

## **The place of university in the culture of young people.**

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This study examined differences in Australian secondary school students' attitudes to higher education. It investigated links between their views their family backgrounds. To facilitate this, the young people were divided into two groups: Traditional Students, who come from well-educated families and Newcomers who come from less well-educated families. This study reveals that there were significant differences in young people's attitudes to enrolling at university that were closely linked to their family backgrounds: Inheritors were more supportive of the liberal perspective, while the Newcomers were generally more utilitarian in their approach. The study also found that while there has been a general shift in values towards the utilitarian perspective, there were a substantial number of Newcomers who had absorbed the liberal idea of university education as a cultural experience. The implication of this finding is universities need to tailor their transition programs to accommodate these differences.

Around two thirds of young Australians would like to enrol at university (Harvey-Beavis and Ellsworth, 1987; James, Baldwin & McInnes, 1999), but just what they hope to achieve there or to gain from the experience is unclear. Do contemporary students regard getting a degree as a way of positioning themselves to advantage in a competitive market or are they hoping for an experience that will transform them and their way of looking at the world? As yet, we can only speculate about students' perceptions of the purpose or value of university education. It is unclear if today's university students share the traditional model of university as an opportunity for intellectual and personal exploration and development, or if they ascribe to a new model that regards university as a way of maximising occupational choices and employment prospects. These are important questions since they go to the heart of the process of transition to university and the answers to them will have an impact of the design of transition programs since they need to assist both the young people who want a deeply affecting and enriching experience at university and the young people who just want a credential that will enable them to secure a "good" job.

This paper draws on a study of 179 secondary students attending five schools across the Melbourne metropolitan region and three schools in country Victoria and is concerned with discovering the range of different views of university education in the community. The sample was divided into two groups on the basis of their fathers' educational attainment and occupation. The first group consisted of young people whose fathers were graduates and whose occupations were identified by the participants as professional or senior management. These young people were examples of what might be called Traditional Students. The second group consisted of young people whose fathers had not completed secondary school, regardless of their present occupation. Some of these students came from low socioeconomic status families, but in some cases lack of formal education had not prevented their families from achieving financial success. Regardless of their socioeconomic status, these young people also wanted to go to university - they are the Newcomers.

As we might expect, based on the association between education, occupation and income, the Traditional Students were concentrated in the elite schools in the eastern and south eastern suburbs while the Newcomers were concentrated in the western suburbs, particularly the outer-western suburbs of Melbourne. However, it should be noted that there were Traditional Students and Newcomers in all nine schools throughout the metropolitan and country regions.

### *Sources of desire for higher education*

Desire for university education is growing among young people. The most striking feature of the students' response to questions about their plans for the future was the very high level of desire for tertiary education of some kind and the strong bias in favour of university; 79 per cent of the young people who participated in this study intended to apply for a place at university only while 21 per cent stated that they would apply for courses at both university and TAFE. However, the preference for university over TAFE masks the complexity of young people's attitudes towards enrolling at university.

Popular wisdom suggests that young people's interest in university education is primarily motivated by economic factors reflecting on her student days in the 1990s, Alice Garner (2006) commented that many of her fellow students seemed to find their studies a burden and avoided campus activities of all kinds. There is an element of truth in this argument; the creation of new occupations has led to a rising demand for professional qualifications particularly in the areas of applied science and technology. Anxiety about changing employment patterns and changes to the way in which university is perceived in the community has also stimulated demand. However, young people's motives for enrolling and their attitudes to university are complex and occasionally contradictory – some are more determined than ever to use education as a means of 'getting ahead', while others are genuinely excited by the prospect and looking forward to the experience and yet others don't believe that university has much to offer because there are other more appealing alternatives open to them.

### *Changing perceptions*

Much of the employment growth over the last 20-30 years has been in areas that require university degree; mining, engineering, metallurgy electronics have all developed in new directions, computer technology, medicine and biological sciences have added to the growth of new professions. During the same time the business sector and the public service have grown dramatically and require more and better-educated personnel to fill new roles in all sectors of the economy.

The strong links between employment and university education have created a perception that a university degree is a valuable, perhaps necessary, acquisition. Anxieties about employment security first emerged in the 1980s and intensified during the 1990s just when the young people in this study were entering secondary school. Despite the boom conditions of the early 2000s, those feelings of unease over the future have not gone away. If anything, they are increasing (Pusey, 2003). Insecurity has made families anxious their children's future and vary concerned that their children's qualifications will lead to secure employment. Young people who have grown up in a period of uncertain employment are also likely to have a healthy interest in the

kind of income that they might earn from a particular career (Harvey-Beavis & Robinson, 2000). The overall result is that the great majority of today's school leavers do think of a degree in terms of the financial benefits it will bring to them, but that is only part of the story.

There has been significant change in community perceptions of university education since the 1960s when the vast majority of young people left school before completing matriculation. University was generally understood to be reserved for the social elite and the very small number of scholarship winners who had shown themselves worthy by their achievements. This is no longer the case: Australian secondary students acknowledge that poor exam results and financial issues might prevent them from enrolling, but they do not find the suggestion that university is an exclusive destination reserved for the elite credible. As participation in university courses continued to grow through the 1960s, '70s and '80s, more families from all socio-economic levels could identify a relative or neighbour who was at university. Despite this change in community perceptions, a university degree retained a certain social *cachet* that is missing from other types of tertiary qualifications.

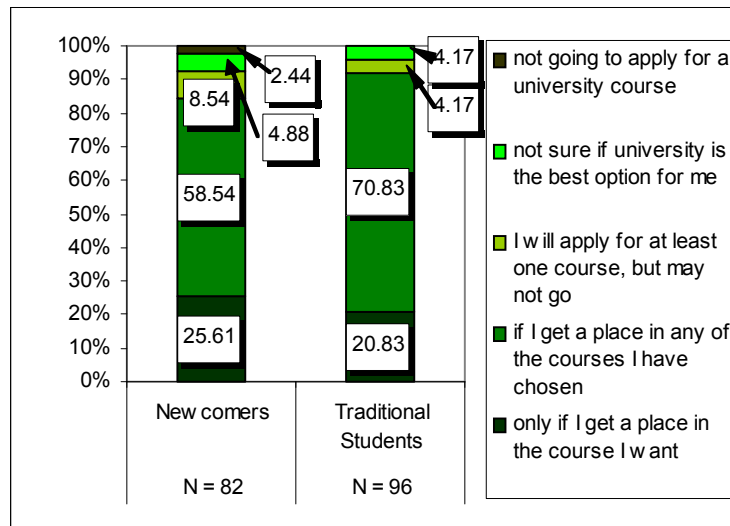
*I want to go to university because ...*

The decision to apply for a university place is complex and private; the factors involved are not always obvious to outside observers and possibly not always fully understood by the young people themselves (Peel, 1998). A university degree is attractive because it is linked to secure employment, is pleasing to one's parents and it appears to be an achievable goal to many school leavers, but there are significant differences in young people's attitudes to enrolling at university based on their family backgrounds, or to use Bourdieu's (1973) term their cultural capital, and these differences have significant implications for the design of transition or orientation programs.

This study shows that university matters more to young people from educated families. There are many young people from traditional middle-class families who regard university as a right of passage. They are going to university because that what their parents and quite possibly their grandparents did before them. This is more than just carrying on the family occupation; a university degree is something that defines their character and their place in society. Traditional Students expressed a far stronger desire to be at university, and less interest in a particular course than the Newcomers. They placed greater reliance on university as a means of establishing their identity, and faced intense pressure from their families and peers that made getting a place at university very important even when they were not sure if it was the right destination. Figure 1 suggests that a place at university, almost any university, is an end in itself for the Traditional Students: 70 per cent stated they would take any university place offered to them, while fewer than a quarter of them stated that they would refuse a place if it came to a choice between a course they did not really want and missing out altogether.

In contrast, the Newcomers were more likely to imagine themselves in a particular course or occupation and to reject alternatives. Archer & Hutchings, (2000) found that many school leavers from low socioeconomic status families performed a sort of rough cost-benefit analysis of going to university and decided that it was not worth the effort, but Teese and Polesel (2003) argue that in many instances rejection of a particular place at university is a matter of pride. Because young

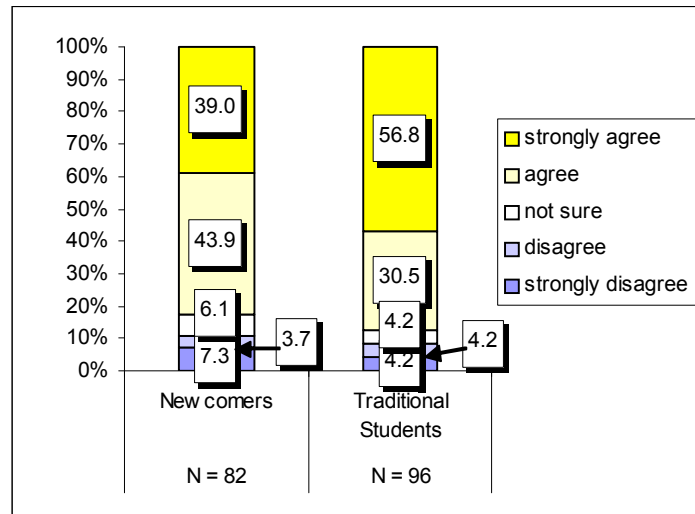
people from low socioeconomic status families are likely to have lower examination results, they are more likely to receive offers for less-prestigious courses or at less prestigious institutions. All too often, these young people interpret lower entry scores as an indication of lower quality and reject the places they have been offered as unworthy.



**Figure 1: Sociocultural status and subject-choice – commitment to enrolling at university.**

In contrast, Figure 2 suggests that the Newcomers were less dependent on university as a way of defining themselves and more open to considering other paths to employment. They chose a more diverse range of careers than the Traditional Students, and more of them were prepared to consider lower-status occupations. Also, when they did choose occupations requiring a degree, they were often more conservative, choosing traditional occupations such as teaching and nursing over creative, and possibly risky, occupations such as fashion designer or artist.

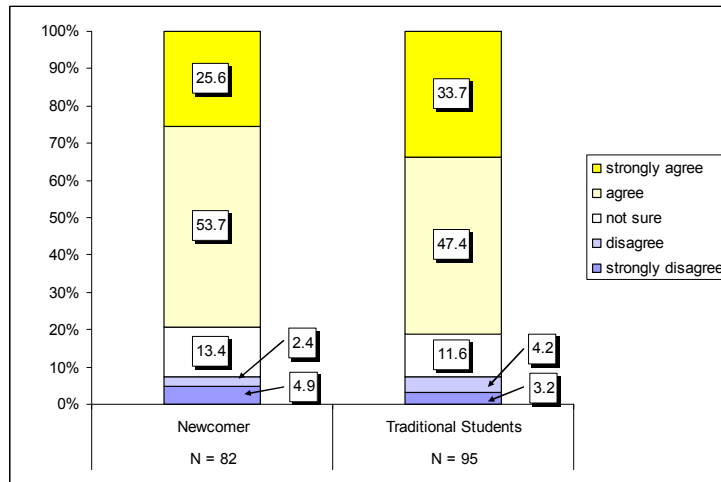
Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert and Muspratt (2004) identified the importance of the parents’ negative example influencing young people’s decisions to enrol at university and this study found similar examples of parents who had had little formal education expressing a very intense desire to see their children enter university for sound pragmatic reasons; one student described her mother, struggling with an endless stream of piecework on the hated sewing machine, haranguing her about the importance of going to university.



**Figure 2: Sociocultural Status and reasons for enrolling – “Going to university will improve my job prospects”.**

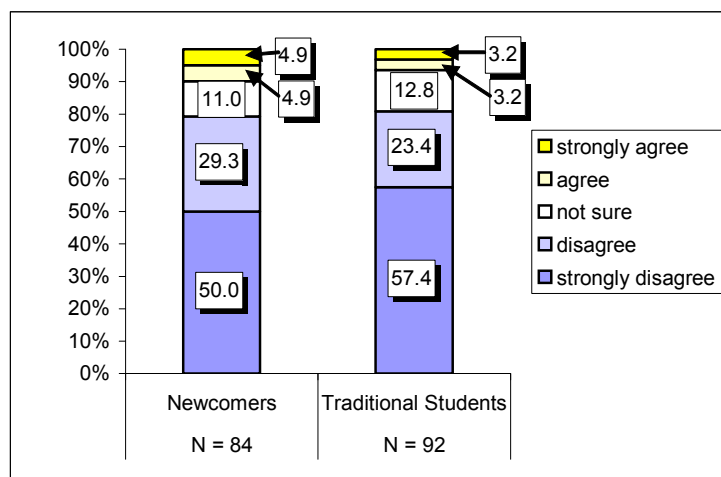
However, it would be wrong to assume that young people from low sociocultural status families were blind to the personal and social development aspects of studying at university. In his essay, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Tasteful*, West (2006) identified two distinct groups in Australian society who hold conflicting world views. The materialists, as their name suggests, are concerned with accumulating personal wealth and displaying the symbols of that wealth for other materialists to admire. Private school education and a degree from a prestigious university are some of those symbols, and if the degree leads to a job with a six-figure salary, even better. Culturists on the other hand, have retained traditional liberal-humanist values. They comprise the intellectual, civil and artistic elite and in contrast to the materialists genuinely value the intellectual and cultural experience of higher education. The complexity of Australia’s class system and it’s long history of immigration have produced a situation in which West’s materialist/culturist divide is not confined to the middle class, but runs across class or socioeconomic boundaries.

As Figure 3 shows, there was a substantial minority of Newcomers who supported the concept of higher education as a means of personal development or transformation, they were convinced that going to university would develop their self-confidence, broaden their outlook on life, help them to understand society and themselves and prepare them for active participation in community life. Close examination of the family backgrounds of many of the western suburbs and country students who were the most determined to get to university often revealed a longstanding commitment to education and support for the idea that it is intrinsically valuable. Families might be facing real financial hardship, but they continued to regard themselves as educated people and the university as their natural milieu.



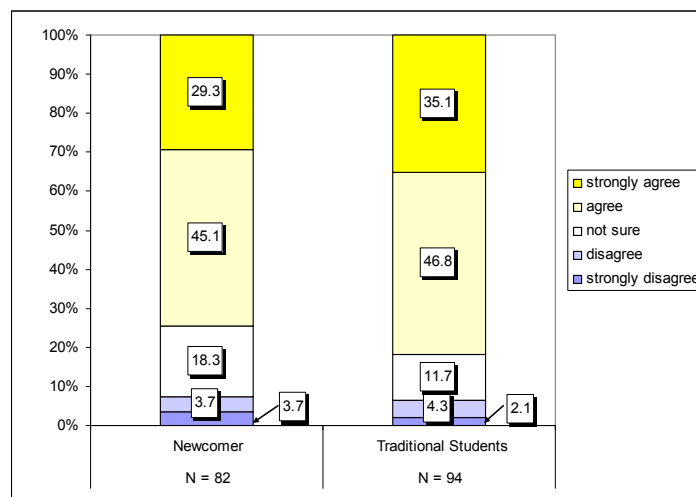
**Figure 3: Sociocultural status and reasons for enrolling– “Going to university will allow me to explore new and challenging ideas.”**

Nevertheless, as a group the Newcomers were more uncertain than the Traditional Students about the benefits of going to university because they knew less about what to expect and lacked the family experience to judge the benefits of enrolling or graduating accurately. At the same time, Figure 4 shows that some Traditional Students were also uncertain about the benefits of going to university. One factor that may explain the apparent disillusion of these Traditional Students is the growing number of people in the community who have been very successful without a university degree. Business entrepreneurs, sports people and entertainers demonstrate that a university degree is not always the best or quickest way to financial success and can make some young people impatient of the long hours of study required to succeed in one of the traditional highly paid professions such as the law or medicine.



**Figure 4: Sociocultural status and reasons for enrolling– “I don't see much pointing going”.**

It would be disingenuous to expect young people to ignore the very considerable rewards that flow from a university education, but the desire for a well-paid and interesting occupation has not obliterated their desire for an intellectually stimulating, life-altering experience. As a group, young Australians are generally biased in favour of a utilitarian, capitalist view of education; however, this study shows that the majority of young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds want more from university than a meal ticket. Figure 5 suggests that regardless of their backgrounds, the majority also want *all* the intangible, humanising aspects of education alluded to by scholars and writers from Newman (1852) onwards.



**Figure 5: Sociocultural status and reasons for enrolling – “I think I would enjoy going to university”.**

### *Implications*

This study suggests that Traditional Students will continue to enrol because university is inextricably bound up with their identity and most of them will graduate, though the quality of their experience is a different matter. (Garner (2006) was struck by students’ lack of excitement or even interest in the subjects they were taking.) But Traditional Students are a minority within the total population; university enrolments rely on attracting Newcomers. Newcomers have less incentive to enrol and require more persuasion, and because their attachment to university is less secure they are more inclined to look for alternatives if they do not find it satisfying.

The current emphasis on the utilitarian, vocationally-driven nature of university education does not cater for current school leavers’ desire for a rich experience. They do not see a clear-cut division between materialist and culturist views of university; they want an experience that combines both. Consequently, universities need to ensure that their recruitment and transition programs balance these aspects carefully by highlighting the joyful as well as practical results of obtaining a degree. In particular, programs that are intended to appeal to students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds should do more than emphasise the importance of vocational qualifications.

However, Newcomers also need additional support and mentoring to survive their first crucial year at university. University is a perilous choice for many young people from non-traditional or low socioeconomic status backgrounds; they are required to make a far greater adjustment than the traditional students and the costs involved (both personal and financial) may also be more onerous. Not only do they need to deal with an unfamiliar environment and demanding new subjects, but there is a real risk of humiliation – facing the disappointment of family members and the jeering of jealous neighbours who predicted it (Archer & Hutchings, 2000). Emphasising the personal satisfaction associated with a particular course of study may be a more effective incentive in many cases than the potential salary after graduation particularly when substantially higher salaries are available for some trades and skilled positions. Birrell & Rapson (2006) warn that the emphasis on vocational training and applied studies is incorrect; within few years the real skills shortages will be in graduate professions. Many of these professions emanate from the faculties of science, arts, humanities or fine arts; they make a significant contribution to community well-being and indirectly to the national economy, but are not particularly well-paid.

However, the implications of too great an emphasis on the utilitarian aspects of university education extend far beyond skill shortages. Replacing the idea of “higher education” an understanding of education as a series of facts and skills will eventually lead to the undermining its epistemological and sociological bases and we risk producing a generation of graduates with technical expertise, but little imagination, ethical judgment or empathy. The consequences for the entire structure of Australian society are profound.

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