

Serial number 0213

Title Degrees of Class: Interrogating linear and non-linear transitions from higher education into the labour market

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In Australia, the biggest employment growth has been in occupations requiring a bachelor degree and economic modelling expects this trend to continue (AWPA 2012; OECD 2015). Australian policy makers identify widening participation as key to economic productivity to meet labour market demand over the next decade. Yet there is a gap in understanding of what happens to university students from historically under-represented backgrounds when they transition as graduates into an insecure labour market. More broadly, access to higher education has come to be considered as a key means of upward social mobility across a range of international contexts. University degrees are seen to straightforwardly produce the cultural and social capital for students to realise graduate outcomes and economic return on their personal investment in university study. In this sense, it is assumed that through taking part in university study, students transition to the graduate labour market regardless of their social location, degree focus or the different and unequal resources, networks and opportunities available. There is very little acknowledgement of the ways in which students are compelled into risk-minimising 'choices' and yet are *unequally located* in navigating their aspirational journeys in precarious and volatile labour markets (Harrison 2017). Instead, discourses of social mobility tend to be produced through powerful organisations of higher education and government in which widening participation is increasingly seen as an individual project of self-improvement, and mainly economic terms.

This paper will explore how social inequalities shape and constrain students' transitional processes from university to different and segmented labour markets, drawing on research in the Australian context. It explores whether universities facilitate equality, or whether they instead produce new degrees of class and inequality that are shaped by intersecting and unequal social positions and locations (Crenshaw, 1991). Our conceptual approach will be informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and refined through theories of intersectionality and difference. We aim to understand how social and cultural differences (e.g. socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity) and inequalities (e.g. of access to and participation in HE and paid work) 'are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society' (Collins 2000: 42). Intersectionality enables us to see that social identities, power and inequalities cannot be separated into homogenous categories. It avoids falling into over-simplifying the problem of equity through 'inadequate additive models' and sheds light on how difference is systematically organized and discursively produced through social relations in our political and economic structures, policies and practices (Mirza 2014/2015). This lens helps to uncover how socioeconomic status is bound together with social and cultural differences in the educational and work structures that young people navigate on their non-linear transitional journeys.

The paper presents our analysis of 50 interviews with current students and recent graduates of law, business, engineering, social science and nursing students at an Australian university. It also draws on our analysis of extant data generated institutionally to capture

graduate outcomes. We interrogate the data to understand transitional processes relating to socio-economic status and other intersecting differences. We consider how the social location of students facilitates or hinders their development of strategies during their university study, and whether this enables students to access and mobilise (un/available) resources through transitional processes. It is argued that social background often produces a durability of disposition that is not easily dismantled or modified in and through university contexts. As well as this, intersecting inequalities are persistent in shaping the ways that transitions are facilitated, experienced and enabled through and beyond higher education participation.

The data illuminate that students who maintain networks and resources that suit precarious global labour markets prior to study already have the means to take advantage of opportunities, including choice of degree and their prospects. It is argued that background and trajectory may serve to position students within their degree in reinforcing or damaging ways. Indeed, while some students utilise self-entrepreneurialism, drive and ambition as rewarding ways of being, other students are critical of their own abilities, the degree that they 'chose', their reasons to study and the likelihood of gaining meaningful work, or even a means of articulating a strategy for this. Further, although students identify finding a suitable and/meaningful occupation after university as a central concern, some also point out the importance of interrogating the meaning of university study beyond this. Our data show that one of the challenges that students face is in finding meaning in building the appropriate 'attitude' for employment. Some students maintain value in self-development for its own worth, and for the development of the tools needed for critical appraisal of the world in which they live.

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