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The Australian Higher Education Context

Reflecting on increased participation in higher education, Marginson (2018) writes: 'competition between institutions and within disciplinary communities is fundamentally driven by status (prestige) rather than revenues or profitability even though revenues are in important secondary objective as a means to the realization of mission' (p. 269). As in other western countries, the university, as a figure in society, is expected to produce a continual social good. Today there is an increasing expectation that these institutions will have a global presence and actively recruit students from overseas who are charged substantially more. As future-oriented spaces, universities are places where individuals can advance their knowledge and where scholars can research important issues shaping the nation. In Australian higher education, most students are enrolled in degree programs that run for three or more years. The private higher education sector is small and the majority of students attend state-run institutions.

At all levels of the Australian education system there exists increasing evidence of stratification within the Australian population (Whiteford, 2014); the gap between rich and poor is widening (Kenway, 2013). Decisions based on economics now dominate most policies. This is reflected in the 'user-pays approach' to policy decisions, which has fostered a rapid growth in the private schooling sector. The inequalities in schooling influence the curriculum which, in turn, influences aspirations. Students who are fed a diet of a restricted curriculum may opt for

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lower-status courses (see Teese & Walstab, 2009). The reality is that social mobility is not attainable for the current generation of Australian youth (Wyn, 2009) and class remains particularly salient in structuring the lives of young people who are navigating their futures.

Pitman (2020, p. 14) explains that Australian higher education is modelled on the medieval European university, and originally served as 'a finishing school for the elite' before eventually arriving at what is considered a more enlightened and holistic model of higher education that we know today. From an early stage the egalitarian principles of Australian society were clearly present in the formation of the university, including 'the notion that men and women of all classes could enter through their gates', provided they met certain standards (Pitman, 2020, p. 15). Since the 1980s Australia has experienced an 'ascent of a neo-liberal and neo-conservative higher education policy, which has redefined education and training as an investment in human capital and human resource development' (Zajda, 2020, p. 48). The university model is now tied to the market-driven imperatives of economic globalization and profit-driven management. This is, according to Zajda (2010), done at the expense of a humanistic education.

Furthermore, while policy promotes widening participation, Bennett and Southgate (2014), among others, note that how students are positioned in these policy documents is problematic and not socially just. Noting two subject positions—the cap(able) individual and the proper aspirant—Bennett and Southgate (2014) make an argument that these represent a 'neo-liberal subject who possesses "natural" ability, hope for social mobility and has a highly individualised and entrepreneurial disposition' (p. 22). Such policy language and framing simply 'reinforces older meritocratic discourses about who deserves to go to university' in which 'educ-able-ness is posed against an absent, abject Other who lacks the higher educ-able-ness' (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, pp. 29, 32).

In order to understand how first-in-family males become socially mobile through their education, I will recount some of the key trends and policy drivers in the Australian education system. Many higher education spaces are now governed by neoliberal agendas (marketization, revenue accrual), and the Australian university sector is no exception. However, there have been substantial efforts to widen participation. I will recount some recent equity policies initiated by the Bradley Review in 2008.

Snowden and Lewis (2015, p. 587) highlight that the 'marketing and mediatisation of higher education contribute significantly to decision-making about higher education participation'. Arguably, the first-in-family students who were a part of this study acclimatized to university life in a 'mixed message' higher education context where it was often assumed that 'students from low income families don't value or attend university, but go to TAFE in order to get a job' (Snowden & Lewis, 2015, p. 591). With the onset of massification of higher education, one could argue that university prestige is becoming a key factor in distinguishing between graduates, with significant implications for employability (see Chesters, 2015). The analysis presented in this book carefully considers what the modern university experience looks like with specific attention to online learning, large cohorts, etc. The onset of online learning allows first-in-family students to work longer hours and take more ownership of their learning, which is advantageous in the short-term but also involves sacrificing making the long-term social connections—or social capital—necessary to secure the long-term employment they desire.

Recent Equity Policies in Australian Higher Education

Drawing on Bourdieu, individual trajectories are not random. Instead Bourdieu (1984) emphasized that pathways are influenced by capitals, dispositions and opportunities:

> To a given volume of inherited capital there corresponds a band of more or less equally probable trajectories leading to more or less equivalent positions … and the shift from one trajectory to another often depends on collective events—wars, crises etc.—or individual events—encounters, affairs, benefactors etc. (p. 110)

In considering the relationship between collective events and social mobility, Kupfer (2015, p. 5) calls attention to factors which enable social mobility, namely individual motives, educational systems and societal structures, with each needing to work in tandem. Researching, education, identities and upward mobility, Kupfer contends that 'upward mobility is

a phenomenon of social change' and 'it is itself a social change because individuals leave their original milieu and enter new ones' (p. 56). Echoing Bourdieu, her argument is that specific social conditions influenced her participants' aspirations and presented opportunities which allowed them to become socially mobile. This is directly relevant to the widening participation agenda in Australian higher education over the last twenty years.

Basically, reforms in Australian higher education in the late 1980s sought to open up tertiary-level education to a larger and more diverse section of the population. Policy initiatives have been structured around certain indicators of success such as access, participation and retention. Coates and Krause (2005) point out that six equity groups identified in 1990 remain the target of performance monitoring and university equity programs. These include people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, people from rural/remote areas, people with a disability, people from a non-English-speaking background, women, and Indigenous people (p. 36). Lately, these equity groups have been subject to critique for obscuring the intersectional and compounded elements of disadvantage.

A Fair Chance for All?

Schooling in Australia is highly segregated along social, ethnic and racial lines (Gale & Parker, 2013a, b; Lamb et al., 2015). Also, according to the Gonski Review on school funding, the quality of schooling available is distorted by severely inequitable funding structures (Kenway, 2013). This is confirmed in recent analysis of Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data, which indicates that school attributes (i.e. school type and student diversity) are responsible for almost 20% of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) variation between students (Gemici et al., 2013).[1] The participants in the *First-in-Family Males*

[1] The ATAR has been widely critiqued for its inconsistency (Guest, 2016). For example in 2017 it was reported Australian universities admitted 56 per cent of students without relying on their ATAR (Singhal, 2017). However, while it is clearly problematic, every boy in the study believed from the outset they had to secure the necessary score to get into their university and program of choice. Some were only later made aware that the university would assign them bonus points, thus securing their entry.

Project came from a variety of schooling contexts, which were variable in terms of quality, though all participants received very little career counselling, which had implications for their trajectories.

In providing a historical account of widening participation and changing conceptions and practices of social justice in Australian higher education policy, Gale and Tranter (2011) document the shift from elite to mass education, highlighting the Whitlam government's public investment in higher education and the Dawkins (1988) White Paper, which amalgamated universities into 37 mostly large and diverse institutions. The number of Australians who desire to attend university has ebbed and flowed over time with a particular downturn in the 1970s (Marginson, 2018). However, from the 1990, *A Fair Chance for All* was conceived within the broader Dawkins recommendations, which aimed to radically change the undergraduate experience; it was 'focused explicitly on access and representation, advocating the need for composition of the student population to reflect the broader population' (Harvey et al., 2016, p. 6). This substantial emphasis on widening participation has continued to the present, altering what university has come to mean in Australia today.

Gale and Tranter (2011) argue that *A Fair Chance for All* provides the foundation for the policy framework for student equity in Australian higher education today; however, it has also promoted the adoption of a 'more pervasive economic rationalist, or neo-liberal, understanding of equity and higher education' (p. 38). While a user-pays ideology still exists, in the continuing national debates over equity and how best to widen participation, there has been discussion of lowering admission scores for some courses as well as modifying the repayment threshold to make university a more appealing option. What has been side-lined are issues of quality pedagogic instruction and strategic governance. The end result is, however, a more diverse student body which, according to Pitman (2020) and many others, 'has challenged understandings of what knowledge is, how it is constructed, and whether these new forms of knowledge are to be embraced by universities as an opportunity, or resisted as a challenge to their authority' (pp. 14–15).

Equity Groups, the Bradley Review and Marketization

The final report of the Bradley Review of the university sector, commissioned by the Australian Government, argued that it was economically imperative to widen the participation of under-represented groups in higher education (Bradley et al., 2008). Pledging that, by 2020, 20% of undergraduate students should be from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the Australian Government also asserted that students from such backgrounds require higher levels of support, including financial assistance and greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services, in order to succeed (Cocks & Stokes, 2013). In 2013, the Australian Government announced the discontinuation of a flat-rate distribution of funds to universities. Instead, from 2014, $36.5 million would be allocated to universities and proportionally distributed on the basis of their share of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gale & Parker, 2013a, b).

Widening participation in Australia remains a fragmented picture where there exists 'differential levels of access and participation by the type of institution (first tier/elite versus other) and degree (prestigious degrees such as medicine versus lower status/social mobility degrees such as nursing or teaching)' (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, p. 23). Zajda (2008) identifies an overemphasis on a human capital approach to higher education, which focuses on 'the productive capacities of human beings as income producing agents in the economy' (p. 45). Describing how the university itself has become a neoliberal space, Zajda (2020) draws attention to the consumer model with a 'focus on accountability, efficiency and ongoing performance surveillance of learning, teaching and research' where 'evaluation of teaching is compulsory for all teaching staff, and is administered in the online mode' (p. 53).

However, despite the push to widen participation, there exist certain silences regarding how these disadvantaged populations experience university life. For example, while there has been a growth in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, it has primarily been in second-tier universities. Researchers have sought to document robust equity and Foundational Studies programs which take place on university campuses

and adopt various strategies to support students academically and socially so they are prepared to enter a degree program. Cocks and Stokes (2013) explain that enabling programs are highly diverse and include 'early school leavers, students with disabilities, refugees on permanent or short-term humanitarian visas, mature age students, students who attained low tertiary entrance scores, students from regional and remote areas, and students from low-SES backgrounds' (p. 25). Sometimes these programs work in conjunction with other equity-based initiatives which focus on certain ethnic groups who are under-represented in higher education such as Indigenous/Aboriginal (see Price, 2012) and Pacific Islander students (see Blake et al., 2015).

Marketing, Branding and Commodification

Since the Whitlam government, universities in Australia have increasingly been part of a market system that rations education through mechanisms of competition (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Connell, 2013). As a result, universities now brand themselves and advertise aggressively to bring in the largest number of students possible. According to Zajda (2020) the higher education sector in Australia has responded in four ways to market forces: accountability, quality of education and training, labour market prospects and global competitiveness, all contributing to a specific atmosphere around teaching and learning. The end result of this neoliberal restructuring is a demand for money. Which can often only be secured through increased student numbers.

Regardless of the university's status or symbolic capital (e.g. membership of the prestigious 'Group of Eight'), these advertisements often privilege a meritocratic vision of selfhood and powerfully influence how individuals come to understand themselves as subjects of value in relation to discourses of employability. This branding can be off-putting to working-class students who do not desire to be the 'best of the best' but instead look for a sense of personal fulfilment through their education. These advertisements present a narrow conception of what learning is and what learning can be. Specifically, learning is always depicted as an investment in oneself and one's future employability; therefore, a failure to learn—to keep up

with the rigour of learning—is a disinvestment in one's future. How universities market themselves can influence how individuals come to understand themselves and what university could mean for their educational biographies. Recognizing that the marketing efforts of institutions have escalated in recent years and that they are now considered essential to secure student enrolment, Snowden and Lewis (2015) note that universities' central message is 'University study leads to good jobs and better pay' (p. 593). This advertising approach, they note, is 'expected to "connect" with the low socio-economic cohorts of potential students, their peers and families and influence decision-making about educational pathways and choices' (p. 595).

Research in Australia on access to universities has provided evidence of substantial differences in higher education participation in different types of universities, specifically for people from working-class backgrounds (Gale & Parker, 2013a, b). Such students are less likely to have the resources, opportunities or networks of people to support their aspirations and 'navigational capacities' (see Appadurai, 2004). Furthermore, despite discourses of 'equity' and 'fairness', scholars contend that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have what Appadurai (2004) describes as 'brittle aspirations' with sparse nodes of experience, social networks, reflexivity and awareness to realize their aspirational journey.

Meritocracy, Masculinity and the Australian 'Fair Go'

In Australia today, there exists a notion of equity, a 'fair go' where, arguably, 'Australianness' is grounded in 'civic virtues such as fairness, openness and egalitarianism' (Plage et al., 2017, p. 318). Indeed, 91% of Australians agree that the notion of the 'fair go', the opportunity to improve one's life through ability and determination, is a core aspect of the Australian value system (Herscovitch, 2013, p. 3). I am interested in how the subjectivities of the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* are produced and presented in reference to discourses of meritocracy and the Australian 'fair go'. According to Kapferer's (1988) work on

national identity, Australian egalitarianism defines individual and group differences and is founded on various assumptions about equality. Within Kapferer's conception, the notion that some may be more fortunate than others is taken to be 'natural' and they are seen as more deserving of financial reward or social esteem than those who have 'artificially' achieved economic or social success. However, Kapferer (1988) acknowledges that a significant part of egalitarianism is built on othering, where those not identical in nature—women, Aborigines, Asians, for example—are not conceived as equals and indeed are often thought of as 'naturally' inferior. Therefore, Australian egalitarianism, historically, is skewed in ways which are frequently the very antithesis of egalitarian ideals (Kapferer & Morris, 2003).

Class Discourses and Masculine Subjectivities in Australia

According to Connell (2003), Australian masculinities are associated with 'the convict shaking his shackled first; the heroic explorer facing inland; the bushman plodding down a dusty track; the digger scrambling the slops at Gallipoli' (p. 9). The patterns and practices of so-called 'Australian masculinities' do 'not make much sense until it is seen as part of the history of settler colonialism, dependent on industrialisation, and contemporary globalisation' (Connell, 2003, p. 19). It is difficult and problematic to speak of an 'Australian masculinity', but many would suggest there is a national character that informs gender relations and gender practices. Nile (2000, p. 2) notes that an Australian masculinity is typically thought of as an 'able-bodied white male with very few personal attachments who ekes out a modest existence with honest work'. From a historical perspective, toughness and an anti-intellectualism have longstanding associations with Australian masculinity (see Crotty, 2001). In critiquing what he sees as an overemphasis on working-class masculinity in Australian studies, Crotty (2001) implores researchers to explore other forms of masculinity than the 'convicts, diggers, bushmen, larrikins' (p. 3). In contemporary times, Whitman (2013, p. 52) has argued that notions of egalitarianism overlap with a 'normative averageness' which has been identified as a central

characteristic of representations of Australian masculinity. Whitman refers to the adoption of working-class masculinities, such as the amiable and easy-going 'Aussie "bloke" identity', as 'aspirational markers of doing manhood' (2013, p. 61). Furthermore, Whitman adds an important dimension to how we view the nexus of class and masculinity by contending that the qualities associated with working-class masculinity—the so-called 'bloke'—have been mainstreamed and taken up more generally as legitimating strategies for masculinity.

Studies of masculinity continue to focus on the ways in which 'men's character structures [are] internally divided—even contradictory', highlighted that everyday practices were 'the product of psychological compromises, which were often unstable' (Connell, 2003, p. 12). Collinson and Hearn (2005) refer to the 'unresolved tension' in critical studies on men and masculinities between 'multiplicity and diversity' and 'men's structured domination, their shared economic and symbolic vested interests and sense of unity' (p. 300). In examining the patterns and practices of Australian masculinities, I draw on the work of Walker (2003) which supplies an excellent example which illustrates how wider histories have influenced working-class masculinities. Focusing on working-class boys living in the western suburbs of Sydney and their affinity for cars, Walker (2003) documents how with the decline of manufacturing—which reshaped their relationship to generational employment and their fathers—the young men turned to cars as a way to perform their masculinity, a process of seeking validation. Walker (2003) writes: 'Economic rationalist policies, and the associated de-skilling, have deprived a significant proportion of working-class youth of even more of their already limited resources for consumption, and have devalued their labour power further' (p. 49).

In Australia, the rise of post-industrialization occurred simultaneously with an emphasis on the knowledge economy. Social dignity, which was once integral to how working-class men came to understand themselves and each other in the manufacturing industry, had to be reinterpreted and, as Walker writes, car culture—a 'hydraulic masculinity' (Walker et al., 2000)—was 'an attempt to overcome the injustices and indignities of a social structure that values mental over physical labour' (Walker, 2003, p. 67).

Linking back to the 'fair go', Nichols and Stahl's (2017) research with young men in Australia during the post-school year found the transition from high school into university involves what they call a 'renovation of learner identity' in order to belong, as an 'easy-going' and 'laidback' masculinity becomes less salient in competitive university contexts which emphasize individual responsibility. They documented gender performativities that involved an 'easy-going' subjectivity—a going with the flow, being open, waiting to see what happens, not stressing about it, and not comparing oneself with others who take things more seriously. Arguing that such an attraction to presenting an 'easy-going' identity has consequences for their transition to higher education, this scholarship highlights how gender is performed in relation to culture and, arguably, national cultures. Understanding how subjectivities are produced, as a discursive category, involves a consideration of 'the personal enactment of communal methods of self-accounting, vocabularies of motive, culturally recognizable emotional performances and available stories for making sense' (Wetherall & Edley, 1999, p. 337). So, in considering the 'easy-going' identity, Nichols and Stahl (2017) make connections between Australian male students' performances in higher education 'through an overarching discourse of masculine egalitarianism, which necessitates neither rising above, nor falling below, one's male peers' (p. 173).

Conclusion

Connell (1989, p. 292) writes: 'Research on schooling is usually confined to schooling, and thus has difficulty seeing where the school is located in a larger process.' With this in mind, this chapter has laid a foundational understanding of the policy context which fosters social conditions which, in turn, inform aspirations and produce subjectivities around social mobility (see Kupfer, 2015). What this chapter has tried to articulate is that it is difficult to understand the identity processes associated with upwardly mobile working-class masculinities without a consideration of the social and economic change which has reshaped what education has come to mean both in Australian society and globally today. Furthermore, while efforts have been made to document the shifts in

working-class masculinities—how they adapt or '(re)traditionalize' their identities (Stahl, 2017)—it is important to remain cautious about drawing clear distinctions. Informed by social change, historic conventions of femininity and masculinity, after all, are becoming reinscribed in new ways (Adkins, 2000), which are often undocumented. In examining first-in-family working-class young men entering university through a longitudinal approach, I am interested in how their experiences speak to the various contradictions and paradoxes they encounter and what this means for their identity work as they stive to become upwardly mobile.

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