Improving Participation in Higher Education for Young People from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds: Changing attitudes towards university.


Current Federal Government policy in higher education espouses a renewed emphasis on equity. As such, it encourages university-initiated projects aimed at improving the access of students from groups identified as disadvantaged. While significant gains have been made in the participation of some targeted groups, marked inequities in transition to higher education persist, with young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds participating in higher education at approximately twice the rate of those from low SES backgrounds.

While the causes of these inequities are multiple and complex, one culprit that is increasingly named is that of the attitudes of young people and their families towards higher education. Research has found appreciable social stratification in the opinions of secondary school students about the relevance and attainability of a university education.

The literature suggests that university-school linkages based on early intervention and long-term relationships have the potential to alter young people’s perceptions of university. This paper describes one such intervention scheme, Australian Catholic University’s ACULink and UNILink programs. Using a predominantly qualitative approach, it evaluates the extent to which this project affects young people’s perceptions of and aspirations for university.

Introduction
Current Federal Government policy in higher education espouses a renewed emphasis on equity. As such, it encourages university-initiated projects aimed at improving the access of students from groups identified as disadvantaged. While significant gains have been made in the participation of some targeted groups, marked inequities in transition to higher education persist, with young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds participating in higher education at approximately twice the rate of those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

While the causes of these inequities are multiple and complex, one culprit that is increasingly named is that of the attitudes of young people and their families towards higher education. Higher education equity policy has taken up this theme, funding projects aimed at affecting young people’s attitudes. This paper explores the impact of one university’s response: Australian Catholic University’s ACULink and UNILink programs.

The study uses theories of social reproduction, in particular notions of social and cultural capital, to explain how the environments in which young people are raised shape their beliefs about university, and to explore the potential for intervention in altering these apparently entrenched beliefs. Using surveys of students participating in
the programs, and in-depth interviews with a small sample from each cohort, it asks to what extent have the programs effected change in the beliefs of the young people involved regarding the relevance, desirability and attainability of a university education? Preliminary findings from the pilot stage of the research project indicate that the scheme has a powerful impact on the young people’s beliefs about and dispositions towards higher education.

An attitude problem? Or a problem with “attitude”? Clearly, any strategy that aims to improve the participation of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds will need to address underlying attitudes. Focusing on attitudes is, however, problematic. The very word “attitudes” is generally ill-defined and laden with negative connotations. Constructing the issue of low transition rates as an “attitude problem” risks being interpreted as the problem lying with the families and the young people experiencing the disadvantage. If they would just lift their attitudes, the problem would go away! This approach serves to deflect attention away from cultural and structural barriers that have been established for centuries. It removes the burden of responsibility from education systems – who hold the power and possibility to change – to the least empowered members of society. In this light, this paper refers to “beliefs”, defined as habitus: embodied cultural capital manifested as embodied dispositions regarding the desirability, relevance and attainability of a university education.

Equity in Higher Education: The Policy Context

Australia’s first universities were elitist institutions, populated primarily by males from the social elite. Access was based on merit, defined as intellectual ability and effort. That such ‘merit’ was concentrated in the dominant classes was rarely questioned.

Recognition of the imbalance in university populations first appeared in the Murray Report of the Committee on Australian Universities, in 1957 and was raised again in the Martin Report of the Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia in 1964-5. There followed a period of dramatic expansion that transformed a once elite system into the new “binary” system that would bring tertiary education to the masses.

It was widely assumed that massification would lead to improved participation of people from low SES backgrounds. By the 70s, however, it was recognised that financial constraints still presented a barrier to the disadvantaged. To provide greater equality of opportunity, the Whitlam government abolished tuition fees in all public tertiary institutions and introduced the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (TEAS). By the 1980s, however, it was recognised that these measures had done little more than maintain the status quo in participation rates.

With the tabling of the 1990 discussion paper A Fair Chance For All, equity became a “systematic and monitored component of the planning and reporting processes of all higher education institutions” (Ramsay, Tranter, Charlton, & Sumner, 1998). The notion of group disadvantage emerged, as policy aimed to improve the participation rates of people from six targeted groups. Institutions were made accountable for equity, with funding linked to progress made towards equity goals (DEET 1990 pp1-5).
The report *Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Framework* (NBEET, 1996) affirmed the progress made in increasing access to higher education for four of the targeted groups. However, it found that little progress had been made in access for people from rural and isolated areas and people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. It emphasised the need to address equity issues at the institutional level, and recommended a three-pronged approach addressing outreach, access and retention issues. (NBEET 1996 pxii-xxi)

Since May 2004, higher education in Australia has been undergoing the most fundamental reforms since the Dawkins era. Reforms include the deregulation of fees and the provision of more full-fee-paying places. It is predicted that students and their families will be contributing an average of 44% to 57% of the cost of their education (Kniest, 2003 p27). The targeted approach, remains, though some of the groups may change as they no longer present as disadvantaged (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2003). The package includes a system of scholarships, targeting rural and isolated students, and increased assistance for indigenous students. However, these have been widely rated as inadequate (Clarke, 2003; Ferrier & Heagney, 2000). Despite the rhetoric of a “renewed emphasis on equity” (Nelson, 2003) the equity agenda has been further marginalised and the reforms are unlikely to bring about any gains in the participation rates of the remaining targeted groups.

**Review of the Literature**

DEST statistics show little or no improvement over the past decade, with low SES representing 14.6 per cent of domestic students in 1992, and still only 14.8 per cent in 2000 (DEST 2001). Several Australian studies investigating the relationship between socio-economic factors and access to/participation in higher education reflect this situation. Long, Carpenter & Hayden (1999) found that those from the highest SES category were around twice as likely to progress to higher education as those in the lowest category. Parental occupation and level of education were found to have a greater effect than family wealth, although finance played a significant role. This supports the theory that it is not financial barriers alone, but attitudes to higher education developed in the home, that affect transition to and participation in higher education. The variable of attitudes is, however, largely inferred from parental education levels. No attempt is generally made, in studies of this scale, to ask the young people what their attitudes were.

Steveson, Evans, Maclachlan, Karmel and Blakers (2000) highlighted stark inequities in rates of participation between geographical regions. While the average participation rate for the Sydney metropolitan area was around 28 per cent, participation rates varied from as much as 60 per cent in some affluent North Shore areas to less than 15 per cent in several low SES regions in Sydney’s outer West.

In his analysis of three existing large-scale surveys, Richard Teese (2000) found that failure in mainstream school subjects was likewise unequally distributed on social lines, with students from semi-skilled or unskilled workers’ homes failing at two to three times the rate of those from professional and managerial families. He noted that aspirations for university decline with the level of achievement in secondary school. In his study of school students’ aspirations and expectations, James found “*appreciable social stratification in the opinions of senior secondary students about the relevance and attainability of a university education*” (Richard James, 2002 p ix).
While recognising a range of factors, parental educational levels were found to be the most reliable indicator of the educational aspirations of young people. Of the 7000 Year 10 to 12 students surveyed, two in every three expressed a preference for university. However, while 70% of high SES students believed they were “likely to go to university”, only 42% of low SES students believed they were. Students from low SES backgrounds had less confidence their parents want them to go to university and had greater perceptions of barriers to their entering higher education. They were:
- less confident their results would get them in;
- more likely to believe they don’t have the right subjects;
- more likely to believe the cost of fees might stop them attending; and
- more likely to believe their families could not afford to support them.

While James does not make specific reference to cultural capital, these perceptions and beliefs (attitudes) can all be characterised as habitus – ie, embodied predispositions that are learned early in the life of a young person.

Case Studies

Several universities across Australia have implemented equity and access programs targeting those from low SES backgrounds. However, initiatives of an intensive and sustained nature are not common, so published research is limited.

The University of Newcastle runs an outreach program – – starting in the early years of secondary schooling and incorporating goal setting and raising awareness of post-compulsory options. Like ACULink, it involves campus visits by Year 10 students and the use of role models – university students enrolled at the University of Newcastle who attended the participant schools. To date, however, no qualitative research is available on the impact of this program on the school students’ beliefs.

Like , the University of South Australia (UniSA) USANET scheme employs a series of outreach actions from the early years of secondary school through to Year 12. Ramsay, Tranter, Charlton & Sumner (1998) analysed enrolment patterns among the USANET cohorts and surveyed all USANET students who commenced in 1996 or 1997. They found that the intervention was producing changes both in students’ attitudes and in rates of enrolment. However, the authors noted that the changes had only been observed in the short-term and recommended further research be undertaken to assess longer term impact of such programs on student attitudes towards higher education.

One conclusion drawn from these studies is that young people from low socio-economic backgrounds have different beliefs about higher education than those from middle and upper socio-economic backgrounds. The implication is that, in order to increase rates of transition, we must first address these beliefs. This assumption has informed equity policy and practice over the past decade or more.
Education and Social Reproduction.
The introduction of free, compulsory, secular education promised to be the great
equaliser, yet a century later educational outcomes in Australia remain far from
equitable. The coincidence of heredity and social stratification was once seen as ‘natural’, and
educational inequality as inevitable (Smith, 1985). Schooling operated as a
meritocracy wherein inequalities were due to individual ability and effort. Education
was seen as instrumental in social mobility only insofar as it raised individuals’
cognitive achievements, thereby allowing access to higher occupational status
according to ‘merit’.

By the 1960s this model had been called into question as the close correlation
between social background and educational outcomes was recognised. The family
environment came to be seen as deficit in terms of economic stability and access to
cultural values and motivation (Germov 2004). The notion of compensatory education
was introduced as a means of changing the status of these children (Bernstein 1971
p190).

The cultural deprivation view soon came under attack, arguing that it served to direct
attention away from inadequacies of resourcing and school organisation and their
effect on expectations and motivation. Several studies also dispelled the myth of
working-class apathy. Connell and colleagues, for example, found that working-class
parents often “strongly desire to see their children receive more education than they
received themselves” (Connell, White & Johnstone, 1991). Coleman (1988) also
noted that it is not the regard for education that is unevenly distributed, but the means
to make such regard work effectively.

Social and Cultural Capital
In the 1980s theorists looked to other forms of capital that families and individuals
invest in education and which can ultimately be converted into economic capital via
enhanced educational opportunities and outcomes. The distribution of the different
types of capital, it is argued, both reflects and acts to preserve the existing hierarchy
of the social world.

Bourdieu (1986) identified three fundamental forms of capital: economic, cultural and
social. Economic capital, comprising money and that which is directly convertible
into money, may be institutionalised in the form of property rights. Cultural capital,
comprising symbolic knowledge and possessions, may be institutionalised in the form
of educational qualifications. Social capital, comprising social connections, is
convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised
in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 243).

Social Capital
The term ‘social capital’ was applied to education in the 1980s by Coleman (1988,
1990) and Bourdieu (1986) separately. It refers to a variety of social resources linked
to possession of a network of relationships, or membership in groups, and which
provide individuals with access to collectively-owned capital which may be useable
(i.e., converted into economic capital) in the short or long term (Bourdieu 1986 p243).
The core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value, which affect
the economic and status standing of groups and individuals (Putnam 2000, p19).
Just as economic capital is distributed unequally in society, so are other forms of capital. The upper classes enjoy a "situational advantage" from their access to networks with others sharing privilege (Fernandez Kelly, 2002, p. 74). They have more opportunity to accumulate the type of social capital needed to preserve their social status. Putnam (2000) observed that, while race, poverty and educational levels had an effect, social capital was the single most explanatory factor in explaining differential educational outcomes.

Although the poor can be rich in social capital, distinct forms have been identified. Granovetter (1973, 1985) distinguished between strong and weak social ties. Strong ties, generally formed by kinship or friendship, create a sense of belonging, security, and identity. Weak ties, formed through irregular contact with persons outside your immediate social sphere – often more powerful persons – allow individuals to access resources that may be instrumental in achieving an improved social station. It is the weak ties that provide the connections that can make a difference in a young person’s life.

Putnam (2000) uses the terms “bonding” and “bridging” capital, from Gittell & Vidal’s distinction (Gittell & Vidal 1998). Bonding social capital is found in networks formed from “perceived shared identity relations” where individuals form connections with others “like” themselves. These networks are inward-looking and exclusive. Bridging social capital, however, refers to associations where participants are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds. It is therefore outward-looking and more inclusive and thus has greater potential for increasing a young person’s life choices (Putnam 2000).

Bourdieu observed that the social capital of the poor is primarily of the bonding type. While bonding social capital provides solidarity and emotional support, it is of limited use in assisting people to break out of poverty. Rather, it serves to lock them into it as they associate only with those in the same position as themselves, reinforcing a narrow set of possible identities. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, provides relationships with persons or institutions that can give them access to the resources and other forms of capital lacking in their environment (Putnam 2000, p23).

The concept of bridging social capital has implications for an intervention program. The proposal here is that bridging capital can provide young people with access to successful role models who are largely absent from their lives and thereby expand their horizons. An intervention program that increase the school students’ bridging social capital may therefore play a part in improving their life chances.

Cultural Capital
The concept of cultural capital, defined as “the cultural goods transmitted by the family pedagogic actions”, originates in the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1970). These cultural differences include language and other symbolic aspects such as knowledge of high art, possession of credentials, or dispositions and attitudes. They saw that schooling contributes to social reproduction “by enabling the possessors of the prerequisite cultural capital to continue to monopolise that capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 p47). Initial advantages in cultural capital, linked to a person’s social class, are rewarded by schools such that those who already possess some of the cultural capital that is valued by schools, are most often those who are successful.
While economic factors connected with family and social class have an impact on a person’s educational outcomes, it is cultural factors which are seen as the “most determinant educational investment” (Bourdieu 1986 p244).

Bourdieu distinguished between three forms cultural capital. Firstly, it can be present in the objectified state, which entails possession of material cultural goods such as pictures, books and instruments. Secondly, it can exist in the institutionalised state, the objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications. Institutionalised cultural capital can be converted to economic capital by providing access to the more prestigious professions. Finally, cultural capital can exist in the embodied state, defined as long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body.

A crucial aspect of a family’s cultural capital is that of durable dispositions (eg., towards learning) which become embodied – an integral part of the person – in what Bourdieu referred to as ‘habitus’. Embodied cultural capital “cannot be transmitted instantaneously” (Bourdieu, 1986 p245). Through the primary pedagogic work of the family, the acquisition of embodied cultural capital starts early in a person’s life and requires an investment of time, effort and, directly or indirectly, economic capital.

Cultural capital in its embodied form is of most interest to an intervention program. The ultimate goal of ACULink and is to assist young people to accumulate institutionalised cultural capital i.e., to increase their access to higher educational qualifications. However, it does so primarily by indirect means, through affecting their entrenched beliefs surrounding higher education – their embodied cultural capital. Given the primacy of the pedagogic work of the family, altering these dispositions will likely require a significant investment of time, which suggests that beginning as early as possible in a young person’s education will be more efficient.

**Scope for Change**

While a group’s social and cultural capital are demonstrably the strongest indicators of their educational outcomes, they should not be viewed as determinants of an individual’s success. Nor should the persistent imbalance in rates of transition to university be seen as impossible to change. Even Bourdieu, who emphasised the difficulty of altering existing predispositions, acknowledged a role for human agency and personal choice in shaping an individual’s life chances.

Several phenomena point to the possibility of change. It is clearly possible that cultural capital can be acquired beyond the limitations of family background since some working-class students do succeed in the current education system. Fernandez-Kelly refers to groups of Chicanos – students of Mexican descent – graduating from Princeton. Price (2000) presents examples of young African American men from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds who were successfully completing their schooling. Thompson (2002) cites several examples of studies showing that change is possible, including Ames & Ellsworth (1997), who demonstrated that targeted equity programs helped vulnerable parents to take charge of their own and their children’s lives.

Clearly, change is possible. What is less clear is what processes might prove most efficient. Social and cultural capital provide a useful framework as they indicate that
capital is available outside the home and that therefore students’ futures are not
determined solely by the socioeconomic status of their parents.

Social capital theory indicates that families provide the strong ties, but it is often the
conscientious work of mentors outside the family – counsellors and teachers, for
example – who form the weak ties necessary to make the difference. “Decisive in the
constellation of factors that determined their educational success was the active
presence of persons mediating between themselves and institutionally structured
opportunities” (Fernandez Kelly 2002 p73). What is evidently lacking in the lives of
the students who attend the ACULink partner schools is the presence of successful
professionals – people from their everyday world who have successfully made the
transition to university and beyond. It is difficult for these young people to view a
higher education as relevant or attainable when there are so few people in their social
sphere who attend or have attended university.

A key characteristic of a successful intervention program would therefore be the use
of appropriate role models to show that “people like me can and do go to university”
(Maclean, unpublished p6). In addition, role models can provide practical information
on course choice, university type, subject options, a realistic estimate of costs, and a
sense of what university life is like. From the perspective of social capital, role
models can broaden a young person’s identity horizon and can help them to construct
their identity of self-as-university-student and self-as-professional.

Changing a young person’s entrenched dispositions, their habitus, presents a
challenge. Providing information alone is not likely to make a lasting difference. To
Bourdieu, a special mode of inculcation is required if secondary pedagogic work (i.e.,
a university intervention) is to bring about the substitution of one habitus for another.
He suggests the possible effect of an extraordinary event in shaping thinking about
future prospects:

“It is the critical moment when, breaking with the ordinary experience of
time as a simple re-enactment of a past or a future inscribed in the past, all
things become possible (at least apparently), when future prospects appear
really contingent, future events really indeterminate.” (Bourdieu 1988 p. 182).

Building on this concept, Yair (2003) borrows the metaphor of the big bang from
physics. Big bang effects – short, intense, decisive episodes – produce extreme levels
of motivation and can have long-term effects over the life-course. He argues that
cumulative model of school effects wherein learning is an incremental and linear
process is reductionist and does not explain the efficacy of short-term intervention
programs. He suggests that students’ career choices may be influenced by a number of
decisive experiences that build upon a foundation of incremental processes. One
major outcome of such big bang moments is self-empowerment, which encourages
individuals to envisage alternative futures, to construct new identities. In these
contexts, students may be motivated to choose a career/study path and to invest time
and energy in working towards this goal. A successful intervention program, then,
would be one which combined the work of laying the foundations, with extra-ordinary
“real world” experiences.
Similar models of changing beliefs and identities come from the literature on life course and career decision-making. Antikainen and Komonen (2003) speak of transitions, or key experiences, as being instrumental in the construction of identity and transformation of the life course. Hodkinson and colleagues also argue that both routines and turning points play a part. The central idea is the same – at a turning point, a person “goes through a transformation of identity” (Hodkinson, Sparkes & Hodkinson 2002 p436).

The ACULink and UNILink projects reflect such a model. Strategies such as goal-setting, raising awareness of alternative post-secondary pathways and developing skills in researching career information, are incremental processes. The campus visits, however, can be viewed as brief, intense experiences that are, by definition, connected to the ‘real world’ of university. These visits provide the necessary preconditions to maximise motivation and can thus be viewed as ‘big bang’ events. Indeed, preliminary evaluation data and informal feedback indicates that the strategies often do have this effect.

Implications for an Intervention Program: A model emerges
Several key features of a university-school linkage emerge from the literature:
- Sustained linkages: the development of long-term relationships;
- Early intervention, in order to enhance young people’s embodied cultural capital before critical educational decisions are made;
- The use of appropriate role models to enhance young people’s networks beyond their peers and immediate families (i.e., to increase their ‘bridging’ social capital and broaden their identity horizons);
- Providing access to, and training in the skills required to find, practical information on course choice, university type, subject options, an estimate of costs and a realistic sense of what university life is like.

The Programs
Stemming from Australian Catholic University’s (ACU) commitment to social justice, the ACULink and UNILink programs are partnerships between ACU and several schools in the Parramatta Diocese. ACULink comprises a series of lessons around goal-setting for all students in Year 8, and around post-compulsory pathways for Year 9 students. (Up to 200 students participate in each school each year). In Year 10, the pathways theme is explored further, culminating in a visit to ACU’s Strathfield campus for interested students (around 50 from each school). Following this, First Year ACU students who went to schools in the region visit Year 11 students for an informal discussion on university life. Around 50 school students from each school participate. Following this, Year 11 students are invited to spend a day at ACU “shadowing” a First Year university student. Around ninety students participate. The UNILink program offers students the opportunity to undertake two university units as part of their Higher School Certificate. Those who pass are given five marks towards their UAI entrance to ACU and, if they enrol in an education degree, receive credit for the units studied. In addition, Parramatta Catholic Education office provides a $1000 scholarship to outstanding students from the UNILink program who enrol at ACU.
Research Questions
The research asks the following questions:
- To what extent do the interventions increase young people’s bridging social networks and broaden their identity horizons?
- To what extent do the interventions effect a change in young people’s beliefs about the desirability, relevance and accessibility of a university education?
- To what extent do the interventions raise young people’s post-secondary educational aspirations?

Research Methods:
Two main research methods are employed:

**Quantitative Methods**
To provide a broad picture of any resultant changes in students’ beliefs about higher education a survey is employed for the strategies that involve large numbers (eg, Year 8 Goal-Setting and Year 9 Pathways Awareness, Year 10 Campus Visits and Year 11 Role Modeling and Shadowing). The survey includes questions about the students’ family background including parental occupation and education levels, and whether they would be “first in the family” to attend university. School students are asked about their post-secondary work/study aspirations, and what steps they will need to take in order to achieve their goals. Participants are then given a set of statements regarding their current view of a university education: its desirability, relevance and attainability, perceived supporting factors and perceived barriers. They respond to these using rating scales.

**Qualitative Approach**
Asking how the intervention works involves a more in-depth exploration than the broad brush-strokes of a survey can provide. In-depth biographical interviews with a small number of students from each year group allow the researcher to gain a picture of how their identities and career plans are constructed and transformed over time, and what role the intervention strategy plays in these processes. Just as importantly, it allows the participants to set the agenda and open up perspectives that may stray from the limits of Likert Scale survey questions. It provides the participants with a voice, allowing them to identify and elaborate on themes that the researcher may not have considered.

The initial question asks informants to share their career aspirations, the story of how these were formed and what was instrumental in shaping them. Respondents are then encouraged to identify the people, events and issues that are significant to them.

**Sampling**
Of the five schools participating in the scheme, two sites were selected for the research: one a year 7 – 10 school, the other a year 11 – 12. For the strategies that involve large numbers, all students in the year cohort will be invited to complete questionnaires. For the interviews, non-representative ‘stratified’ sampling is used. Two students from each year group – where possible, one male and one female – will be interviewed. While not representative in the statistical sense, this will provide the best representation of the impact of the program across all levels. Where possible, students will be tracked into the second year to gauge changes over the long term.
Reliability and Validity
The methods of collecting and analysing data incorporated a number of procedures to promote the validity and reliability of the study’s findings. These included:

- Methodological triangulation: use of survey and interview data to cross-check findings from same cohorts;
- Collecting data on an anonymous and confidential basis; and
- Allowing key themes to emerge from the participants.

Analysis of Preliminary Data
To date, the survey has been piloted on seven Year 8, and six Year 9 students. In addition, one pilot interview has been conducted with a university student. While it is clearly too early to draw definitive conclusions, early indications are that the model suggested by the literature is an appropriate model, and the project is enhancing the social and cultural capital of participants.

Survey Responses
Of the thirteen respondents, only three had parents working in professional occupations. This is broadly representative of the school population as a whole (Australian Catholic Bishop’s Conference 2003). Despite this, three had siblings who had attended or are attending university, and the majority were considering careers that require a university level education. Year 9 students were better informed than Year 8 regarding the training they would need to enter their chosen career and the subject and mark entry requirements for this training. They also responded more positively to questions around potential barriers to their entry to higher education. They expressed less concern about the cost of university fees and more confidence that they would be able to cope with the workload. This indicates that the sessions and resources were useful in providing access to accurate information as well as breaking down existing perceived barriers.

In regard to the specific strategies of the projects, Year 9 students rated the university students as more helpful than their friends in helping them to make decisions about their futures. All university run strategies rated highly on the “helpful” scale, with input from university personnel having more of an impact than that from their regular teachers. While the school teachers are generally competent and committed and their work undoubtedly lays the foundations for the university lecturer’s visits (in the 7-10 school, Careers lesson form part of the PD/H/PE curriculum), this could be a function of the novelty of a new face, coupled with the links to the “real-world” of the university lecturer, students and campus.

These results resemble Yair’s model of career learning and decision making wherein students are influenced by a number of decisive, ‘big bang’ experiences that build upon a foundation of incremental processes. They also highlight the importance of the role of the university students in acting as role models who are close to the world of the school students while acting as positive examples of what people “like me” can and do achieve.
Carly Interview

As was hoped, the interview adds important depth to the picture formed by the surveys. Like the majority of her peers, Carly had no significant role models in her life who had been to or were studying at university. While Carly’s ability to picture herself as a teacher – encouraged by her parents – undoubtedly helped in the construction her identity as a professional, she nevertheless perceived many barriers to her ever getting to university. These barriers included concerns around entry requirements, financial issues, the absence of a role model and the resulting lack of any realistic idea of what university is like. She reports that it was the university intervention which made all the difference in confirming her goals and helping her to believe that it was possible to achieve them. Additionally, and equally importantly, the program not only raised her aspirations, it also provided the means of enabling her transition to university.

Carly’s aspiration to be a teacher had been formed in her primary school years, long before she had contact with any university intervention: “I’ve always wanted to be a primary school teacher”. However, by the later years of her secondary schooling she had come to the realisation that aspiration alone may not be enough. This realisation was influenced by her knowledge of the entry requirements “I thought maybe with the marks it might be impossible for me to get in”, coupled with her perception that “People at my school felt that not everybody will go to uni”. She also expressed the belief that costs presented a barrier: “From what I’d heard I didn’t think I would be able to afford university at all…I thought I’d have to pay fees, thought I’d have to pay for the books, for the travelling as well”.

The provision of accurate information on the HECS system and on alternative entry pathways was an important step in altering Carly’s perceptions: “When I found out about HECS and the other ways that I could go to university that was better”. Taking the two university courses also helped removed any notion that the work might be too hard, as it provided a “reality of the expectations”. Here, the university intervention has facilitated a change that constitutes the substitution of Carly’s existing habitus – the perception that university would be too expensive and entry would be unattainable – for another.

Other aspects of the university intervention were instrumental both in changing Carly’s beliefs and in facilitating her pathway to university. She frequently mentions the impact of the visit to her school by ACU students, saying: “I had some students when I was in Year 11 from ACU actually come to my school … and these ACU students apparently went to my school and they encouraged me … that I could go and I thought that “If they can do it, you know, I can as well”.” Meeting successful university entrants from her own school was an important factor both in altering her perceptions of the relevance of university, and in enhancing her self-efficacy. In the absence of any of the “right” form of bonding social capital – “out of (my) whole group, I was the only one to go to university” – the university role models became the essential bridging social capital, providing a link for Carly to an otherwise unknown world.

\(^1\) Name has been changed to protect privacy. School and suburb names have also been removed.
Of equal significance to Carly was the removal of structural barriers to her transition. The ten mark bench was a critical factor in her gaining entry and gave her hope where there had been little: “They offered the two courses for me which I could do during school and it allowed me to get into university with the ten mark bench as well... within the ten marks difference... that was amazing. That gave me so much more hope”. She also mentioned the additional motivation created by the offer of a $1000 scholarship to successful entrants to ACU. Evidently, the program not only altered Carly’s perceptions and aspirations, it also facilitated her successful transition to university.

Conclusions
Despite decades of policy and the implementation of a myriad of strategies across the higher education sector, inequities in access to higher education for people from low socio-economic backgrounds persist. Much statistical data suggests that family attitudes are at the root of the problem. Federal policy supports university intervention schemes for the promotion of access to higher education for people from this targeted group, particularly strategies aimed at changing these apparently entrenched attitudes.

While a group’s social and cultural capital are demonstrably the strongest indicators of their collective educational outcomes, they should not be viewed as determinants of an individual’s success: clearly, there is scope for change and universities have an important role to play in this process. Although federal policy does not specify what form such initiatives might take, characteristics of a model with the potential to enhance a young person’s social networks and alter their embodied predispositions, emerge from theories of social and cultural capital and the literature on career decision-making. Such a model would involve early intervention, sustained linkages with relevant schools, provision of accurate information and the use of role models.

Australian Catholic University’s ACULink and UNILink programs are built on these principles. Preliminary data indicate that the projects have been instrumental in enhancing the social and cultural capital of many of the young people involved. They appear to be altering their beliefs about the relevance and attainability of university and raising their post-secondary aspirations. Just as importantly, the projects provide pathways which further enable their transition.

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2 This ten mark bench has since been reduced to five marks.
References


