Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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De-valuing 'alternative extra-curricular activities': the symbolic reproduction of extra-curricular activities as status distinctions

Julia Clarke[1], Andrew Harvey[2]

[1]Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom [2]La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract: With growing competition, employers are increasingly differentiating applicants not only by their formal qualifications, but by their extra-curricular credentials and activities. Access to the activities valued by employers varies widely though, reflecting and reinforcing inequalities across different groups of students. This paper presents the outcomes from the first national survey of Australian universities' careers service staff on the theme of equity in extra-curricular activities. Careers staff consistently highlighted the under-representation of equity group students in volunteering activities, work experience, and outbound mobility placements. In addition to time and money, many equity group students were perceived to be under-represented in extra-curricular activities because of their (misplaced) perception that such activities are marginal to employability. We draw on Bourdieu's conception of the 'cultural arbitrary' and Yosso's conception of community cultural wealth to highlight the need for more inclusive university practices which recognise alternative extra-curricular activities within employability strategies.

Paper: Extra-curricular activities (ECAs) can be broadly described as 'activities and events that students engaged in, which are not part of their formal degree classification' (Thompson, Clark, Walker, & Whyatt, 2013, p. 136). Commonly recognised extra-curricular activities include volunteering, overseas experience, and participation in student clubs and societies (Kinash et al., 2015; Perna, 2013). Participation in ECAs has been linked with improved graduate outcomes (Richardson, Bennett & Roberts, 2016), including through social connections made that can help graduates find jobs and progress in their careers (Stuart et al., 2011). Employers may use ECA to gauge skills and cultural fit (Rivera 2012), and to differentiate between candidates with equivalent qualifications and academic results (Stuart et al., 2011).

The tendency of ECAs to exacerbate inequity by reflecting broader socio-economic stratification highlights a 'cultural arbitrary' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), whereby values attributed to different

forms of cultural capital are arbitrary in the sense that they are determined by their relations to power structures rather than by intrinsic worth. In a "crowded" labour market (Tomlinson, 2012, p.408) those qualities and experiences which are deemed to make graduates employable are largely determined by socio-economic positioning (Allen, Quinn et al. 2013), reproducing inequalities by reinforcing an ideal that reflects middle class characteristics (Morley, 2007).

Marginalised groups may not attribute the same value to those activities privileged by dominant groups. Instead they may preference alternative capitals such as resistant, familial, and linguistic capital, or the 'intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style' (Yosso, 2005, p.78).

In Australia, for example, Indigenous students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) do not necessarily identify with the concept of volunteering in the same way as their peers. Many of these students spend time assisting their families and communities in ways that are neither measured nor rewarded by universities, including caring and kinship responsibilities (Walsh & Black, 2015). These same family and community commitments for economically marginalised people can be a source of development of persistence, resourcefulness, motivation toward achievement in the form of viewing themselves as fulfilling family potential unrealised due financial constraints (Mallman 2017a,). New migrants also have numerous home and community involvements that, though not recognised as ECAs, provide a source of support, identification, and inspiration (Harvey et al. 2018). What could be viewed by employers as the source of rich development of skills and personal attributes are not viewed as having legitimate exchange value.

Managers of careers services (or equivalent) from each of the 37 Australian public universities were invited to participate in a survey administered via Qualtrics. A total of 29 out of the 37 invited managers responded to the survey, representing a 78 per cent response rate. Survey responses were obtained from universities with campuses across all states and territories of Australia. Survey responses covered a range of university types (see Table 1).

Table 1: Managers of careers services: survey responses by university type

University group	**Responded**	**Did not respond**	*Total*
Non-aligned universities	9	3	*12*
Group of Eight (Go8)	6	2	*8*
Innovative Research Universities (IRU)	5	1	*6*
Regional Universities Network (RUN)	5	1	*6*
Australian Technology Network (ATN)	4	1	*5*
Total	*29*	*8*	*37*

Respondents were asked their perspectives on the extent to which equity group students were participating in traditional careers services, such as CV assistance, interview preparation, and employer forums; and in traditional extra-curricular activities, such as formal volunteering, work-integrated learning, and outbound mobility. We concentrated on the six identified equity groups in Australia higher education, namely students from low socio-economic, non-English speaking, and regional backgrounds, Indigenous students, those with a disability, and women in non-traditional areas (Engineering and IT).

Our survey revealed broad concern about under-representation in ECAs across all equity groups, but respondents were also frustrated by paucity of equity data that was either collected and/or made accessible to them.

We explore perceived reasons for under-representation, which included constraints of time and money, but also attitudinal and cultural issues. Some students were believed to be over-privileging academic achievement above participation in ECAs, potentially to their detriment. Others, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, were perceived to be concerned about their level of English proficiency and the extent to which they would be welcomed in ECAs. Students with a disability were seen to be concerned about physical access and psychological support for work integrated learning and other activities, while regional students were typically seen to be under-represented because of constraints of distance.

Careers managers were asked about their knowledge of university strategies to address under-representation within traditional ECAs, and many pointed to the existence of bursaries and scholarships to support low SES and other equity groups. However, strategies appeared to be limited in scope and scale.

In our explanation of ECAs and structural inequity, we further explore how under-represented students are often excluded from participation in the activities of highest perceived value. Compounding this lack of access to traditional ECAs is an under-acknowledgement of the alternative extra-curricular activities undertaken by many equity group students, such as paid work roles, caring for family, and involvement with community. Together, these processes serve to reify a system of structural inequity and to value some forms of cultural capital above others.

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Universities need to focus on mainstreaming existing ECAs within the curriculum where possible in order to minimise inequity, and on developing targeted strategies for particular groups with discrete needs. Specifically, we posit the need for universities to value and formally recognise alternative extra-curricular activities. Many equity group students are active in caring, family and community roles, and these roles could be recognised formally within university extra-curricular frameworks. A recalibration of ECA recognition would redress the ‘cultural arbitrary’ that currently exacerbates

student inequity, and would value the forms of capital that diverse students bring to the university.

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