which "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Through his study, Willy will have developed critical *theoretical* perspectives on inequality and the very social forces that produce and maintain contemporary labour market precarity. He then has to deal with the *reality* of the situation, where that critical knowledge becomes a reflexive way of experiencing one's own disadvantaged position.

HE study should be seen to afford the opportunity to develop an expanded sense of selfhood, one that exceeds the requirements of the market (Williams, 2012). As universities and governmental policy shift towards a focus on how education can best serve industry (Lynch, 2006), more attention needs to be paid to the diminishing value on the development of the good life. University students experience greater rates of psychological distress than their peers, especially those with high numbers of working hours or financial disadvantage (Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm, 2012). A stronger focus on enriching experiences of self-worth in relation to the purposes of HE beyond economic drivers, could counteract these trends.

Graduate jobs – An expanding series of obstacles

I'm kind of scared. I wish I could stay at university for a few more years. (Beatrice: Business)

Even with the extracurricular activities that are required to 'stand out' in getting a job, the process of applying for high-level graduate jobs requires time and timing, as well as a range of other resources. As Bathmaker et al. (2016) note, in the UK regarding the time needed:

To gain a position at the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), applicants have to complete a short form, a telephone interview, an online psychometric test, a longer application form, two more sets of psychometric tests, and finally, an assessment day. (p. 101)

As Catalina, a middle class student in this study, recounts:

So, I had to go through the very, very long process that graduate applications are, so the online form, your Resume, you know the aptitude test, the maths, the patterns and all that stuff, and then followed by a video interview, followed by you know, a normal interview and redoing the tests, and writing a report, and writing your speech, so it was a very long process. (Catalina: Business/Commerce)

On top of this, students must also invest time in putting in the initial applications and knowing when to apply. When asked how many jobs she had applied for, Catalina replied: *A lot. Some I didn't even probably want, but I just wanted a job. A lot—probably like a whole list of—a page of firms that I applied for.* These applications needed to be filled out at the right time, and often in surprising timescales:

Yeah, so they hire quite early—in advance. I think they usually open in about February and then they close—depending on the firm—end of February/ March. Then it starts from there with all the online tests. It's a pretty gruelling process. (Catalina: Business/Commerce)

It is important to apply for graduate jobs early and often. This is because the application process has become highly competitive. These often rely on personality tests:

It's a set mark on the online test, and that's how they cull hundreds and hundreds of people. So it was really hard—really competitive, considering they don't even know you ... The online tests were just—they weren't working for me very well—the patterns and all those silly things are just—were showing a different side of me compared to my uni transcripts. (Catalina: Business/Commerce)

Even with all this effort, Catalina still relied upon her social networks for support in understanding when and where to apply, and to get a sense of whether her own experience was unusual. This is an important aspect of the emotional labour of these applications, as maintaining fortitude is possible through knowing that other people are having the same experience. Moreover, the time that this required of students *during* their study, while still having to complete final year courses, often had to be worked into a demanding schedule:

I know one of my friends actually dropped back to three subjects, just so that she could keep applying for graduate jobs, because it was a pretty full on process. (Catalina: Business/Commerce)

This process of applying for jobs suggests several ways in which institutions are orientated towards students from privileged and middle class backgrounds (Burke & McManus, 2009; Allen et al., 2013). In these cases, this includes the time taken to complete applications, as well as the timing of various activities and achievements that will make a CV 'stand out'. In a labour market flooded by applicants, employers have the capacity to select employees based upon additional 'soft credentials' (Abrahams, 2017) that ultimately privilege middle class background. For many students, this process could lead to a substantial effort with little reward, a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011).

Yeah, so I've actually been applying since February and it's so hard to get a grad job. I've applied for probably 30 plus jobs and the application process is so long and tiring. You have your application and then there's a selection criteria which is a long response. I don't know, maybe it's just me, but I can't think of it off the top of my head. I have to write down and plan, and do that kind of thing so it takes a long time [...] I've just been doing heaps of psychometric testing. It's so overwhelming. Oh, my goodness. So, anyway, I'm still applying for jobs. I'm not going to give up until I get something that I enjoy. (Beatrice: Business/Tourism)

Although a substantial number of professional jobs with government and large companies have moved to these forms of application, smaller employers are still likely to use more traditional application processes. For these jobs, social capital will play a significant role in being able to find work. As Abrahams (2017) demonstrates, middle class students will draw on their social networks for maximum advantage. For many working class students however, there is a double hurdle in being able to utilise a similar strategy. On the one hand, working class students will have limited access to the kinds of social networks that generate social advantage, especially in relation to professional networks. On the other, drawing on social networks is often perceived by students from working class backgrounds as signifying their lack of inherent capability and a lack of effort to attain a position on their individual merits.

Beatrice explains that there are only a few social contacts she could rely on to enhance her graduate future. Even though she is struggling with the application process, she dismisses networking, illuminating all the 'different things' that she must navigate in struggling towards a graduate job:

I don't really know that many people. There's a couple of random friends of friends kind of thing, but I feel like if you want to apply for a grad job, I don't know if they have anything to do with it, because of the psychometric testing and there's all these different things.

(Beatrice: Business/Commerce)

Yet in the case of Dorothy, another Business graduate from a working class background, the role of social networks is much more pronounced:

Most people these days, you know, your sort of casual jobs and things like that, a lot of positions do require a degree or a diploma of some description. It's quite a hard market to get into, just jobs in general. Because you know, it's not that your degree necessarily counts so much if you know the right people, but you need to have the qualifications to even try and get into a lot of places when you don't have the contacts.

(Dorothy: Business/Management–Grad)

The importance of social networks is exemplified by Dallas who is beginning to look for work or internships within local law firms. Her parents, though reasonably well-off financially hold working class occupations, translating in little familial social capital that translates to finding possible openings.

I'm only just starting to send out cover letters now to firms. I've never really done it before, so I'm just a bit—lacking in confidence. But, yeah, I don't really—it's hard to know what's around. I think it comes back to like my parents not really being—not necessarily lawyers, but you know living half an hour out [of town], there are lots of law students, like lots of my friends who I study with who live in town—parents are lawyers, and know lots of people and that kind of thing. So, I'm just starting to realise that I have to start networking myself a little bit and putting myself out there, because I know a lot of my friends are just going to kind of be able to get jobs.

(Dallas: Social Science/Law)

Social capital, then, is not a mere possession. It is the ability to imagine (Ivana, 2017), recognise and strategise (Sutopo, Threadgold & Nilan, 2017) the social capital that is, or is not, available in the specific context of creating possibilities for graduate transitions, evaluating its value, and consequently converting this into a usable advantage. Students need to have purchase on social contexts through such network strategies, in ways that require emotional and affective recognition.

Entering the labour market

I was really fortunate or whatever to have the connections and I've never been out of work unless it was my own choice, but a lot of my peers had taken jobs working in pubs for 12 or 18 months before they had their first break in getting an office job using their degree. I know now that a Bachelor of Business degree is probably not worth the piece of paper it's written on. (Freddy: Business–Grad)

As has been suggested in the previous section, social capital, both its recognition and conversion, are seen by many students as being an important part of applying for jobs. Freddy, a business graduate, suggests that the degree itself lacks value, but throughout his time studying he developed a valuable network that has allowed him to remain in professional employment. He grew up in a regional area, and although coming from a middle class family, had lower options for maintaining and building his social networks. He gained employment within the university and continued to be able to leverage this for ongoing work.

Many participants felt that the degree itself held far less value than having the right contacts. Dorothy thought that a challenge to finding work was knowing people within the industry she was entering.

I feel like if you have contacts in an industry that's going to help you a lot more than what a degree will [...] It has been to some degree but I really don't know how much—I mean I don't use a lot of it every day by any means. It's just a piece of paper that I've stated that I've done this and I'm able to be employed by you because you're requiring that somebody has got a bachelor's degree.

(Dorothy: Business/Management–Grad)

Discourses that orientate students towards the vocational usefulness of their degree, as is seen by Dorothy and Freddy, appear to mislead students. In both cases they refer to the degree by its perceived practical uselessness, and instead see the value in university attendance and graduation as primarily symbolic. Its practical worth is limited, where the degree is not 'used' in everyday settings.

While some students manage to find work effectively, they often remark about how many of their peers have not been so fortunate. Daphne, a working class Social Science student, found a short-term graduate position that could possibly lead to a more secure role. She sees herself as 'lucky':

So—in relation to like it being a smooth transition, yeah I think so. I think it's been—I think I've just been lucky. I think I'm sort of a—not the norm when it comes to finding work straight out of university. I mean, I've got friends that—they didn't do Social Science but they did humanity studies, development studies, I think and they're still looking for work and they graduated three years ago.

(Daphne: Social Science–Grad)

In the growing precarity of the labour market, obtaining stable work connected to the area of study is seen to be good fortune. Stories like this are common in our interviews, more often with working class students than those of more advantaged backgrounds. When they recount the stories of their friends who have not found work, they are not seen as the unfortunate ones, but are positioned as the norm.

In contrast to students like Daphne, who sees her success as being an unusual form of good fortune, students who have successfully adopted the employability discourse see the successful transition into a relevant graduate occupation as a 'natural' outcome of their day-to-day practices. As Ronald suggests:

For me, it wasn't too difficult. I guess, because of like, that Chinese internship, with you know, my business as well—a lot of things that I have done, I knew exactly what to expect. Like exactly what to expect. I don't know if that is just lucky or if you know, I've really looked into this properly. Not too much really phases me.

(Ronald: Business/Commerce/Management)

The narrowing expectation of students to become deeply orientated towards their relevance to the labour market should be seen as a dangerous standard for widening participation in Australian universities. While it is not 'too difficult' for some students to make this successful transition, it also requires an early and clear adoption of a disposition toward exploitability, elevated material support, and an instrumentalising of education as something that will freeze the working class out of opportunities derived from HE participation. Working class students are asked to take on greater responsibilities for their own development into an institution that traditionally is orientated towards middle class culture. They are then made to feel the consequences of their shortfalls as being the result their own poor decisions or work ethic, even though, as has been shown, entry into the labour market is skewed towards an orientation towards 'employability' that working class and disadvantaged students will often not have the resources to participate in.

Conclusion



Conclusion

“Bourdieu distinguishes between those who only have to *be what they are* as opposed to those who *are what they do* and, therefore, have to constantly prove that they are capable of carrying the signs of national belonging” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 19). This is relevant to the conditions of HE however, where the middle class (as many of them say in this study) perceive choices and opportunities as a part of following their ‘natural path’, the thing they were always fated to do (see Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Working class participation in HE is coded through the lens of misrecognition, and so working class students are engaged in a never-ending process of proving themselves, whether through their study, in conversation, or to themselves.

One of the challenges that needs to be emphasised is the way graduate outcomes have become vocationalist. While not addressed in detail in this report, a number of participants (mainly studying Social Science) remarked on education as being more than vocational training. They felt that education was about growing as a person, about learning for the sake of learning, and trying to understand the world in which they live. These students tended to come from educated backgrounds, often with teachers as parents, and so belonged to trajectories that allowed for a sense of empowerment and meaning to be derived from engagement with and the accumulation of powerful knowledge (Young, 2008). An issue here then, is that the symbolic violence experienced by working class students within the university is connected to a lack of access to the game of how to successfully become ‘vocationalised’ or ‘employable’: or in other words, how to best make themselves *exploitable*. This is a disappointing outcome. Students pursuing further education should be celebrated; feeling unworthy at the end of a degree because of a lack of employability demonstrates that universities need to do more to foster supportive, inclusive and enabling pedagogical spaces for undergraduates to develop their sense of self and through this to enrich their transitional processes towards meaningful graduate futures and senses of belonging (including but beyond narrow employability).

More research is required that can extend this analysis further into the how different students understand, prepare and navigate towards graduate futures. This study reinforces research in the UK that HE participation does not tend to erase inequalities. Students from backgrounds associated with equity policies are less likely to have access to knowledge about what strategies are needed to map a pathway through HE and beyond. It will be important to give sustained attention to classed experiences during and beyond HE, but the analysis needs to be extended with a nuanced and deepened intersectional analysis relevant to the particular contexts in Australia (Gale & Parker, 2017).

Further, the notion of ‘success’ at university needs to be carefully considered through more than instrumentalist discourses of being employable, driven by a narrow focus on market-focused economic measures. Students come to university to find work, but also to find meaning, experience and self-worth. Through being bound to a narrow and ever-changing conception of marketable skills, students are placed into the risky terrain that tertiary education is only valuable when it can be used for individual employment or career opportunities. When students struggle to find work, or are employed in areas outside of their study, they can feel that HE was a waste of time. Higher education should focus more broadly than this, emphasising building capacity to be critically engaged with the world, and to support the idea that HE can build informed citizens who have a rich contribution to make, beyond their individual employment.

Recommendations



1. More equitable paths for HE access. ATAR results tend to reflect social advantage rather than capability; students from working class backgrounds do not have access to the resources, capitals and opportunities that enable high ATAR results. Importantly, the choices teachers make in terms of who they focus their support on plays a large role in how some students feel neglected and marginalised. Thus, students from working class and other under-represented backgrounds should have access to pathways into university that appreciate a broader range of abilities and experiences than standardised tests can assess.

2. More opportunities for getting a feel for university study. Universities need to consider reimagining the way HE learning is structured in order to provide students the opportunity to explore the full range of opportunities available to them. Rigid degree programs lock students into pathways that were chosen before even experiencing university; all students should have the range of movement that allows for them to *take time* in finding what area of study is for them. We believe that this will lead towards better civic attitudes, more personal contentment, and greater motivation in their studies.

3. Inclusion can become a form of symbolic violence. It is important to reflect on and consider different people's experiences, cultures and backgrounds in the university space. The discourse of social mobility largely assumes a willingness for all people to accept a dominant cultural outlook that favours self-interest and competition as drivers and indicators of success. More needs to be done to problematise this homogenising of the university space, and to celebrate diverse experiences, backgrounds, identities, and futures orientations.

4. Necessity of criticality being taught during university study. Access to 'powerful knowledge' and broad critical thinking tools produces a much greater opportunity to develop knowledge, experience and understanding towards graduate futures, rather than narrowing the focus on the immediate skills the term 'employability' suggests are relevant. HE students should receive a robust education that supports stronger abstract and critical thinking skills. We argue that these will allow students to see ways that their own abilities and understandings can be applied, and can be used meaningfully and innovatively across a range of scenarios, that include, but are not limited to, their careers.

5. Critical approach to 'employability' discourse.

One of the challenges that working class students from under-represented backgrounds face transitioning into the labour market is that conventional pathways tend to favour students who have had more time and social capital to manage and strategise their networks and career trajectories. Universities should take more responsibility for protecting students from working class and under-represented backgrounds in the competitiveness of the labour market by pushing back on some of the business and industry demands for employability. Students should not feel compelled to narrowly produce themselves as exploitable subjects for the benefit of business and industry. Business and industry serve the functions of society; it should not be assumed that it functions the other way around.

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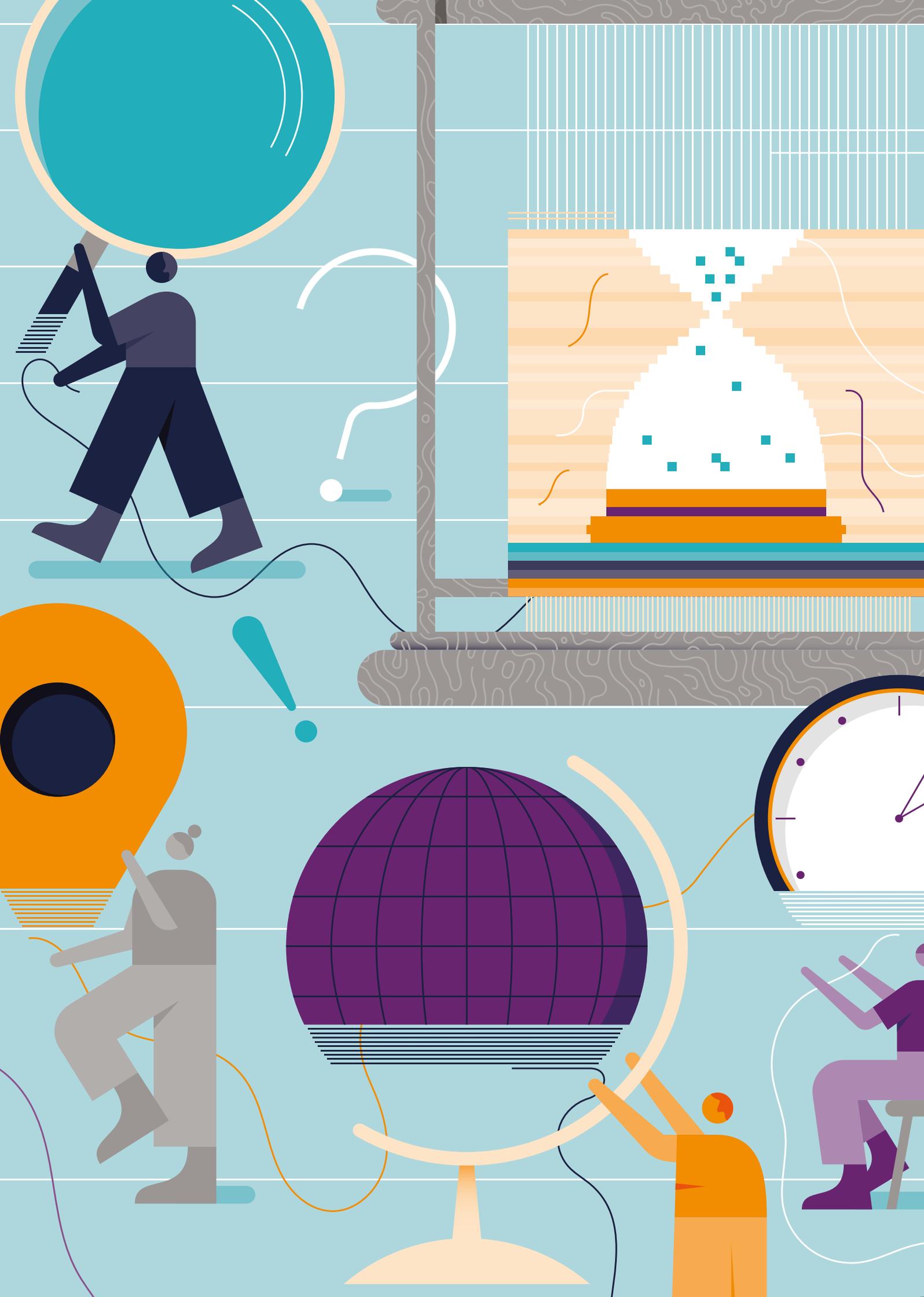


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