



Conceptions of performativity, responsibility and care within a University excellence program

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Abstract

In this paper, the experiences and aspirations of seven students who are members of an excellence program at a large Australian university are foregrounded. The theoretical concepts of performativity and responsabilisation are drawn on to highlight (1) how these students responsabilise themselves and (2) how they are responsabilised by the program—in ways that reflect and reproduce an existence of calculation. This existence of calculation was directed towards particular academic and employment outputs. The strong predominance of a neoliberal framing of responsabilisation in the lifeworlds of these students is recognised. Also recognised are alternative forms of responsibility based on relations of care exemplified in the high levels of social consciousness and concern for the welfare of others expressed by the students. The paper examines how care relations within the excellence program are anchored in a technical rationality focused on meeting performative targets. These targets are at odds with the relations of care prioritised by students and stifle their social and political agency. Against this backdrop, the paper argues for the ongoing significance of re-aligning universities with the ideals of the public good where the values of inclusion and equity are prioritised.

Keywords Performativity · Responsibilisation · Audit culture · University excellence program · University students

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Introduction

I am a very very competitive person. I won't necessarily strive to get a grade unless there is someone I know who is doing better than me and then I'm like, I don't want to be worse in a way ... I was happy with my ATAR¹ but two of my close friends got 99.95 which kind of put my ATAR a little bit more into [perspective] – that's the highest you can possibly get ... I want to be the best in comparison to the people that I can see that achieve that ... Yeah, because that's what I work best off is being recognised because otherwise I don't see the point in trying... (Dorothy)

These comments are from Dorothy, one of the students in an under-graduate excellence program at a large Australian university. Like many other similar programs in universities across Australia and globally, this one is explicitly associated with academic excellence and prestige. It is highly selective in offering limited places to those who demonstrate such excellence, usually through outstanding final year school results. Dorothy was one of ten students interviewed as part of a study that sought to explore the aims and practices of this program. The particular focus of the research was on the experiences, expectations and identities of its student cohort. The comments from Dorothy exemplify the sense of competition expressed by the cohort in relation to calculating their value and worth in terms of academic outputs. They also point to the sense of personal responsibility accepted for achieving this output. In this paper, the theoretical concepts of performativity and responsabilisation (as responsibility for the self) are drawn on to highlight the existence of calculation and competition that regulates the lives of these students around the academic and employment measures of achievement that 'count'. The paper also draws on these concepts in highlighting the ways in which the university via the excellence program actively encouraged and reproduced this existence. Such theorising highlights the strong predominance of a neoliberal framing of responsabilisation in the lifeworlds of these students.

Following this explication, the paper explores students' views and take up of alternative conceptions of responsibility based on relations of care. These conceptions were exemplified in the high levels of social consciousness and concern for the welfare of others expressed by the students. These alternative conceptions of care were seen as separate to, and indeed at odds with, the program's priorities. The paper examines how care relations within the excellence program are anchored in a technical rationality focused on meeting performative (academic and career excellence) targets. This anchoring, the paper argues, works to stifle the students' social consciousness and political agency towards the betterment of the social world. Against this backdrop, the paper argues for the ongoing significance of re-aligning

¹ The ATAR is the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank. It reflects student achievement upon completion of secondary education (Year 12) as they compare with other students. It is a score used by tertiary institutions in allocating course places.

universities with the ideals of the public good where the values of inclusion and equity are prioritised.

Universities and the culture of performativity, audit and responsibilisation

An audit culture now governs all manner of social and political life where individuals and collectives are (1) continuously measured and held to public account in relation to particular performance indicators and (2) expected to adopt practices of self-surveillance and self-assessment in holding themselves to account (Power 1999; Strathern 2000). Central to this culture is ‘performativity’. This is a technology that links business-derived concepts of measurement, comparison and evaluation to effort, values, purposes and self-understanding (Leys 2003; Locke 2015). Through its employment of judgements, comparisons and displays, performativity is a mode of regulation and measure of productivity and outputs. It incentivizes and controls through rewards and sanctions—encapsulating the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgment (Ball 2003).

Performativity has become a ‘powerful and insidious policy technology that is now at work at all levels and in all kinds of education and public service’ (Ball 2012, p. 19). It has radically reshaped the purposes and direction of institutions like universities and schools to align with the grand narratives of efficiency, reason and instrumentality (Lyotard 1984). Lyotard’s ideas of performativity (1984) along these lines have strongly informed education theory and research in this area of audit and accountability (see, in particular, Ball 2003, 2012). Lyotard’s argument (1984) was that education under these narratives is being subsumed by the ‘efficient functioning of the social system’:

Education is no longer to be concerned with the pursuit of ideals such as that of personal autonomy or emancipation, but with the means, techniques or skills that contribute to the efficient operation of the state in the world market and to maintaining the internal cohesion and legitimation of the state (in Marshall 1999, p. 309).

The technologies and cultures of performativity have worked to incorporate education institutions into national drives for efficiency and productivity (Lyotard 1984; Shore 2010; Ball 2012). Since the 1980s a combination of economic rationalism and efforts to capitalise on commercial opportunities has realised a new vision of universities as transnational business corporations operating in a competitive global knowledge economy (see also Strathern 2000). The ethos of new managerialism encapsulates the institutionalising of market and business principles into universities and is reflected in the myriad of performative measures designed to gauge their responsiveness to industry and government (Deem and Brehony 2005; Lynch 2015; Shore 2010). The different systems that rank universities exemplify such measures. Amid funding cuts and competition for students, such rankings have become increasingly high-stakes for universities generating both positive and negative impacts on

reputation, status and income (Hazelkorn 2014; Marginson 2016). A notable example of how universities are attempting to improve their rank is through offering 'merit scholarships', such as the ones featured in this paper which are designed to attract elite students and enhance university reputations (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Lynch 2015).

Against a backdrop of new managerialism, the moral and ethical values of the public service have been replaced with the market language of costs, efficiencies, profits and competition (Lynch 2014). This shift has rearticulated the notion of public universities from a 'public good' geared towards producing an educated citizenry to a conception of higher education as an individual economic investment (Shore 2010; Kimber and Ehrich 2015). In Australian universities, statements of vision and values vary widely. Such variance perhaps reflects the broader reality that universities now combine so many different functions, their core objectives and agenda have become diffuse, unreadable and sometimes contrary (Marginson 2010; Shore 2010). The key measures of success in terms of students is equipping them with the necessary qualification for labour market access and success (Hyslop-Marginson and Sears 2006). However, Australian universities do maintain a focus on the public good. Broadly speaking, they are expected (along with the issuing of qualifications) to support free intellectual inquiry that advances knowledge and active scholarship (TEQSA 2016). At an individual institutional level, many are explicit in their commitment to the public good. Various reflecting broader policies of inclusion and equity (for example, widening participation and anti-discrimination) are the promotion of social values. The university featured in this paper, like many other universities in Australia, explicates a vision to contribute to a more respectful and socially equitable world.

Kimber and Ehrich (2015) argue that a democratic deficit has been generated in universities through a shift in how accountability is understood. Previously understood as responsibility to the public sector, accountability is now understood as responsiveness to the market or market accountability (see also Ranson 2003). Amid this shift notions such as equity and inclusion within universities' pursuit of the public good have been re-articulated. Care for the welfare of students and others is anchored in a technical rationality focused on meeting performative (academic and career excellence) targets towards enhancing reputation rather than a genuine care directed towards improving the social welfare and wellbeing of others (McLeod 2017; Young 2011). Such performative forms of caring have been subject to strong critique. A robust history of feminist scholarship has challenged the privileging of rationality, pragmatism and the public sphere in these forms of caring (Noddings 1988; Blackmore 2006; Lynch 2012). This privileging has trivialised and silenced relational conceptions and enactments of care where social connection and collective responsibility are central to creating conditions of equity and inclusion. This privileging has eschewed the importance of the affective domain in how social welfare and wellbeing are understood (Mills et al. 2017).

Meeting performative targets is also a key imperative for students. Much has been written about how performativity plays out for students within education institutions (Macfarlane 2015; Nairn and Higgins 2007; Southgate and Bennett 2014). There has been a particular focus on how the performative demands of

the audit culture reduce and commodify students to an 'ability'. The proliferation of testing mandates and achievement statistics demand a certain homogeneity in the construction of the successful student. The successful university student or 'proper aspirant' (Southgate and Bennett 2014, p. 35) 'must display an ability to rationally calculate pathways to and through higher education (and their subsequent career) for maximum benefit'. They must conduct their lives as an enterprise bound by specific rules that emphasise ambition, calculation, accountability and personal responsibility. In this enterprise, they are a commodity, entrepreneurs who invest in and work on themselves and their positional value as they would a business. They 'relate to others as competitors and [their] own being as a form of human capital' (McNay 2009, p. 63; Southgate and Bennett 2014).

For much of the current generation of students, this existence might seem natural or normal. These students are conceptualised as subjects of the market (Nairn and Higgins 2007; O'Flynn and Petersen 2007; author 2016). Having grown up during a period of intense neoliberal reform, they are a generation who are crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives. While such crafting is always curtailed to the extent that autonomy under neoliberalism is shaped to be compatible with governance (McNay 2009), these students actively make use of the resources that neoliberal discourses provide (Nairn and Higgins 2007). Indeed, they self-regulate or responsabilise themselves around these discourses.

Responsibility for the self or responsabilisation is seen by many as a mechanism of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 2002; Rose 1999; Shamir 2008). Within this mechanism, responsabilisation occurs when the subject assumes a moral agency within the processes of governance. Such agency arises from a positioning of oneself as autonomous, self-determined and self-sustaining in these processes and thus as responsible for bearing the consequences arising from one's actions within these processes (Shamir 2008; Rose 1999). Responsibilisation presupposes the freedom of the governed. It is not about crushing the capacity to act but rather about acknowledging, crafting and utilising the freedom to act (Rose 1999). Foucault describes this as a relation of power that 'is always a way of acting upon ... acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action' (Foucault 2002, p. 341). Freedom conceptualised within these discourses is shaped through technologies of responsabilisation (Rose 1999; Ball 2003). While it can be said that obedience was the master-key of top-down governance, responsibility and duty are the master keys of new governance (Shamir 2008).

Such responsibility for the self aligns with the changed relationship between students and the university generated by new managerialism—from one of education to one of market service. The current relationship of market service is one where students are customers and the university-student relationship is defined in transactional terms as a means to an end (Lynch 2015; Kimber and Ehrich 2015). The end goal for students is credential acquisition and employability. In this relationship, the student-as-consumer is necessarily concerned with the return on their investment. Encouraged to choose the most attractive education product, students have become increasingly sophisticated in their decision-making about

where they study. They must differentiate providers by cost, course, institutional reputation and selectivity in admission (Thornton 2014).

The notion of responsibilisation is contested and, in particular, is not a process that is exclusively associated with neoliberal political regimes (Rose, 1996). In this paper, the focus is on the competitive individualism encouraged by these regimes in relation to responsibilisation (Rawolle et al. 2017). Examined are the ways in which such competitive individualism is fostered by the excellence program where care is anchored in a technical rationality focused on meeting performative targets. This rationality reflects a broader subsuming of the public priorities of universities to the market. The paper challenges this focus on financial accountability towards an ‘accountability to the community in a deeper sense’ that is more reflective of social welfare, social responsibility and equity (Craig et al. 2014, p. 29).

Research context and processes

The data presented in this paper were drawn from a small-scale study focused on the aims and practices of an academic excellence program at a large Australian university. Like many other similar programs in universities across Australia and globally, this one is explicitly associated with academic excellence and prestige. It is only available to approximately 25 undergraduate students per year and is valued at up to \$80 000. Students must demonstrate a high degree of academic achievement, either by gaining a very high aggregate result in their final year of secondary school or being dux of their secondary school. Eligible students are also expected to demonstrate other forms of achievement and excellence that reflect goals of the public good—for example, in areas such as leadership, community service, volunteer activities or involvement in the arts.

The study sought to examine how the program was understood and experienced by its two coordinators and a selection of its students (of the 2017 cohort). Guiding the research was an interest in the students’ identities and aspirations in relation to their sense of self and their expectations of the program. The research was also interested in how these identities and aspirations were located within the goals of the program.

Individual semi-structured interviews with ten of the program’s students were conducted over a period of several months in early 2017 by the three members of the research team. All of the students in the 2017 group of 27 were invited to participate, ten volunteered. The interviews were structured around a series of prompt questions that sought to explore the students’ motivations for applying to the program, their thoughts about their selection, their academic backgrounds, their future aspirations and their views and experiences of the program. The ten participants were all aged between 18 and 22. Four of these participants were male and six were female, most were Anglo-Australian. Although some of the group, as with the broader cohort, might be considered economically privileged, there was social class and cultural diversity within the group. Some of the students lived at home with parents, others lived independently—most worked part time as a necessity to support themselves. Some of the students (and two of the students featured here) had relocated

(internationally and interstate) to take up their scholarship. In this paper, the voices of seven students are featured—‘Dorothy’, ‘Felicity’, ‘Nathan’, ‘Sally’, ‘Shannon’, ‘Ben’ and ‘Imogen’—as they highlight most concisely the issues that are focused on. Strictly speaking, these students are not a representative sample of the broader cohort of 27 students given they volunteered their participation and thus came to the study with an interest in the issues under investigation. Nevertheless, they do reflect the diversity of this larger cohort in their different backgrounds and to this extent might be seen as a good representation of the broader sample. Further detail of the students’ backgrounds are woven through the data presented below.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two of the program’s coordinators ‘Dianne’ and ‘Rhonda’. These interviews prompted discussion about the goals of the program and, in particular, its focus on prestige and excellence, key practices in the program that supported this focus and views about the identities and aspirations of the students. All interviews lasted in duration from between 45 min to 90 min.

The data were analysed drawing on the theoretical and conceptual literature outlined earlier. The identification and presentation of recurring themes in the data were guided by an interest in how the students and the university were navigating the performative demands of the audit culture. Framed by the theories of performativity and responsibilisation explicated in the previous section, this process led to the emergence of three analytic categories that highlight: (1) how these students responsibilise themselves around an existence of calculation; (2) how they are responsibilised by the program towards reproducing this existence of calculation; and (3) alternative conceptions of responsibility.

Living an existence of calculation: responsibilising the self

As argued earlier, students in today’s classrooms can be conceived of as ‘subjects’ of the market (Nairn and Higgins 2007). Having grown up during a period of intense neoliberal reform, they are a generation who are crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives. Within these imperatives, these students are living an existence of calculation (Ball 2003; Rose 1989). Consistent with the comments from Dorothy that open this paper, this existence, for many of the students was expressed in relation to competition around their ATAR scores:

I really just got over the 95. I got, like, a 95.6. I was quite lucky to get the scholarship I think ... say at [X university] for instance, you can get a scholarship if you get, like, a 99.99 ATAR. They are very difficult to get. My brother, he got a 99.98 or something and he didn’t get a scholarship ... the school I was at ... they tried really hard to get good academic results ... they made the whole score system seem like it was very important ... there was a lot of pressure put on the kids. I mean, it’s good. It helped me get a good mark which is great. (Felicity)

Yeah. So I [got] just under 97 ... For some unis, you have to get 99 to get a scholarship ... I was always quite like studious at school and pretty self-motivated. I never really had any strong external pressure ... it was mainly me putting pressure on myself because I knew that I could do well and I just wanted to see how well I could do. (Sally)

In these comments (and in the earlier remarks from Dorothy) we can see the existence of calculation these students are experiencing where effort, value and purpose are linked to indicators and comparisons of output (Ball 2012). This existence involves these students organising themselves in response to the measures of success that ‘count’—the ATAR score. Competition with oneself and others is requisite to this process of calculation (Petersen and O’Flynn 2007; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Scharff 2016). The ATAR score is the measure around which these students compete with themselves and their peers to enhance their reputation and gain recognition. There was thus, as reflected in these comments, much investment in and pre-occupation with this score. The students were keenly aware of the particular score necessary for them to win a particular scholarship at a particular university and the related prestige associated with this.

Also requisite to this existence of calculation, is a sense of individual responsibility for one’s performance. These students responsabilise themselves around this marker of success. For Dorothy (as the opening comments to this paper indicate), this is reflected in how she constitutes her success—as a personal endeavor of striving to be better than her high achieving friends; for Sally, it is about being ‘self-motivated’ and ‘putting pressure on [her]self’ to do as well as she can. Such ways of thinking point to the moral parameters of performativity that subvert and re-orient us to its ends through animating rather than constraining us (Davies and Petersen 2005). As we can see from the students’ comments, they freely accept this calculated/calculating existence (see also O’Flynn and Petersen 2007). The significance of investing in this existence as a mechanism to open up opportunities was further illustrated by Nathan:

ATAR ... is kind of a big number ... you only have one chance ... to make a number that probably heavily influences what you are going to do for the rest of your life and I had one chance to get that number and I wanted to give myself as many options as I could down the track so I was just setting myself up for the future. I don’t get the point in, even if the pathway you are going on doesn’t require a high ATAR ... why would you not try and get as high as you possibly can go and leave your options open? (Nathan)

Like the earlier remarks presented in this section, these comments reflect Nathan’s existence of calculation and responsabilisation around the ATAR score. What is also evident here (and to some extent in the earlier comments from Dorothy, Sally and Felicity), is the construction of success as possible through working hard and harnessing individual abilities and talents (see Nairn and Higgins 2007; McLeod 2000). Gaining positional advantage through hard work is, of course, a central platform of neoliberal discourse and strongly resonates with how Nathan construes what it takes for success. Like the ideal neoliberal subject, he positions himself as freely choosing

and solely responsible for this success. What is problematic here is that in this view both success and failure are individualised—the individual only has themselves to blame if something goes wrong (see Scharff 2016). As has been well argued (Nairn and Higgins 2007; Walkerdine et al. 2001; McLeod 2000), this view obscures the structural and institutional conditions and processes that impact on ‘success’ and ‘failure’ (especially in relation to gender, race and class privilege).

There was also a sense of entrepreneurialism in the students’ remarks. This was evident in the tendency of students to relate to themselves like a business. Here, investing in the self was seen to accrue positional advantage in relation to future employment. This was particularly apparent in how the students spoke of their employment aspirations in calculated ways. In all of the students’ talk, there was a recognition of and strategising towards achieving their desired employment goals. The students were acutely aware of the education steps and milestones that they needed to reach in order to achieve these goals (Dorothy, for example, noted that an Honours year and a PhD were necessary for her to be ‘more employable’ at a ‘higher level’). Selecting employment goals tended to be a very carefully considered process—a process of calculation and commodifying that involved weighing up individual and personal interests and capabilities with various career options and requirements (Nairn and Higgins 2007). Shannon, for example, described her choice of optometry as a ‘good balance’ of her interests and aversions. This choice involved a complex process of ruling out professions she knew she was not cut out for like medicine, occupational therapy, and disability care. Such weighing up entailed much critical reflection in recognising personal shortcomings and developing skills that could add ‘value’ and lead to self enhancement (O’Flynn and Petersen 2007; Davies and Bansel 2007).

The comments in this section highlight the sense of calculation that these students take up in organising and responsibilising themselves around the measures of academic and employment success that count. These performative sensibilities are not a new phenomenon. However, as ‘subjects’ of the market, such sensibilities are more likely to be seen by students as common sense, as something logical and desirable (Ball and Olmedo 2013). These students have been immersed in discourses of competition and enterprise throughout their schooling. They are also, as the next section outlines, immersed in these discourses via their participation in the excellence program.

Re-producing an existence of calculation: responsibilising students

The neoliberal university actively creates ‘subjects’ of the market whose identities are crafted around neoliberal imperatives (Ball 2003; Rose 1989). The existence of calculation experienced by the students where their effort, value and purpose are measured against particular indicators of success was expected in, and fostered by, the excellence program. The students related to themselves as businesses where investing in the self will accrue advantages especially in relation to employment. Equally, the program invested in the students so that they would accrue recognition to the university in relation to employability. Business imperatives imbued

descriptions of the program. Rhonda, for example, was recruited (as coordinator) specifically to bring a ‘corporate perspective’ to its aims and management. She articulated its central aim as supporting the students to ‘understand employability’; Dianne referred to the program as leading students to be ‘more marketable as graduates’. The students similarly described the program as ‘preparing’ [them] for the workplace and that process of trying to get jobs after our degrees’ (Felicity); helping them to ‘look more attractive to an employer’ (Nathan); about ‘making yourself marketable’ (Sally) and working towards ‘being as employable as possible’ (Ben). There was also recognition from the students about the benefits that would accrue to the university from its investment in the program. Ben noted, for example, that the students’ achievements would ‘improve [the university’s] graduate employability stats... so that [the university] looks good’. Business imperatives were further evident in how Dianne described the university’s economic investment in the program and the expected returns on this investment in terms of specific outputs:

...the university is invest[ing] a massive amount of money in this. So why are we doing that? ... clearly, the university is investing in them; they should be future leaders, ambassadors for the university and it is our business to make sure that the money is well-spent...

From my point of view, three years down the track, unless we can demonstrate that the program has had a measurable impact, we shouldn’t be running the program.

So we want to make sure that the graduate outcomes that they get are actually exceptional; because if they get [what] everybody else’s [gets], then what’s the big deal, you know? ...we want them to aim higher and then we want them to basically achieve that.

In these comments, the program and its students are construed within a discourse of calculation. They are auditable and audited commodities. Their success or impact is measured and quantified through ‘exceptional’ graduate outcomes and aspirations towards creating for the university impressive ‘future leaders’ and ‘ambassadors’. This is an existence of calculation that, as with the students, enables the university to craft an identity as outstanding (Ball 2003). Business imperatives are reflected in Dianne’s view that a particular economic input will lead to a commensurable level of return or output. This return indicates the level of effectiveness of the program—it is a measure which holds the program to account. Should it not be reached then the program (as Dianne notes) will be deemed ineffective and will cease to run (Leys 2003; Ball 2003). Dianne comments on the ‘massive amount of money’ invested in the program towards ensuring its success. A major focus here is supporting students to maintain a high grade-point average (of Distinction, i.e. over 70%)—given that they could lose their scholarship should this average slip.

There were many mechanisms in place for monitoring and tracking the progress of the students and ensuring that they continue to achieve academically. As Dianne commented, this sometimes meant ‘pushing’ students when they were ‘not pulling their weight’. These were mechanisms of surveillance and accountability that aligned with the students’ calculable existence to maximise achievement. This was very ‘individualised support’ that, in Dianne’s words aimed to help the students

‘achieve everything that they possibly can’. There were, for example, ‘intensive’ ‘coaching sessions’ three times per year with Dianne where students reflected on their studies and progress or lack thereof in relation to their goals and career aspirations. Organisation, planning and time management were central skills focused on in these sessions towards maintaining the requisite high grade point average to keep them in the program. All students were also appointed a personal mentor who regularly and frequently met with them to keep them on track in this regard. Dianne acknowledged that some students did ‘struggle’ and required extra support such as counselling so they didn’t ‘fail’ and/or ‘fall in a heap’.

This section brings to light the mechanisms within the excellence program that reproduced the students’ existence of calculation. This existence was fostered by the expectations, strategies and monitoring within the excellence program designed to attain particular academic and employment targets. To be sure, the program’s monitoring reflected care for the students in supporting them to strive to achieve new and better targets and undertake appropriate and value-enhancing steps to be more productive and employable. However, this care is anchored in a technical rationality and thus is necessarily narrow in its focus.

Responsibilisation beyond neoliberal imperatives

Neoliberal responsibilisation is a useful concept for understanding the ways in which the audit culture as it is embedded in institutions like universities is working to regulate students’ lives to reflect an existence of calculation and performativity. As illustrated in the previous sections, this neoliberal framing of responsibilisation predominated in how the students spoke of their education and life experiences and how the coordinators of the excellence program understood its aims and supported its students. The negative impacts arising from this form of responsibilisation are well recognised. In particular, it is seen as eroding social bonds and conceptions of the public good. As McNay (2009, p. 65) argues: ‘the organization of society around a multiplicity of individual enterprises profoundly depoliticizes social and political relations by fragmenting collective values of care, duty and obligation, and displacing them back on to the managed autonomy of the individual’. Under these conditions, opportunities for political agency towards social welfare and equity are closed down (McNay 2009; Scharff 2016). Political agency in this space requires active critique of and resistance to neoliberal imperatives so that their conditions of existence can be refused and alternative discourses and values promoted (Davies 2005; Ball and Olmedo 2013).

Such resistance was evident in the students’ aspirations and in their critique of the excellence program. All expressed a strong sense of social consciousness and care in relation to their desires to make a positive difference to the world. This theme of care for the welfare of others was consistent and strongly articulated across the group. Dorothy, for example, who grew up in a family of environmental activists and described herself as ‘green’, expressed a strong commitment to pursuing a career in ‘conservation genetics’ to ‘make a difference’ in terms of ‘prevent[ing] extinctions’, preserv[ing] plant and animal life and ‘help[ing to]

prevent global warming’ and the ‘damages that people have done’. Sally, a vegan, expressed an interest in working in the ‘fair trade’ industry.

Felicity’s desire to make a difference was apparent in her plans to become a medical doctor and work for Doctors Without Borders and ‘make a contribution to disease control’ while Nathan wanted to do volunteer work in Vietnam. For Nathan his motivation for this work stemmed from his family influence and a questioning of his privilege:

Dad is from Vietnam and he grew up through the Vietnam War and I guess I hear stories [about] what he went through ... I am sitting here being very privileged ... it is really eye-opening the discrepancy between how people live through this world literally [in] one country above us; like, Papua New Guinea and East Timor.

For Felicity, who grew up in Russia, her experiences in Moscow working as a volunteer to improve the health care of ‘children with disabilities’ had incited her desire to work in the field of ‘public health policy’. And for Imogen, her desire to make a difference in the world was catalysed through her studying of effective altruism in secondary school. She was considering ‘going into research’ to examine how empathy can be increased towards ‘driving people to help others’.

What is evident in these comments is a sense of responsibility around a commitment to the welfare of others and the environment (Trnka and Trundle 2014). Unlike the constructions of responsibility in the earlier sections of this paper around the self, responsibility here is a productive and affirming orientation directed towards others (McLeod 2017). Such constructions deviate markedly from performative forms of care in their focus on relationality, social connection and collective responsibility to change unjust processes and outcomes (Lynch 2012; Young 2011). These alternative forms of responsibility and care are evident in Dorothy’s commitment to conservation activism, Sally’s commitment to Fair Trade, Felicity’s desire to work for Doctors Without Borders and the significance Nathan places on disrupting his privilege in his volunteer work. This connection and collectivity reflect an obligation to join with others who share in a responsibility to transform the structural processes of inequity (see also Young 2011).

Despite the goals of the excellence program to foster students’ contribution to community and society, there was little mention of these values of care, duty and obligation in relation to the program. These stories of social consciousness and care were endeavours not associated with the program. For Nathan this played out in the program’s primary focus on ‘self-development and helping out yourself’ as motivated by enhancing ‘marketability and employment’ and ‘mak[ing] yourself better’ rather than genuinely helping others as he explained:

...they say, “Hey, volunteering is something that is really worthwhile and helps you be employable and marketable”, for me the motivation for them is coming from, “Hey, doing volunteering makes you look better”. You are not volunteering for the sake of helping those people. You are volunteering for the sake of employing yourself.

Imogen similarly described the program as focusing on ‘creating people who will do great things in the world and not great things for the world’. For Imogen the program did not encourage a questioning of what they ‘should’ be aiming for, ‘why [they] wanted to succeed’ and ‘what [they] wanted to do with their success’, as she explained: ‘I suppose it’s kind of—like, there’s a goal there and the goal is to become successful. And they do talk about “do something for the world”, but it’s never really elaborated on or really discussed’. By way of explanation, Imogen told us about a workshop on ‘effective altruism’ that she wanted to run for the students as part of the program. Given the students’ interest in volunteering, she thought that this workshop would be useful in exploring: ‘...concepts like, Why should you give? What are the benefits of giving? [how can we] ‘earn to give’[?]’. Despite enthusiasm from the other students about this workshop, it was not supported by the program. Imogen was told that, effective altruism was not ‘related enough to developing professional skills or developing professional goals’.

These comments from Imogen and Nathan reflect a critique of the neoliberal forms of responsabilisation embedded in the excellence program. For these students care within the program is framed by and reduced to individualised performative outputs (as in Nathan’s volunteering example) and thus (as in Imogen’s example) care is depoliticised. When care is an individual rather than collective enterprise focused on self-interest, marketability and employment there is a profound de-politicising of social and political relations (McNay 2009; Lynch 2012). In Imogen’s view, this de-politicising reflected a missed opportunity for political agency towards the care of others:

...if you are thinking about effective altruism, this is the prime group of people that you should target; because these are people who are going to have a big impact on the world [they] are super-intelligent [and] motivated and they want to [do] well – and I think if you influence their mindset ... and provide them with that motivation to go and do something for other people, then they are going to have a huge impact.

For the other students, their concern with these neoliberal forms of care was less explicit but still marked. This was evident, as noted earlier, in the distinct separateness they expressed around, on the one hand, their sense of responsibility and desire to care for others and, on the other hand, the act of responsabilising themselves within the expectations and priorities of the excellence program. While less explicit, such separateness can be seen as reflecting a contestation of care as defined within neoliberal frames. There was thus a recognition from all of the students that the performative forms of caring privileged in the excellence program sidelined or did not encompass their ideas and enactments of care as relational, connected and collective (Noddings 1988; Blackmore 2006; Lynch 2012).

Conclusion

As noted in the beginning of this paper, there has been much concern expressed about the regimes of performativity shaping the education and lifeworlds of students. Such concern relates to the adverse effects of reducing and commodifying

students to an academic score or employment value. Successful or ‘proper’ university aspirants, as reflected in the stories presented in this paper, must navigate this reductionism and commodifying in their journey through higher education to their subsequent careers. They must conduct their lives as an individual enterprise bound by specific rules that emphasise ambition, competition, calculation, accountability and personal responsibility.

The theoretical concepts of performativity and responsabilisation helped to make sense of the students’ pre-occupation with, and strategising around, academic and employment targets and outputs as a self-determined and autonomous endeavor. These concepts also helped to make sense of the processes within the excellence program that reproduced this existence. Just as the students actively organised and responsabilised themselves around the measures of academic and employment outputs that ‘count’, the program actively fostered and reproduced these sensibilities through its high expectations and close monitoring of students.

There is little doubt that the performative demands of the audit culture produce a responsibility for the self that is individualised, competitive and output-oriented. This is a responsibility driven by the autonomous individual making certain choices about how to act rather than a responsibility motivated by a commitment to the welfare and care of others. Responsibilisation around performative demands is strongly reflective of what today’s students are expected to value and how they are expected to approach their education and broader lives. Such responsabilisation is cultivated and reproduced in institutions such as schools and universities where the business imperatives of new managerialism have commodified education services and produced the student consumer-entrepreneur. Attempting to gain a market edge through merit or excellence programs designed to attract the ‘best’ students so that universities look good exemplifies this commodification and production. Also exemplifying this commodification and production is the savvy student who is discerning about which university will accrue to them the most positional advantage in terms of their future employment. These conditions reproduce inequities in their exclusivity and reinscription of privilege. At an institutional level, they are at odds with a commitment to the public good that many Australian universities espouse in their promotion of equity and inclusion. At an individual student level, they are at odds with cultivating social bonds that prioritise the care and welfare of others.

The current ‘democratic deficit’ in universities has, as many have argued (Kimber and Ehrich 2015), been generated by shifts in how accountability is understood. Previously accountability was understood to be a public sector responsibility. It is currently enacted as responsiveness to the market. These shifts have re-articulated the idea of what constitutes the public good and what might count in terms of equity and inclusion. In the excellence program featured in this paper, care for the welfare of students and others was anchored in a technical rationality focused on meeting performative (academic and career excellence) targets. The students’ desire and action to make a difference ‘for the world’ in this respect either existed outside of the program or it was re-directed to meet the performative priorities of the program. Students were encouraged to care for and contribute to the community and society. Indeed, a key aim of the program was to develop ‘all-rounded successful people’ who ‘make a difference’, as Dianne and Rhonda put it. However, such care was

framed and reduced to individual performative outputs. This framing around self-interest, marketability and employment is compromising of social bonds and conceptions of the public good—as recognised by Nathan and Imogen. These students expressed concern about the ways in which care was re-articulated in the program around performative goals. For the other students, such concern with, and contestation of, neoliberal forms of care was less explicit. However, it was evident in the separateness they expressed between their sense of responsibility and desire to care for others and their sense of responsibility within the expectations and priorities of the excellence program.

The sensibilities and articulations of performativity, responsibility and care examined in this paper are not new phenomena. However, they do warrant ongoing attention given their location within the shifting, diffuse and sometimes contrary vision and values of universities and within particular ‘excellence’ programs that seek to epitomise and carry out this vision and values. If universities are to realise their public goals of equity and inclusion, attention to stories of critique and resistance to the performative imperatives that sideline these goals is crucial. What these stories highlight is the imperative of change at the institutional level to support a greater focus on collaboration and networking rather than competition and ranking as ongoing critiques of new managerialism continue to tell us (Thornton 2014). They also highlight the imperative of appreciating and mobilising the social consciousness and concerns for the welfare of others expressed by students as a ‘prime group of people ... who are going to have a big impact on the world’.

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