

**Do we know who we are teaching?
Teacher education undergraduates' views of the world**

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A prevailing notion exists suggesting contemporary university students are conservative in their views and lacking the commitment to socio-political issues traditionally associated with the varsity. If this is the case, it is of particular concern with regard to those who would be teachers. Such conservatism can represent a world view that normalizes one's own experience of schooling and indicates a lack of understanding and acceptance of socio-cultural logics and life experiences different from one's own. But how conservative are today's teacher education undergraduates and how do their views and opinions sit with their wider youth cohort? This paper is a preliminary exploration comparing results from a Western Australian State-wide youth survey with those from three cohorts of first year university undergraduate teacher education students. The minor differences found suggest that students are no more or less socio-politically passive than their wider youth cohort.

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Introduction

Notwithstanding the recent anti-war protests by Australian students, there remains a perception that contemporary generations of university students are politically and socially conservative embodying the me-generation that embraces individualism and primarily views the university experience instrumentally as a means to employment. Accompanying this perception is an assumption that the older Australian 'sandstone' universities with their generally more selective entrance criteria are attracting the more privileged and by implication the more conservative of the eligible youth. Implicit also is a comparison with former generations of students, particularly those of the 1960s, with their accompanying images of student-manned barricades and that generation's participation in civil rights struggles. These assumptions are generally untested and in this era of compulsive polling there are surprisingly few broad sweep surveys of youth views and attitudes.

In 2000, the Western Australian Office of Youth Affairs surveyed the State's youth to ascertain a wide range of their views and aspirations. In 2003 the survey with minor modifications was again conducted. For three consecutive years the survey has also been administered to a first-year class of double-degree teacher education students at The University of Western Australia as part of the teaching of a unit that considers issues regarding Australian youth. This paper is a preliminary investigation of these results. It considers the State Youth Survey findings and compares them with the University of Western Australia results. Notwithstanding the methodological issues inherent in the survey instrument itself and its administration, the lack of significant divergence in the majority of the findings questions the prevailing assumptions regarding contemporary university students' socio-political conservatism.

Generation 'Y'

The so-called *generation Y* refers to those born between 1980 and 2000 and they are, thus, those who form the bulk of our undergraduate cohorts at the moment. While class, race, religion and socio-economic status influence the experience of youth it is also probable that at particular times in history contemporary social issues and their ensuing mobilisation provide distinctive formative experiences. To the extent that these are shared by a generation they can have an impact on that generation's world view and according to Alwin (2002) may remain a powerful force throughout their lives. It is the Y generation that in their formative years has seen the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, the end of the Cold War and more latterly witnessed the destruction of the Twin towers, the Bali bombings and reports of an 'axis of evil'.

In most of the developed world, it is the Y generation that appears to be more affluent, better educated, more technically adept and ethnically diverse than its predecessors (Paul, 2001). Where pessimism was a characteristic of generation X, by contrast, the Y generation are said to be optimistic about their life chances and what they can accomplish. This generation, according to Cole et al. (2002:2) are said to have a "new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct" with *honesty* and *caring* being the most admired traits. Where personal relationships were considered important for the Xers, who searched outside the workplace for self-fulfillment, it is friendships and family relationships and friendships sought in the context of the family and the workplace rather than personal relationships per sé that matter to the Ys. This generation is content to continue living at home and continue to do so well into young adulthood. They consult their parents and value their opinions, and acknowledge the parental influence on their own values and attitudes. According to Hill (2002), five of the "most essential insights" into the generation concern "believing that only your parents love you unconditionally ... believing that being tough depends on who is in the room at the time ... understanding the ability-performance nexus ... finding passion in your work, and managing multiple roles/multiple selves".

A comparison conducted by Cole et al. (2002) of the results from selected items from the US high school graduate survey for 1990 and 2000 showed that while there was a remarkable consistency over the period, there were some important attitudinal shifts over the decade. For example, there was a

notable decline in the importance youth saw in keeping abreast with politics, which the authors suggest (p. 3) "reinforces the perception that generation Y has little trust in government to solve social problems". They also concluded that the Y generation was increasingly willing to accept that social diversity exists but seemed to see no need to work to promote racial understanding, reflecting the authors say (p. 4), a possible resentment of affirmative action and a "drop in interest in having responsibility ... for others". While adaptive, resilient and talented, and referred to as the 'why' generation (Chester, 2002) this generation of young people is seen by employers and others as the group that is asking *why should I? Why does it matter? and why should I care?*

Cohort-wide and generation studies are clearly not unproblematic, particularly with respect to the arbitrariness of the temporal cut-off points, the implied historical comparison and the implied assumption of intra-cohort stability. It is therefore not surprising that while there has been a great deal of surveying of the attitudes and opinions of youth and particularly university students, most of these have canvassed attitudes and opinions toward specific issues: HIV Aids, homosexuality and gender issues, suicide, depression, domestic violence, employment prospects, physical activity levels, particular university teaching styles or courses, political literacy, to mention a range revealed in the literature on undergraduate opinions and values. The *American Demographics* studies series (eg Paul, 2001) and recent work by Ryckman and Houston (2003) constitute some of the more holistic studies of youth values, attitudes and opinions.

Ryckman and Houston (2003) employed the Schwartz's Value Survey to identify individualistic and collectivist values and compare the value priorities of American and British male and female university students. While women in both countries assigned greater value to the collectivist cluster, these authors reported finding little gender differentiation on individualistic values. However, American students were found to assign greater value to achievement, hedonism, self-direction and stimulation than did British students. In an earlier study employing the Schwartz's Value Survey together with the Spranger-Allport-Vernon Typology, Myyry and Helkama (2001) compared business, technology and social science students and found, that university business students gave a higher priority to values of power and achievement than did social science students. On the other hand, social science students gave higher priority than business students to values associated with universalism while the technology students were more concerned with those associated with security.

That the university experience itself is associated with value changes has been shown in various studies. Lottes and Kuriloff (1994), for example, found in what they described as a "highly selective" East Coast US university that students' views changed over their university experience. By the time students became seniors they were scoring higher on measures of liberalism, social conscience, homosexuality tolerance and attitudes toward feminism. However, the differential intake of various institutions and the nature of the academy itself were reflected in these and other such results. For example, in a study comparing cadets entering West Point and an unidentified US East Coast State University, the military cadets were found to have stronger attitudinal affiliations toward social skills, physical development, academic achievement, intellectualism, kindness, honesty, status, religiousness and social control. On the other hand, the military cadets, by comparison with the university entrants were found to be weaker on independence. Nevertheless, the notion that a liberal university education models and assists develop attitudes such as tolerance has been challenged. Buford et al. (1999) found little tolerance in the University of California law school for students who step outside the "mainstream" in terms of expression and thinking.

One of the few larger-scale focused surveys of youth opinions and understandings undertaken in Australia was the 1994 government-commissioned survey of young people's political literacy. Over 2000 15-25-year-old Australians were asked about their knowledge of: the Federal system of government, and federation, the constitution, Federal parliament and government, the nation's laws and judiciary, the republican issue, their attitudes to citizenship and civic duty, and where their information on such matters was being obtained (Corrigendum to Appendix 3, *Whereas the people, Citizenship and Civics Education*, 1995, Report of the Civics Expert Group, p. 140). The survey found a widespread "high level of community ignorance about Australia's system of government and its origins". With most of respondents' information deriving from the media, over 75% of the 2000 Australian 15 to 19-year-olds surveyed admitted limited understanding of voting procedures for the upper and lower houses of parliament and limited knowledge of the broad subject matter of the constitution, of mechanisms for constitutional change, the roles of the Governor-General, cabinet, the High Court. In addition, Australian youth surveyed admitted ignorance of the rights and responsibilities of Australian citizens (*The Australian Community and its Governments, Constitution, Citizenship and Civics. Community*

Knowledge and Understanding, Report to Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet November 1994).

In a related study, Phillips (1996) surveyed 800 West Australian school students of whom 407 were in the 15-16-year-old range. This study, like the Victorian Year 11 students studies by Mellor (1998), found that not only was there an ignorance about matters such as those to do with political literacy in the federal survey referred to above but that young people were "bored" by politics and did not consider it important to be informed about such matters, nor did they consider political knowledge to be necessary for "good citizenship". Phillips found that of greater important to youth was respect for the rights of others, for others' property, the need to treat people equally (particularly with respect to gender, disability, race, age and religion) honesty and road safety. While the young people in this study ranked these characteristics among the top eleven in a 25-item list, notions of conformity to law and responsibilities to family, hard work and patriotism (eg respecting the flag) followed in the 11-15 rank positions. Somewhat in contradiction, Ainley et al. (1998), however, reported a strong decrease in commitment to society and optimism, belief in the need to respect social rules and law, and an increasing social passivity, and pessimism in schoolchildren over the period from Year 5 to Year 10.

The view that contemporary young people are politically passive has been contested by Sean Healy, national co-coordinator of the youth action group *Resistance*. In a discussion of young people and politics in the volume Australian Youth Cultures. On the Margins and in the Mainstream (White, 1999), for example, Healy cites the youth reaction to One Nation (the high profile political party that achieved prominence for its neo-conservative attitudes to immigration and Indigenous affairs among other issues in the late 1990s) and the youth participation in demonstrations against racism. Nevertheless, as Healy points out, while the youth participating actively in this way are a minority, political passivity he reminds us, is embedded in Australian culture and certainly not confined to youth. He argues (1999:201) that youth have a far greater degree of social consciousness in terms of their "understanding of social issues and progressive personal attitude" toward these than they are generally given credit for, and that they are more willing than the wider population to take political action on the issues they embrace.

While youth political passivity with regard to social and environmental issues may not have declined, the Economist reports that American students "are flocking to the neo-con cause" (*Higher Education Supplement, The Australian* Sept 10, 2003, p. 26), with reports of College Republicans tripling their numbers over the past three years and recruiting 22,000 in 2002 alone. They report that this recruitment is occurring on campuses such as Berkeley, traditionally not associated with right wing politics. The writer points out that this is associated with an overall "rightward shift" in youth attitudes in the US. Young people, according to the report, are increasingly reacting to what the author deems the "Ab Fab values of the '60s generation", particularly with regard to casual sex and abortion, and they are increasingly supportive of the push for military might. Reports of polling from both Harvard University and the University of California indicated that three quarters of students at Harvard *trusted* the military to "do the right thing" and almost a half of the Californian students supported an increase in military spending and that this student support has doubled since 1992.

Various explanations for this increasing US youth swing to the right are suggested. These range from a reaction to the restrictiveness of imposed political correctness to a response to the terrorism of September 2001 and the success of the strong conservative recruiting among youth through organisations such as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, the Heritage Foundation the Young America's Foundation, and the Federalist Society all of which provide incentives such as scholarships and internships for causes for which the organisations approve.

Is there then, any evidence of the claimed passivity and absence of a progressive social sentiment and communitarian commitment among Australian young people, in particular those opting to enroll in teacher education on leaving school? And how does this group compare with the their wider youth cohort?

WA Youth Survey

The WA Youth Media Survey (2000) was claimed to be "the most comprehensive youth survey that had ever been undertaken" in Western Australia and the survey report surmised that it was probably the most comprehensive in the country (Rajan, nd:3). The project was a partnership between the Western Australian media and the Office of Youth Affairs (OYA). It set out "to paint an informed picture of the majority of the young people of Western Australia" between the ages of 12 and 25 (pp. 5-6). It asked

about four dimensions of youth outlook: attitudes and beliefs, hopes and aspirations, needs and wants, and participation and involvement. Among the survey's 50 questions were those that sought information on family, employment, education and training, leisure, political literacy and self-image (see table one).

Table 1 Topics surveyed in the Western Australian Youth Media Survey (2000)

The survey was given extensive coverage in the sole local daily Western Australian newspaper and the survey itself appeared as a full page spread. In addition, copies of the survey were distributed to youth organizations, schools, and it was available electronically. In 2000 valid responses were received from 11,013 young people representing approximately 3% of the State's youth cohort. The survey report acknowledges that it is difficult to ascertain the representativeness of the response but considered that the results gave "a significant insight into the views ... of mainstream youth" (Rajan, nd:14). There was, however, a significant bias in the results toward the younger youths. For example, 50.3% of the responses in 2000 were from 12-14-year-olds and another 38.2% from the 15-19-year-old age bracket. Over the respondent age range there was roughly a gender balance but in the older group (20-25 year old), female respondents outnumbered males by 50% (14.6%::7.3% of respondents), as they also did less significantly in the 15-19-year-old age bracket (40.7%::35.9%) (Rajan, nd:26).

Apart from questions concerning the representativeness of the results, the survey itself was not without problems, some of which were acknowledged in the project's report. Among the criticisms identified are those referring to the nature and breadth of the survey itself, the question format and what the report referred to as the absence of attention to the 'hard issues' (Rajan, nd:5). However, the project report defended the format and content in terms of the pragmatics of canvassing widely and the role in the project of the media and other sponsors (eg WA Electoral Commission, WA Department of Youth Sport and Recreation, WA Ministry for Culture and The Arts and the Lotteries Commission of WA).

Be that as it may, some of the questions, appear somewhat problematic; question 27, for example, asks *how do you feel about your racial or ethnic origin* and provides the opportunity to check positive, negative, don't care/not important. One might ask in what context and in relation to what when seeking a response to such a question. The question itself sits between one asking if respondents consider themselves healthy and one asking which of a battery of characteristics respondents admire and feel are

admired about themselves. As with any survey of this nature the format provides no opportunity for clarification, elaboration or explanation of responses.

Notwithstanding issues to do with the sampling and the survey format itself, it was reissued in 2003 with minor modifications (e.g. a question on the republic as a social issue, topical in 2000 was dropped in 2003).

University of Western Australia undergraduates and the survey

Incorporation of the survey into workshops in a University of Western Australia second semester first year unit on Youth in Australia offered in the teacher education double degree has provided a teaching resource that is a fertile stimulus for discussion. In the first instance, students are asked to complete the survey with an eye on the question content and format. That is, they are asked not only to complete the survey but also to critique the instrument. This serves to introduce these first year undergraduate students to the need to interrogate research methods underpinning studies reported in the literature on which they are drawing. The second way the survey has been employed in the unit is to stimulate discussion on the ways in which these undergraduate students' views and attitudes may be consistent with or vary from those of the wider youth populations and especially those of the State's younger youth cohort who they are likely to be teaching in the not too distant future. It is the comparison of these first year university students' results on the survey over three years (2001-2003) with the results from the State survey (2000 and 2003) that form the basis of the discussion here.

Table 2 State and University samples

As the 50-question multiple-choice item survey itself is long, selected items of particular relevance to the focus of the argument presented here will be dealt with. The items selected are those that point to notions of conservatism, conformity and socio-political passivity or otherwise in values and attitudes and those in which there appears to be significant divergence between the undergraduate classes and the State youth results. For clarity and to maintain focus, the tables are abbreviated and show selected items in a range of the survey's questions.

Results

Demographics

Demographically over the past three years the UWA group appears remarkably similar to the State 15-19-year-old age bracket. About three quarters of respondents in all groups described themselves as Australian with State groups more inclined than the University cohorts to identify themselves as *English*. About 3% across all groups identified themselves as *Chinese* and State and University cohorts were variously distributed among other ethnic groups in small numbers including Aboriginal Australians.

The 2000 report observed that the State's youth were more home-based than they had expected, with approximately 70% of both the 2000 and 2003 cohorts stating that they usually lived with their parents. While fewer of the 2001 UWA cohort (51.7%) said they usually lived with their parents in a two-parent household, this appeared to be increasing with closer to 70% of the later University cohorts falling into this residential category and overall, 80% living with either one or both parents. However, as would be expected, compared with the State respondents (about 4%) a significantly higher proportion (26.9%, 13.3% and 9%) of the University students were living in shared accommodation including residential colleges.

Almost twice as many University students than State-wide youth were working part-time in addition to studying full-time in 2001 but the two subsequent cohorts of University students were 10% more likely to be in part-time employment than the 20% of State cohort in part-time employment. Almost twice as many university students compared to the State survey indicated that they were undertaking voluntary work of some kind in 2001 although the gap appeared to be narrowing with subsequent cohorts. The University cohorts were also significantly better traveled than the State-wide respondents, both in terms of travel within Australia and overseas. However, this reflects the percentage of overseas students and the bias toward the older end of the age range in the University group.

As might be expected of university students, the UWA cohorts placed a higher priority on obtaining information from books and the Internet and less on magazines and the media than did the wider State cohort (Table 6). All of the UWA respondents in the 2002 and 2003 groups indicated a computer with

Internet access in their homes compared to the State survey where 77% (2000) and 88% (2003) of the respondents had such facilities. About 15% of both State and university youth indicated that they are using SMS and mobile phones as information sources.

Youth appraisals of achievement and confidence

With university entrance behind them, the UWA first years were happier about what they had achieved at school and in further education than was the State cohort (Tables 3 and 4). However, the degree of satisfaction varied between the University groups. For example, where 100% of the 2001 cohort indicated that they were happy about what they had achieved at school, only approximately three-quarters of the 2002 and 2003 cohorts indicated that they were so. In each University group this understandably exceeds the State results where less than half (43% and 48%) said they were happy with their school achievement.

Table 3 Self-appraisal of achievement

Also as would be expected of university entrants, most of whom entered their courses direct from Year 12, a more positive value was placed on the experience of schooling than with the wider State cohort. While all groups acknowledged that their schooling had provided them with valuable skills and knowledge (Table 3), interestingly, however, in a further item (not included here) the 2001 University cohort did not feel that their education to date had provided a honing of literacy and numeracy skills. The 2003 cohort, however, were unanimous that their schooling had provided them with literacy and numeracy skills.

Table 4 Appraisal of education so far

Nor did the 2001 University cohort feel that their schooling had necessarily provided them with the skills to participate in the *changing world of work*, or that it had *prepared* them for work. However, subsequent University cohorts were more likely to mirror the State results but were less positive than the wider youth cohorts about what they had to date achieved in work (Table 3), most of them making this appraisal on the basis of their experiences in part-time/casual jobs. As indicated in a related question (Table 5), the majority of all groups were optimistically confident that they would obtain the type of work they wanted. Nevertheless, while the majority of respondents in each group was

confident that they would obtain the kind of work they wanted, the 2002 University cohort was the least confident of all groups.

Table 5 Optimism

The generation's optimism can be seen clearly in these appraisals of their life chances (Table 5). The overwhelming majority in each group was confident that they would have enough money on which to live comfortably, that they would find a long-term relationship, a secure place to live and a healthy lifestyle and remain on good terms with their parents. It is likely that the slightly lower optimism regarding finding a secure place to live in the 2001 University cohort may reflect a higher proportion of new immigrants and overseas students in that particular year group. The overall optimism was not born of experience as few indicated that they had achieved their aspirations to date.

The notion of risk-taking, often associated with contemporary youth is implicit in a question the survey asked about respondents' undertaking "new things". While the State respondents saw age as the main barrier hindering them, the University groups were inclined to regard lack of time as a greater hindrance and to a lesser extent lack of money and a shortage of similarly interested friends as factors inhibiting their undertaking of 'new things'.

Perhaps the most direct question on values was one added to the 2003 survey. It asked respondents to select the dispositions they admired among 12 options (Table 6). Here the University cohort universally considered being smart, creative, honest and confident to be the characteristics most admired. These were closely followed by a sense of humour, kindness and being independent thinkers. On average the University cohort were up to 11 percentage points more likely than the wider State cohort to admire the dispositions and values in all but an item referring to toughness and strength. However, when the State figures are broken down by age results from the section of the State youth of more or less comparable age to the 17-19-year-old University group, are slightly more similar.

Table 6 Characteristics admired

Influences on youth opinions

With regard to identified influences on youths' views and opinions in each of the three University groups and the State groups, parents and relatives were cited most frequently as the most important (Tables 7a & b).

Table 7a Influences on opinions and views - State cohorts

As a teacher, it is salutary to see that the profession is not regarded as particularly influential in either the State or the University youths' opinion. In fact 28% of the 2000 State youth cohort and 22% of the 2003 cohort (Table 7b) indicated that teachers had no influence at all on their views and opinions. Among the University groups teachers fared a little better - at least according to the 2002 cohort. It is of course possible that while I see the question in terms of influence on views and opinions not with regard to *what* to think but rather *how* to think, respondents are interpreting the question in terms of whose views they are most likely to take on board.

Given that I frequently receive from individual students emails that are adorned with extended biblical texts, and that it is not uncommon to find peer micro-teaching sessions devoted to 'biblical' instruction, I was not surprised that in another survey question asking respondents to nominate the most important person in their life several students annually cite *Jesus Christ my Saviour* in the 'other' category. Nor was I unduly surprised that religious leaders figured as strong influences in a relatively significant number of these University students' lives (Table 7b). I was, however, surprised at the strength of the University response relative to the State cohorts and the strength of the response. If the 'some' influence category (not shown in tables 7a and 7b) is added to the stronger influence, 'a lot', then two-thirds of the 2003 University cohort, for example, are identifying religious leaders' influence on their views and opinions.

Table 7b Influences on opinions and views - University cohorts

The attitude toward the influence of politicians on youths' views fits with that reported on the literature on the Y generation. They have been said to distrust politicians and government believing they can't be

trusted to be honest, a trait valued highly among the 97% of the State and 100% of the 2003 University youth (see Table 6).

Perceptions of community issues

In both the 2000 and the 2003 surveys a series of community issues were presented to respondents to rank in terms of the three *most pressing* community issues (Table 8). Issues such as the republic and Aboriginal reconciliation included on the 2000 survey were replaced in the 2003 version with the more contemporary issues of terrorism, asylum seekers and Australia's involvement in overseas conflict. Also added in 2003 were issues of crime and personal protection.

Some students indicated that they were unclear as to whether this question referred to which three issues they thought *should* be the most pressing in the community as opposed to those issues they considered the community *was* regarding as the most pressing. Most seemed to have opted to interpret the question in the latter sense. However, if this was the case then among the 2003 cohort it is curious that the very topical issues such as health bearing in mind the SARS scare, Australia's involvement in the Gulf, terrorism and the media attention relating to the Bali bombings together with the high profile asylum seeker issue did not rate more highly. Asylum-seekers, for example, did not rate highly in either the University or the State 2003 cohorts. Similarly, the protection of personal property ranked more or less last for both the 2003 University and the State cohorts.

While there are no clear and unambiguous patterns across the range of groups, overall most saw drug and alcohol issues and the environment as key community issues. It is also interesting to note that unlike the State cohorts, two of the University groups most frequently or the second most frequently regarded education and training as one of the three most pressing community issues. This may be associated with and reflect a level of satisfaction with their own achievement to date in education and their acceptance into the vocationally oriented teacher education course of study.

Political and social activism

Youth citizenship/political activity was canvassed in a question in which 13 political action options were offered. Respondents were asked to say if they had ever used an avenue *to get their views heard* and whether they would or would not consider using such an avenue (Table 9). Reflecting the interests

of the sponsors, two of the questions (not included in Table 9 here) asked about using various forms of artistic expression as a political avenue.

Over one-third of the 2001 University group of youth (Table 9b) said that they had already contacted a member of parliament and/or the Youth Advisory Council, had started petitions and had written letters to the editor to make their voices heard. This level of participatory democracy is significantly higher than for the 2001 State cohort (Table 9a), but also significantly higher than the level of activity in the 2003 University cohort. The 2003 University group indicated a much lower level of participation, and much more closely mirrored the State results.

Not only was the later University cohort a great deal less politically active, arguably at a time when a great many high media profile pressing social issues face the nation and Australian universities, but also they were categorical about anticipating that that they *would not use* many of the avenues available to them. While the State cohorts over time appeared to be becoming less categorical about which avenues they would use, the University students by 2003 were becoming more so. Almost two-thirds of the 2003 university group, for example, said that they would not use council meetings or talk-back radio and almost one-half of the group said that they would not start a petition, participate in a public protest or rally or use the Youth Advisory Council.

More so than both the State cohorts, more of the University groups said they would use their vote and increasingly it seems would use family and friends to help make their voices heard - possibly reflecting immaturity or access to a pool of very influential friends and family! When the State figures are broken down by age there is a marked decline from one-half to one-third in the percentage of the older group who said they would use family and friends to have their voice heard.

Discussion

The picture then of those 17-20-year-olds we are teaching and the wider youth cohort of 12-25-year-olds is one of home-based young people, who are not only living in the parental home and are generally happy about their family life and overwhelmingly expecting to remain on positive terms with their families, but who acknowledge the influence of family on their views and opinions and employ the

assistance of family to make their voices heard. In this regard the groups surveyed sit comfortably with the literature on the Y generation.

In these data is a partial snapshot of three consecutive cohorts of teacher education students in their first year of university in comparison with a wider youth cohort. More so than the wider cohort these young students are generally confident and optimistic about their life chances. Consistent with the literature on the Y generation they appear to be privileging the ability -opportunity/performance nexus (Hill 2002) and valuing highly the attributes of being smart, confident, honest, and a sense of humour.

In all the current hype and rhetoric about risk and resilience, new economies and new employment, and the exciting opportunities said to be provided by the Information super highway, when it all boils down, these youth - both the State cohort and the University students - want what the rest of us want: enough money on which to live decently and a full-time steady job. For students in particular, the juggling of study and part-time work is being regarded as a challenge and, as for many others in today's world, they find lack of time limiting the undertaking of new pursuits. Like the rest of us they also acknowledge the influence of family and friends on their own views and tend to eschew the influence of the likes of radio presenters, sports heroes or rock stars. However, the University groups, more than the State cohorts acknowledge the influence of youth leaders and increasingly it seems the influence of religious leaders on their views and opinions.

Among the issues youth consider pressing, there is no consistency, however the topical and more politicised issues of the day are not generally considered to be the most pressing in the community. While the 2001 University students indicated that they been more politically active than the State cohorts, the 2003 cohort in many ways appeared less so, and there was an indication of an increasingly strong reluctance to employ many of the legitimate avenues of making views heard in a participatory democracy.

For a researcher such as myself accustomed to working within an interpretivist paradigm, results such as these are inherently frustrating. They seem to elaborate so little of any real significance and seem so decontextualised as to raise more questions than answers, and what they do tell me begs the question *so what*. The results also tell me little about how these views and opinions might translate into action. But while they go nowhere near providing the thick description I am used to, or to helping me really

understand the intricacies of the diverse contemporary youth experience in general or that of my students in particular, they do provide me with a flimsy overview and provide me with an overview of my own undergraduate students vis à vis their wider youth cohort. I have gained some of a picture albeit superficial, of how they spend their time, who matters to them, the locus of influences on them, what they think about their own school experience and achievement, and what they want out of life.

These data do suggest that the University students are leading busy lives and that for them as for many adults time is a scarce resource. The data also suggest that those enrolling in teacher education at the University of Western Australia over the past three years are in a great many respects very similar to the State's wider youth cohort in their appraisals of life issues and their own achievements, and in the nature of their concerns for issues challenging their community. The results I suspect would also not be very different were adults to be surveyed in the same way and it remains to be seen what shifts might occur over their university experience and how they might compare with young people enrolling in other tertiary institutions.

While the survey may be to some extent flawed in terms of the selection of issues included for comment and in its capacity to sample a more diverse range of the State's youth, as a teaching tool it is useful. I have followed up with more in-depth interrogation of beginning students on key issues such as youth employment and working life, the levels of citizenship/political knowledge and the nature of these highly selected students' own school experiences - issues all relevant to the preparation of teachers. Clearly emerging is the marginal role that the university experience and teachers seem to be playing in the busy lives of these young tertiary students.

Acknowledgment

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TABLES

Table 1 **Topics surveyed in the Western Australian Youth Media Survey (2000)**

-
- Career and work
 - Education, training and development
 - Sources of information and influence employed by young people
 - Adequacy of services and barriers to using them
 - Active citizenship
 - Arts, culture, sport and recreation, and other activities
 - Family structures
 - General concerns and self-image
-

Table 2 **State and University samples**

	State	UWA
2000	11013	-
2001	-	29
2002	-	30
2003	10704	33

Table 3 Self-appraisal of achievement

Q 28 How do you feel about:	UWA '01 n=29 %	UWA '02 n=30 %	UWA '03 n=33 %	State '00 n=11013 %	State '03 n=10704 %
	Happy	Happy	Happy	Happy	Happy
a) what you have achieved at school	100	73	76	43	48
b) what you have achieved at work	54	43	54	48	46
f) your family life	69	63	70	52	65
g) your social life	72	53	73	53	58
h) other relationship	55	50	58	44	49
i) racial/ethnic origin	na	na	78	60	77

Table 4 Appraisal of education so far

Q 23					
<i>My education so far has ...</i>	UWA 01 <i>n=29</i>	UWA 02 <i>n=30</i>	UWA 03 <i>n=33</i>	State 00 <i>n=11013</i>	State 03 <i>n=10704</i>
	agree	agree	agree	agree	agree
	%	%	%	%	%
been enjoyable & informative	97	93	91	78	83
given me valuable skills and knowledge	97	97	97	91	94
been useful in everyday life	90	87	85	73	80
taught me to be a "team player"	86	70	76	66	72
given me skills in literacy & numeracy	90	97	100	91	94
helped me to understand the changing world of work	72	63	na	67.6	na
helped me to understand my views and those of others	86	93	97	74	81
prepared me to leave and find work	79	67	70	59	67
helped me form my ideas and opinions	90	97	94	75	81
helped me to participate in arts activities (eg music, writing, painting, dance, drama, photography etc)	79	70	79	67	69
helped me build a network of contacts in my community	76	50	85	49	58

Table 5 Optimism

My chances of achieving the following are:	UWA '01	UWA '02	UWA '03	State '00	State '03
	good	good	good	good	good
a) Have enough money to live comfortably	79	96	94	87	86
b) Finish my education successfully	100	96	97	72	76
d) Have a long term relationship	79	86	93	78	72
e) Keep on good terms with my parents	97	90	91	81	77
f) Get the kind of work I want	83	69	87	79	78
h) Have a secure place to live	72	86	91	83	81

Table 6 Characteristics admired

Which of the following do you admire?	UWA 03 admire	State '03 admire
a. being smart	100	90
b. being good at sports	85	75
c. being good looking	76	65
d. having a sense of humour	97	92
e. having lots of friends	79	68
f. being rich	39	33
g. not being influenced by others	97	86
h. being tough and strong	42	50
i. being kind	97	97
j. being creative	100	92
k. being confident	100	95
l. being honest	100	97

Table 7a Influences on opinions and views - State cohorts

How much influence on your views & opinions?	State '00		State '03	
	a lot	none	a lot	none
a) Friends	40	5	44	4
b) Parents and relatives [2000]	51	6	na	na
Parents [2003]	na	na	54	6
Other relatives [2003]			15	30
c) Teachers/lecturers	16	28	19	22
d) Television & radio personalities	12	46	8	45
e) Newspapers	9	32	9	32
g) Sports stars	12	57	9	64
h) Rock/pop stars	11	56	9	59
i) Politicians	6	72	4	67
j) Religious leaders	9	67	9	67
k) Youth leaders	8	59	9	60
k) Sports coaches	13	55	13	56

Table 7b Influences on opinions and views - University cohorts

How much influence on your views & opinions?	UWA 01 %		UWA 02 %		UWA '03 %	
	a lot	none	a lot	none	a lot	none
a) Friends	55	0	55	0	48	0
b) Parents & relatives [2000]	65	0	74	4		
Parents [2003]	na	na	na	na	54	0
Other relatives [2003]	na	na	na	na	9	24
c) Teachers/lecturers	29	14	33	7	24	18
d) Television & radio personalities	7	57	7	63	12	42
e) Newspapers	24	17	11	22	9	30.
g) Sports stars	0	72	0	85	0	85
h) Rock/pop stars	3	72	7	63	3	76
i) Politicians	7	55	0	55	0	54
j) Religious leaders	21	41	15	41	25	34
k) Youth leaders	17	41	18	44	16	53
k) Sports coaches	10	46	7	67	3	74

Table 8 Three most pressing community issues

The 3 most important issues facing the community are:	UWA 01 <i>n=29</i>	UWA 02 <i>n=30</i>	UWA 02 <i>n=33</i>	State 00 <i>n= 11,013</i>	State 03 <i>n= 11,013</i>
Drug & alcohol abuse	50	43	0	36	27
The environment	32	11	6	38	29
The future of the family	4	14	na	34	na
Personal safety	4	11	3	27	18
Work and employment	25	21	3	31	16
Road deaths & injuries	17	43	6	19	24
Education & training	43	50	9	25	24
Health	25	29	3	20	22
Youth suicide	25	14	3	18	18
Family violence	18	18	19	13	12
Racism	17	29	6	13	18
Poverty	39	1	16	15	14
Aboriginal reconciliation	11	7	0	7	7
The republic	0	0	na	7	na
Aust's involvement in o/seas conflict	na	na	3	na	9
Risk of terrorism	na	na	3	na	10
Protection of personal property	na	na	0	na	7
Immigration/asylum seekers	na	na	6	na	15
Crime	na	na	12	na	29

Table 9a Political Activity - State cohorts

Which of the following would you use to make your views heard:	STATE '00			STATE '03		
	Have used	Would use	Would not use	Have used	Would use	Would not use
a. voting at an election	11	50	39	34	43	23
b. council meetings	3	32	65	6	44	50
c. talk back radio	6	27	67	5	40	55
d. letters to the editor	6	49	45	11	56	33
e. Youth Advisory Councils	3	31	66	7	42	51
g. union	3	24	73	6	43	51
h. public protests/rallies	5	39	56	15	36	49
i. family & friends	8	75	17	44	47	9
j. contact MP	4	31	65	11	44	45
k. start a petition	6	41	53	12	44	44

Table 9b Political Activity - University cohorts

Which of the following would you use to make your views heard:	UWA '01			UWA '03		
	Have used	Would use	Would not use	Have used	Would use	Would not use
a. voting at an election	62	7	14	12	76	12
b. council meetings	31	65	3	9	24	64
c. talk back radio	22	76	3	3	27	64
d. letters to the editor	38	55	7	9	58	27
e. Youth Advisory Councils	38	48	17	9	33	48
g. union	21	76	0	4	56	31
h. public protests/rallies	24	65	7	15	33	42
i. family & friends	62	14	24	45	45	0
j. contact MP	38	55	3	6	34	37
k. start a petition	38	52	10	15	36	42