

# **Precarious education and the university**

## **Navigating the silenced borders of participation**

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**Abstract:** Access to and participation in university education is a key equity issue, with increased efforts to widen the participation of secondary school-aged students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds in many countries worldwide. In Australia, programmes aimed at widening university participation generally target LSES children and young people engaged in schooling. Access to such programmes thus demands a connection to schooling, yet not all school-age young people have such connections: they may experience what we term 'precarious' relationships to education. Without school connections, young people with precarious relationships to education have extremely

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limited opportunities to engage (or to imagine engaging) in higher education. This paper considers this issue from the perspectives of young people who have precarious relationships with school education. Drawing on qualitative research investigating disadvantage and university education, the paper reports on how the imagination of university education, which might be argued to be a 'silenced' border of social inclusion, is described by young people with precarious relationships to education. Drawing on Judith Butler's book *Precarious Life* (2004), the paper puts forward the argument that the precariousness of education is relational and that universities thus have a moral responsibility to recognize and respond to the educational precariousness of the Other.

**Keywords:** Access and participation, university, social inclusion

## Introduction

Interviewer: Would you consider going to university?

Mazzy and Clare: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes? You would Clare?

Clare: If I was smart enough for it, yes.

Mazzy: You are smart enough for it.

Clare: No.

Interviewer: Both of you – why would you consider going to university?

Mazzy: Just because university will give you more opportunities in life and to get a better job and I want that.

Interviewer: Okay. Clare, why would you consider going to university?

Clare: It gives you a better life I'm pretty sure.

Mazzy: Yes.

Interviewer: It might give you a better job and maybe a better life, yes.

Mazzy: If we stay here, all they're going to give you is retail – retail work – and that's not even worth it.

(Capital City – Outer Metro, Imagining University Education  
(IUE<sup>1</sup> project interviews, 2013)

Mazzy and Clare state a point that underpins the rationale for improving access to university: the possibility that it can lead to 'a better life'. Both had left schooling well before they could obtain any important education credentials, both lived in

disadvantaged communities and both had experienced problems at school and at home. Mazzy, for instance, described her extremely brief time at secondary school:

When I went to Parkview High, no, I didn't attend very much and then I got kicked out in Year 7; half way through year seven they kicked me out and they expelled me. Then when I came here [to the youth education service] my attendance was not really good and it's still not really good.

(Mazzy, Capital City – Outer Metro, IUE, 2013)

Unlike Mazzy, Clare remained at school for year seven, the first year of secondary school, but things changed shortly after:

I finished primary school in Jones Public. I went to school in Year 7, to Chapel Street – and then I stopped going in 8 and 9 because I had problems at home. Then I ended up going to Chapel Hospital and getting a mental health check or something because I tried to kill my sister's boyfriend. He didn't appreciate it at all and yes, [I] came to this [youth education service].

(Clare, Capital City – Outer Metro, IUE, 2013)

Both young women have backgrounds of inter-generational disadvantage. Clare, for example, explained, 'My mum dropped out, my sister got expelled from Chapel Street twice and still went back the third time; never finished. My Nan and Pop I have no idea' (Clare, Capital City – Outer Metro, IUE, 2013).

Fortunately, both had been able to connect with a youth education environment which, despite their sporadic attendance, provided a valued connection to education. Yet even with this important connection, both young women remained caught at the silenced borders of social inclusion. Quite simply theirs are experiences of educational exclusion in the 'dead zone' of the agenda for widening university participation. Here, imagining university participation is not only far-fetched, it is a topic of abjection. For example, at one of our research sites, a youth professional stated 'we can't talk to them about university. We don't want to give them false hopes' (Education Access Service, field notes). Statements such as this have some justification, since they invoke an ethical rationale of care for the young people; accordingly it is right to consider young people such as Clare and Mazzy unsuited to a discussion about university.

Our intent in this paper is to pick up on what we see as a 'skewed ethics', and to engage with the debate about widening university participation – but to do so with a focus on the perspectives of young people at the silenced borders of university participation. Drawing ideas from Judith Butler's work, *Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence* (2004), our aim is to mount the argument

that universities need to find ways to listen to and accommodate the Others of higher education who occupy the most silent of its borderlands.<sup>2</sup>

We begin by discussing precarious education and the moral dilemma it presents to the university (and, by extension, to those connected to youth and education). This leads us to describe the research informing this paper, including research with young people experiencing educational disadvantage in Australia and in the United States, and research conducted with university students who mentor Indigenous young people in an initiative to connect them with education and university. We then discuss the precariousness of imagining university participation, and this leads us to consider the importance of identifying as 'we' with the university. We also explore how connection needs to occur at varying points throughout the experience of education if participation in university education is to be established or maintained. We conclude by making the case that the university has the responsibility to recognize and respond to the precarious education of its Other.

### **Precarious education and the university: a moral dilemma**

The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails.

(Butler, 2004: 130)

A key starting point in this paper is the proposition that the moral authority of the university to educate is called into question when it fails to address the precarious Other. Following this line of reasoning, there is a relationship between the university and the Other, with precariousness an experience shared by both. For the Other there is the precariousness of relationships to education and accompanying relationships to the social and cultural world. This precariousness can be summed up as the loss of 'a better life' (Clare, IUE Interview, 2013). On the side of the university, there is a consequent precariousness in its role as a notable and respected educator in our societies.

It is certainly the case that the question of 'addressing the Other' has been recently explored through efforts to widen university participation for students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds. This group is widely acknowledged to be poorly represented in higher education, with participation rates an ongoing concern for higher education providers (Lehmann, 2009). Reforms in Australia, for instance, have sought to increase LSES participation in university,

and include programmes designed to encourage pre-university-aged students from non-traditional backgrounds to engage in university education (Gale *et al.*, 2010).

Targeting school attenders, such participation initiatives obviously miss young people who are not engaged in education. Yet the cohort of LSES young people disengaged from schooling comprises categories of students that are among the least represented at university. In Australia this includes Indigenous students, who have higher rates of school disengagement than non-Indigenous students (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). While no data is available that reports specifically on university enrolments among students who have experienced significant school engagement problems, this population is thought to be barely represented in Australian universities. Disengagement from school consists of a lack of engagement with the daily activities of schooling: it can be indicated by low levels of school attendance (and, at its most extreme, by complete withdrawal from education), or it can include irregular attendance at the school or at particular classes. School disengagement can have lifelong consequences for employment, health and welfare (National Youth Commission, 2008). Affected young people have difficulty reconnecting to secondary education (National Youth Commission, 2008; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998) and subsequently face considerable barriers to university participation.

As a consequence, young people from disadvantaged communities who have precarious relationships to education are not only affected by educational exclusion and structural factors of disadvantage, they are also not addressed by the university and the university community more broadly. Given that education is recognized as a cornerstone for social inclusion (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011; Marmot, 2004; Sen, 2000), barriers to university participation represent a substantial obstacle to social inclusion. We maintain that recognition of structural factors alone is not sufficient; a successful response to this problem needs to reflect the importance of addressing the Other. One starting point is to consider how the university might engage young people who have been failed by education. Another is to listen to how such young people imagine the university.

### **Research with the university's 'Other'**

This paper draws on findings from our team's work on four related projects researching educational disadvantage. Research has involved work with young people experiencing precarious education and with university students who mentor young people with precarious relationships to education. The first component of this project, *Imagining University Education (IUE)*,<sup>3</sup> focused on perspectives of

university among young people who live in communities in comparable LSES regions of Australia (in Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales (NSW), South Australia and Queensland),<sup>4</sup> all with low rates of university participation. 250 young people have been interviewed in this national project. Participants were recruited through youth-sector and related agencies, with youth professionals often joining interviews.

The second component of our work involved research focused on former refugee youths. In-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to investigate how former refugee youths living in Australia negotiated their cultural identities in relation to education. Data was collected from 12 young people (7 females and 5 males, aged 16–25). Participants described themselves as originating from Karenni and Chin states in Burma, from Myanmar, Burundi, Southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Togo.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, to better understand precarious relationships with education, our team conducted research with education programmes that work with cohorts of disadvantaged young people who have precarious relationships to education.<sup>6</sup> Two United States charter schools were included in our project, as these schools had been designed to re-engage children and youth displaced from traditional schooling. This research involved interviews and observations with students and teachers in two schools in a large US city during a period in 2011. Young people who had experienced significant levels of disadvantage and educational disengagement were interviewed about their perceptions of education.

Finally, we conducted research with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) programme at one Australian university site, to investigate the experiences of university student mentors who had worked with Indigenous Australian young people.<sup>7</sup> Although we did not work directly with the young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants who came to AIME, we conducted in-depth research with the university mentors that included interviews with Indigenous university students. Narratives of the university mentors involved in the programme were collected through digital storytelling, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis of AIME resources.

## **The precariousness of imagining university**

Outcomes from the Imagining University Education study revealed a distinctive difference between how young people with precarious relationships to education imagine university and how they imagine themselves having a university education. Put simply, while the young people could readily imagine a university, imagining

having a university education was extremely problematic. A minority of young people (no more than 20 of the 250 that we interviewed) could describe imagining having a university education.

By contrast, almost all of the young people were able to describe how they imagined university. When asked to imagine a university, the young people's responses were dominated by depictions that referred to the size of buildings. For example:

A big building with lots of nerds;

Just a lot of staircases, grass, a lot of scooters parked out the front;

A big long building with lots of people in it;

Big. Just big and stuff;

(Various young respondents, outer city suburbs, IUE, 2012)

These 'big' depictions can be appreciated when the context of the young people's communities is understood. For instance Lisa, aged 14, imagined university as 'A two-storey building with lots of classrooms and different subjects and ... a big oval. It's huge ...' (Lisa, outer city suburbs, 2012). When asked to reflect on who might go to university, Lisa replied '[people from] two storey houses with lots of bathrooms' (Lisa, outer city suburbs, 2012). Lisa lived not far from a new university<sup>8</sup> and had seen the houses nearby. Her reasons for these answers become clearer when the context of this nearby university and its surrounding houses are placed into context of the young people's communities. Images 1 and 2 show the buildings in the university that Lisa described.



Some of the young people interviewed described the university and its surrounds as 'so posh' (Stella) and, as Craig elaborated: 'Now it's all posh, yes but it used to be swamp land' (outer city suburbs, 2012).



The new houses shown in Images 3 and 4 stand in close proximity to the university and differ markedly from the housing in the older areas. These houses, where the young people lived, were built in the 1960s in large-scale public housing developments.



Images 5 and 6 show housing in one of the suburbs in this area that are considered among the most disadvantaged in Australia (Vinson, 2007). The difference between Images 1–4 and Images 5–6 is stark, revealing what it might mean for Lisa to imagine a university as ‘big’, and the people who go there as coming from ‘two storey houses with lots of bathrooms’ (Lisa, outer city suburbs, 2012).

When asked if they could imagine going into the place (the university) they had imagined, the responses were typically negative. For example Chris, aged 13, replied ‘No I would never’ (Chris, outer city suburbs, 2012). John was also very clear that he couldn’t see himself walking around the buildings: ‘No. I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem like me to go to one of them ... Smart people [go there]’ (John, outer city suburbs, 2012).

Such sentiments of dislocation from the university site were repeated by many young people. One young man even described how he would skateboard along the kerb outside of a university regularly but would never enter the gates. He explained:

... it's just kind of, it's just this place that you don't go when you're a kid, it's like the university you just stay away from it for some reason. I don't even know how to explain it, it's just ... It's just this weird phenomenon that just happens. No kids my age kind of go near the university.

(Jye, inner city, 2012)

For Jye, university was certainly a place he could imagine. But it was not a place where he could imagine getting an education, nor even a place he could enter. Jye rode his skateboard all over the city; through malls, 'over' civic landmarks, on the concrete surfaces of drains. It is poignant that while he was prepared to enter into and go onto any number of civic structures, he would not ever ride his skateboard into the university.

### **Dreaming precariously: the complexity of university education for young former refugees**

Our research with former refugees suggests a further complexity of imagination: the precariousness of dreaming of a future. These interviews provided insight into the important distinction between dreams of educational futures and imagining university participation. Compared with the young people interviewed for the Imagining University Education (IUE) study, the young former refugees described how university figured prominently in their dreams of future life in Australia. However, it was another matter entirely to move from 'dreams' of university to imagining participation in university education. For example, upon hearing they were coming to Australia, the young former refugees described how they dreamed of becoming 'a doctor', 'an engineer' or 'a teacher'. Their families and friends left behind in the refugee camp talked of great expectations for them to 'become someone'. This dream is illustrated by Sing Me, a 19-year-old Kareni<sup>9</sup> who has lived in Australia for one year:

Before [entering school] I think I can be doctor, then I study and then I think maybe I can be a nurse. But I feel like my eyes go crazy. I'm not a good student, I'm very bad student. Sometimes I feel I want an older sister, she can help me. Now I see my family need money. I must stop [school] and get a job. My little brother, he is only nine but already he is good at English. We think maybe it is for him to study. I am old so I can work, all of us work and he can go [to university].

(Sing Me, NSW, 2011).

Sing Me sees two barriers to achieving her goal: her inability to catch up on school-work, and her perception of the gap between her dream to be a doctor and the pressing reality of her school grades. Considering themselves 'behind' in school-work and believing 'the gap' to be 'too great' dampened these respondents' dreams of their futures and, in effect, drew to a close the possibility of imagining having a university education.

As Cassity and Gow point out from their research with Sudanese young people, 'unfortunately, their dreams coexisted alongside a limited awareness of the difficulties involved in climbing the socioeconomic ladder in Australia' (Cassity and Gow, 2005: 53). The issue of poverty is significant for young former refugees: Sing Me's family couldn't afford for her to continue studying at school. In many former refugee families, parents find it hard to obtain work. As a consequence older children in the family will often sacrifice their own educational dreams to take up the responsibility of work in order to meet the family's needs. This issue was discussed in an interview with Joseph, who left school after Year 10 to obtain work (even though this was a great disappointment to his father living in Sudan):

Joseph: I was sending Mum [living in Kenya] money for water and that was okay because my youth allowance could pay for that.

Interviewer: For water?

Joseph: Yeah, they [local Kenyans] were poisoning the water to make us [Sudanese] go home, so Mum needs bottled water. But now my young brothers are at school [in Kenya] so I gotta move, yeah to Wagga or Perth, get a job.

(Joseph, NSW, 2011)

As is evident, poverty is associated not only with living in Australia, but with the abject situations of the loved ones left behind. Under these circumstances, despite the dreams, waiting another six years to finish school and complete a degree is impossible. Accordingly the needs of family far outweigh both Joseph's and his father's dreams for his education.

Dreams of futures in Australia are best described in these instances as dreaming precariously. This precariousness further complicates the possibility of imagining having a university education. Here we suggest it may be useful to draw on the work of Hannah Arendt to distinguish between dreaming and imagining. In her interpretation, dreaming is a process that occurs in 'the mind's experiences of withdrawal from the real world' (Arendt, 1981: 44). The distinction between dreaming and imagining might then be understood as the degree to which a connection is made to reality. Dreams of the future were precarious insofar as these

dreams did not afford preparedness for the difficulties of life and education in a host country, or overcome the need for an understanding and some experience of the university. In this sense the young former refugees were Other, remaining outside the borders of the university not only physically but in their imaginations.

### **'They' and 'we'**

From the analysis of our interviews it appears that being unable to imagine a university education is intricately bound up with a sense of not belonging to education, a sense that is linked to the experience of poverty and disadvantage. For instance, in the IUE interviews, the young people frequently depicted themselves, their family and their friends as 'lazy' or 'dero' (slang for derelict). When asked if he would consider university participation, one young man exclaimed, 'No, my family's all lazy' (Carl, outer city suburbs, IUE, 2012). One young woman declared, 'I'm nowhere near smart enough to go to any of these places' (Tina, outer city suburbs, IUE, 2012). By contrast, the young people described those who go to university as people successfully engaged in education, and who have been so throughout their interactions in education: they didn't imagine that these people could have encountered problems with education. Such people were 'rich people', 'smart people', or 'wealthy people'.

This response reveals the extent of these young people's awareness of the subjectifying (Harwood, 2006) processes wrought by education. As they saw this subjectification occurring in relation to education, unsurprisingly they were determined to avoid university. The extent of these subjectifying processes was made clear in one of the interviewees' responses to the question 'do people talk about university?' Ana, a young woman who left school when she was 13, replied 'I don't like listening to it because then I feel like even more of a dero ... I didn't even pass Year 8' (Ana, outer city suburbs, IUE, 2012).

Given the powerful effects that such subjectification can have on young people with precarious relationships to education, it is not surprising that, in the instances where connections are being successfully forged to university, a shift can be seen to occur. One example of this process featured a young man who, despite home difficulties, had decided to opt out of public education and worked casual jobs to attend a local fee-paying private school. He explained in his interview that he believed he had no chance of getting to university if he remained in the local public (non-fee-paying) schools. His descriptions of himself portrayed a connection to education and higher education, and a distancing from young people who were 'failing' or not attending school.

This shifting of precariousness was observed in our research in two US schools devoted to educational justice. Here we noted how young people experiencing disadvantage, and who had previous disengagement issues, described attendance at university as a possibility. Both schools were charter schools, with each having different charters but similar focuses on the education of young people experiencing disadvantage who could no longer attend mainstream schools. The first school's charter concerned the provision of a social justice curriculum for young people, from kindergarten to Year 8, who lived in disadvantaged circumstances in one large US city. The second was a 'sober school' with a charter to provide education for young people who had been removed from mainstream schools for reasons associated with drug use. The young people interviewed were aged between 11 and 14.

When Declan, a young man from the sober school, spoke about college, he used the word 'we', aligning himself with those who attend university. Yet when speaking about barriers to university attendance he used 'they'. It became clear that he identified himself with university attendees, despite the strong similarities between his life circumstances and those of the 'they' he identified as non-university attendees. It is significant how Declan's language differed from the language used by young people who continued to experience educational subjectification, who referred to themselves with terms such as 'lazy' or 'dero' and most certainly did not identify with university-goers.

At these schools, university was an expectation commonly cited by the young people who were interviewed. Declan, like others at the schools, was also observed engaging in the school environment in ways that reflected an alignment with educational participation. Conversations were observed among students, between students and teachers and among teachers. At the social justice school, when asked what they would do after they finished high school, students' assumption that they would attend tertiary education was clear. Similarly, the young people at the sober school described the assumption that they would attend college. At the sober school the young people also discussed considerations, such as support structures, that they needed in order to attend college, primarily due to previous patterns of drug use. For example, one young woman emphasized the need to maintain her current family support systems as she moved to further education:

I'm going to college. I'm going to college for sure. I'm not going to rent a dorm or anything on campus, I want to stay with my parents for a while ... my dad didn't graduate from high school, my mum didn't graduate from college and I want to break that and go on to graduate high school and then graduate college.

(Angela, US sober school, 2011)

Angela also wanted to separate herself from some of her family's historical patterns of participation in further education. A similar concern with getting through university while dealing with addiction was described by Nathan, one of the young men at the sober school. Due notably to nurturing support from his school, he had been able to identify a sober college designed to support young people with addictions while they attended university,

So I'm really happy like it's just – so I mean if worst comes to worst you know, I'm probably going to go to Attsbrough because it seems like a really good college you know and people are doing what I'm doing so why not, you know.

(Nathan, US sober school, 2011)

With this option in mind, Nathan's imagination of having a university education had moved away from precariousness. Indeed, his re-connection with secondary education had enabled him to move from being 'they' to 'we'.

### **Moving away from precariousness: 'they' versus 'we' and the 'insider' perspective**

The importance of the insider perspective for moving away from precariousness was brought home to us in our research with university student volunteer mentors in the AIME programme. Working across twenty university sites in Australia, AIME recruits university students at each university to mentor and assist Indigenous young people, encouraging them to stay in school and consider university as a viable prospect. Indigenous young people are at considerable risk of not completing school education (Curtis and McMillan, 2008; Graham, 2012; MCEECDYA, 2010); unsurprisingly, university participation is thus alarmingly low (1.3 per cent of the university population in Australia) and there are extremely low rates of Indigenous PhD graduates (0.5 per cent of all PhD graduates in Australia) (Evans and Carr, 2011). In this context, the Indigenous young people taking part in the AIME programme have precarious relationships to education and certainly, given the appalling statistics, universities have precarious relationships with them.

Importantly, peer mentoring is not an unproblematic concept; this is a relationship of power, which can have an invisible layer of inequality. Colley (2003) adopts the term 'engagement mentoring', which is defined as being 'targeted specifically at socially excluded young people ... the role of mentors in this process is defined as that of transforming young people's attitudes, values, behaviors and beliefs – in short, their dispositions' (Colley, 2003: 79). Colley argues that this type of engagement mentoring involves working upon an individual's habitus in a very deliberate way. In many cases, such modifications are designed to alter

individuals in order to create a more 'saleable commodity within the labour market' (Colley, 2003: 95). For Colley, these practices expose the 'contradiction' of mentoring, where the 'brutal commodification of the self is cloaked in the guise of human relationships based on warmth and compassion' (ibid.). However, it is equally important to realize that people are not simply passive actors. The AIME mentees were not powerless in this relationship, demonstrating resistance in subtle but effective ways, such as remaining silent or resisting the prescribed activities in the programme. Such actions represent mentees' individual agency. Besides, the mentors in this study reflected upon adopting a more individualized approach to mentoring, characterized by working 'through' rather than 'on' people, constituting a collaborative and collective network that did not deny the individuality of the mentee. As Jessie explained: '... so like they don't like being told what to do, you have to be their friend really and like you're not their teacher and you're not their mother so you have to be cool about it all' (Jessie, 20, AIME Mentor, 2011).

Each mentee's ability to develop an insider perspective hinged on the type of mentoring relationship created with the university student mentor. As our mentor interviews revealed, the relationship was not simply that of teacher/learner, as the mentor role is frequently characterized (Colley, 2003); instead, the relationship enabled the mentee to deconstruct the university environment from a university student's 'insider' perspective. Importantly, sharing this 'insider perspective' and moving from 'they' to 'we' demanded that the university mentors connect with the realities of the young people's lives. For instance:

I think that those kids who have come from families where no-one has previously gone to university and it is very easy obviously for university to be seen as a very distant alien place.

(Helen, 27, AIME Mentor, 2011)

The university students drew a different picture of university for the young people that they mentored, developing relationships that moved to a sense of 'we'. This connection was supported by the way the university students enabled the Indigenous young people to gain familiarity with university as place. For the young people, the very act of 'being' within the campus environment is significant. They were collected from the local area in a bus and then dropped at the campus, their first visit involving a tour from their university student mentors. Here, the university mentors could respond to the mentees' potential fears of 'big buildings'. In this way feelings of alienation could be removed during conversations where the mentors were able to normalize and demystify the university environment. Importantly, this enabled establishing a connection of 'we'. This process is summed up by Andrea:

[They] get an idea that uni isn't as scary a place as what they've always believed it was. Hearing our stories, yes I would tell my mentee I have an exam coming up. I haven't had time to study or I had assignments, but I at least let her know about the good stuff at uni as well. The uni is a fun place. It's not that hard to get into. You just have to apply yourself for two years and then you're there. I think they get that foot in the door into uni.

(Andrea, 20, AIME Mentor, 2011)

In subsequent visits to the campus the Indigenous young people were encouraged to move around the campus freely and were frequently observed in the campus food outlets and other common areas. The physical presence of AIME on campus, and the opportunities for mentors and mentees to interact with this space, were powerful means to become a 'we' and to move away from a sense of precariousness that, arguably, would otherwise exist for both the young people and the university.

Given the high attrition rates of Indigenous students from the university (and, by consequence, the arguably precarious relationship between the university and these students), the effect of volunteering on Indigenous university student mentors cannot be overlooked. This experience is poignantly related by Paul, a returning mentor (he had mentored in previous years), who described relationships between himself, the AIME organization and his mentees. He identified himself as 'a young Indigenous male' and credits his involvement in AIME as a mentor as something that 'assisted me to achieve my university degree'. His experience of mentoring with AIME is one of moving from 'they' to 'we':

From the first session I felt like I belonged and I was enriched with this feeling in my guts that ... what I was doing at AIME, was right and that I would not let the programme down.

(Paul, 22, AIME Mentor, 2011)

Indeed, Paul's commitment to, and involvement with, the AIME programme appeared to provide him with routine, accountability, and a sense of community that worked to engage him in his tertiary education experience. Paul revealed how his involvement was personally powerful:

By being connected to the programme, I am a university graduate, I am the first in my family to complete a higher education, and look forward to seeing my sisters and cousins gaining a better education, and achieving greater things than me.

(Paul, 22, AIME Mentor, 2011)

Kinship connections are made very clear in the above statement, an important point that Paul clarified later in his interview:

AIME helped me get through ... it was like the light at the end of the tunnel ... hopefully now with my education I'm not going to be another number and that I will actually make something for my name and show my family that it's achievable. Hopefully now my sisters will if not better, equal what I've done, do something better and set the goal for the next ones to come along, cousins, sisters whoever. So yes, without AIME I wouldn't have an education. Who knows where I'd be to be honest.

(Paul, 22, AIME Mentor, 2011)

Mentoring with AIME had beneficial outcomes for Paul and has had repercussions for his family and community. In this sense, AIME has not only assisted Indigenous young people of school age in the negation of precarious relationships with education: the programme has also made a substantial difference to reducing the precariousness of an Indigenous university student's relationship with the university. Furthermore, the connections with AIME would appear to have had positive repercussions on the precariousness of relationships between the university and Indigenous communities.

### **University: a responsibility to respond to the precariousness of education**

Education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices.

(Arendt, 1968: 196)

Expulsion from the possibility of imagining university education is an ethical issue. Similarly, searching out the perspectives of the Other is a moral responsibility of the university. Returning to Butler's discussion of the work of the theorist Emmanuel Levinas in *Precarious Life*, we are reminded that engagement with the Other operates in the 'sphere of ethics':

To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awakenss, to use [Levinas's] word, to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another's precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. This is what makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics.

(Butler, 2004: 135)

Understanding how we are connected to the Other helps us to grasp the Other's and our own precariousness. Extrapolating this to the university, recognition of this relationship enables awareness of how the precariousness of the Other is bound up with the precariousness of the university.

This ethical agenda shifts the way the relationship of university to the Other is conceived. Moral actions by the university premised, to paraphrase Butler (2000: 135), on ‘awakeness to the university and an extrapolation to another’ have the fundamental flaw of failing to fulfil the moral responsibility of education. This is because, starting from the point of view of the university, it is too easy to overlook and too easy to deny the perspectives of a young person with a precarious relationship to education. It is easy, for instance, to rely on the power of a statistic that bears testimony to a reading age. Likewise it is easy to lean on a diagnostic repertoire that renders translatable a young person’s behavioural activity within a school environment.

Then there is the significance of precarity.<sup>10</sup> In the round-table discussion ‘Precarity Talk’, with Lauren Berlant, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović, Judith Butler (2012) proposed two ways to think about precarity: precariousness and precaritization:

- (1) precariousness, a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form, and precarity as differentially distributed, and so one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life; but also (2) precaritization as an ongoing process, so that we do not reduce the power of precarious to single acts or single events. Precaritization allows us to think about the slow death that happens to targeted or neglected populations over time and space. And it is surely a form of power without a subject, which is to say that there is no one center that propels its direction and destruction.

(Butler, cited in Puar *et al.*, 2012: n.p.)

Precaritization, then, could be used as a term to capture the ongoing processes, the ‘slow death’ that occurs for young people with precarious relationships to education, who live in disadvantaged contexts. It is a means, however provocative, to capture the cruelty of neo-liberalism and its connection to intergenerational disadvantage. The photographs of disadvantaged communities included here give examples of populations neglected by university systems. As Butler goes on to elucidate, ‘Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity’ (2012: n.p.). The precarity of the young people and their rebuffs to university education could be considered as actions against precaritization. This is a productive way of responding, as it turns the moral tables on the university, calling on it to address itself and its exclusionary practices. Precarity, then, can connect with precariousness in a productive way that can challenge and incite. As Schram explains, with reference to Butler’s involvement

with Occupy Wall Street, '[p]recarity brings diverse bodies into alliance, if tenuously and contingently, in the name of representing a shared condition that needs to be challenged and contested in conflict with the powers that be' (Schram, 2013; n.p.).

How different, then, would it be to take stock of the uncomfortable facts that: (1) universities engage in acts of precaritization; (2) universities are a 'we'; and (3) those with whom universities share their most precarious relationship are the 'they'? An interlocutor may well argue that, by its very nature, demarcation between 'we' and 'they' is a necessary by-product of higher institutions. The point, however, is not to dismiss such views as a form of elitism. Rather it is to engage with precarity as a positive political force and, consequently, to encourage the university to engage in ethical acts as an ongoing practice. These are acts that seek to recognize the precariousness of the Other and do so because of the identification of the precariousness in the university itself.

Regarding a response to the precariousness of education, we have put forward some tentative ideas. Our principle purpose has been to make the case that those with very little 'formal' education, those with arguably the most precarious relationships to the university, should be included in determinations of access and participation. That said, our research has brought to light some valuable clues as to how young people experiencing precarious education might be connected to the possibility of imagining a university education. The key concept discussed is one of becoming a 'we'. Such a movement creates opportunities that may assist in a different kind of imagining of university, one that may help to build the range of connections, structural and otherwise, that could lead to imagining participation in higher education.

Arendt's (1981) concept of the productive imagination and the creation of new concepts is useful here, since it provides a way to grasp the processes required to conceive of something new, an imaginative act necessary to imagine participating in education and to move to a position of 'we' in relation to the university. Drawing on Arendt, Zerilli (2005a; 2005b) describes two types of imagination, delineating between productive imagination and reproductive imagination. The former is of importance because, 'With-out the initial non-concept-guided synthesizing activity of imagination, there would be no concept formation, no objective knowledge, and thus no science' (Zerilli, 2005b: 717). Indeed, Arendt explains that 'in the productive imagination, elements from the visible world are rearranged, and this is possible because the elements, now so freely handled, have already gone through the de-sensing process of thinking' (1981: 86). Schimmel points out the value of imagination for street children, children who undeniably experience precarious education and who undoubtedly slip through the nets cast to widen participation.

In this connection Schimmel cites Korsgaard's (1993) observation that 'Ignorance, lack of imagination, and lack of self-respect are not just external constraints on the range of your options: they can cripple the power of choice itself' (Korsgaard, 1993, cited in Schimmel, 2006: 219).

At the beginning of this paper we stated that our purpose was to bring perspectives from young people with precarious relationships to education into the conversation about education. As we've shown, young people who have their life experiences with education shortened (for instance because they have left school early) do have an imagination of university. What is lacking, however, is an imagination of having a university education. For some young people, though, this experience has shifted away from the 'they' of being the Other to the 'we' of participating in the university. This shift situates the young person as 'we', as connected with the university and its participants. Significantly, this movement to a 'we' is not a straightforward change, one for instance signalled as occurring successfully with formal admission to university. This point was made abundantly clear in Paul's story where, despite being at university, he remained in a precarious relationship to it. His connection with mentoring in the AIME programme altered this precarious relationship and forged a stronger relationship with the university. At the same time it can be contended that the university, by connecting with the AIME programme, has sought to recognize the precariousness of the Other.

While structural factors must always be taken into account, it is important that the influence of imagination is not disregarded. In this respect the university has a responsibility to engage with the precarious education of its Other and to consider seriously how it can remedy the ways in which its education is imagined. In so doing the university can better attend to the precariousness of its own moral authority and act on the responsibility it has to create ways to spark the productive imagination of its precarious Other.

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## **Notes**

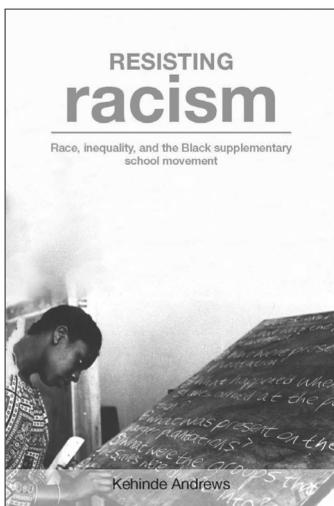
- 1 Imagining University Education (IUE) is a research project funded by the Australian Research Council.
- 2 In this paper we discuss LSES young people who have precarious relationships to education. These young people are one of the Others of higher education; we acknowledge that there are more groups that need consideration, such as young people with disabilities.

- 3 Funded by the Australian Research Council Research Council *Discovery Projects* DP160371009.
- 4 Site selection was based on: (i) proportionately low rates of undergraduate participation by persons aged 18–20 (Birrell *et al.*, 2008); (ii) low SES (ABS, 2001; Vinson, 2007); (iii) high rating on indicators of disadvantage in health, community safety, economic factors, and education (Vinson, 2007); (iv) high rates of behavioural problems; and (v) school engagement problems as indicated by (a) school non-attendance rates, (b) rates of school non-completion to Year 12, and (c) attendance and absenteeism intervention programmes (DECS, 2010; NSWDET, 2009; Stehlik, 2006).
- 5 Country names given reflect participants' self-identifications; 'Burundi', 'Myanmar', and 'Southern Sudan' were all terms used by participants.
- 6 Funded by the United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney.
- 7 Funded by the University Research Committee, University of Wollongong.
- 8 Names changed to preserve confidentiality. Details about where Lisa lived, and how far from the university, are not disclosed, to protect participant confidentiality.
- 9 The spelling used reflects the most common transliteration. Other spellings include 'Karrennii' and 'Karenni'.
- 10 We wish to thank a reviewer for their detailed comment on precarity and the connections this paper has with the wider discussion on precarity (e.g. Standing, 2011). As this reviewer pointed out, quite different understandings of precarity and young people's relations to university are possible – for instance, a focus on precarity can address social incorporation into the status quo of the university or, alternatively, can assume a political project that seeks to challenge and change the university. Our leanings are toward the latter.

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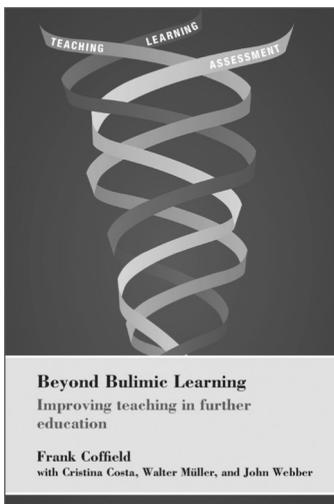
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