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Massaging Desire: Disadvantaged Students' Aspirations for Higher Education

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Introduction

Australia is in a challenging position. Having ridden the resources boom up and down, it now finds it has fallen back from the OECD pack in terms of the number of young adults (25 to 34 year olds) with higher education qualifications. This, coupled with a change of government, has prompted transformation in the Australian higher education system that will increasingly require research and policy to address students' aspirations for university. Aspiration has long been considered an important condition for entry to higher education (Anderson, Boven, Fensham & Powell, 1980). However, recent policy reforms, specifically the setting of targets for significant increases in participation, now demand a rethinking of the concept. Across Australian universities, the current attainment rate for bachelor degrees among 25 to 34 year olds is around 32 per cent, while over the past twenty years the enrolment rate of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds has stagnated at around 15 per cent (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). In response to the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education in 2008, the Australian Government has set '20/40 targets' in a bid to increase low SES enrolment to 20 per cent by 2020, and to increase to 40 per cent by 2025 the number of 25 to 34 year olds holding bachelor degrees. This will require that around 220,000 additional students attain bachelor degrees by 2025. Given current levels of unmet demand for university entry, this overall increase in participation, and the proportional increase of low SES students in particular, will only be achievable by engaging with populations of potential students who do not currently seek university places.

Intervention programs to 'raise' aspirations for university among groups of potential students are one possible response to the 20/40 targets. However, we argue this strategy does not offer hopeful prospects for significantly increasing demand (to meet the 40% attainment target) or for alleviating educational disadvantage, which is ostensibly the aim of the 20 per cent low SES participation target. In order to design more hopeful responses, we argue it is necessary to rethink conceptions of aspiration that frame it as (a) a factor that will continue to drive competition for university entry because it exceeds the places available, as (b) relating to a relatively homogenous and universal vision of the good life that people aspire to, to greater or lesser degrees, and as (c) an individual set of wants and preferences that are unrelated to the cultural norms valorised in higher education institutions.

The work of Arjun Appadurai (2004) provides useful resources for this rethinking. Appadurai describes aspiration as intimately related to people's capacity to enact their vision of the good life. All people aspire, because all people have wants and preferences in relation to their future. However, Appadurai argues that the *capacity to aspire* 'is not evenly distributed in any society' (p. 68). This notion of aspiration contrasts with potentially deficit understandings, which frame it as a homogenous resource that people have in 'high' or 'low' supply. Appadurai argues that aspirations are not simply individual preferences but 'form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which

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derive from larger cultural norms' (p. 67). And the degree to which they can be successfully enacted depends on people's relative access to social, cultural and economic resources. Aspirations are seldom simply 'lacking', but are differently constituted according to the normative contexts in which they are formed and are differently enacted depending on the means available to different groups.

Rethinking aspiration along these lines has implications for how its relation to higher education participation is understood, and for the types of intervention that appear most likely to increase participation and alleviate disadvantage for under-represented groups. At stake in this rethinking is the contrast between two different responses to the 20/40 targets. On the one hand, homogenous understandings of aspiration as an individual resource that is unrelated to the institutional structures of higher education imply the need to 'raise' aspirations among under-represented groups. On the other hand, a conception of aspiration as an unevenly distributed cultural capacity suggests the need for more complex responses that involve: (a) examining disjuncture between the cultural norms valorised in universities and those valorised in groups that are under-represented at university; (b) facilitating institutional change to better connect these potentially disparate cultural regimes; and (c) providing resources and experiences that strengthen the capacity of less wealthy and powerful groups to pursue their aspirations. We argue that policy and practice informed by the latter set of strategies has a greater likelihood of successfully supporting the attainment of the targets.

Our argument is laid out in four sections. In the first we discuss how aspiration has previously been conceived in Australian higher education research and policy. In the second section we discuss the Australian government's 20/40 targets and demographic trends that provide the context in which these targets will be pursued. In the third section we draw on Appadurai's arguments to discuss why current approaches to 'raising' aspiration are limited in their capacity to increase participation while also alleviating disadvantage. In the final section we describe key features of an Australian university outreach program—YuMi Deadly Maths—that offers a more hopeful approach to strengthening the aspirational capacities of students, families and their communities.

The 4 As: past conceptions of the relation between aspiration and higher education

Anderson et al.'s (1980) study of the social composition of students in Australian higher education in the 1970s identified four conditions that must be met for students to gain university entry. Aspiration was one, availability, accessibility and achievement were the others; collectively known as the four As. Anderson et al. argue that students seeking entry to higher education could only do so if there were places available *and* their academic achievement qualified them for entry *and* they had the financial and geographical means to take up study *and* they were motivated to do so.

Differences between the degrees of policy influence that can be exerted over each of these four conditions are also described by Anderson et al. For example, availability and accessibility are considered to be readily influenced by government and university policy decisions, such as increasing the available higher education places or providing scholarships and other forms of financial assistance. In contrast, achievement and aspiration are considered less readily influenced by policy and more directly affected by factors such as academic ability, family environment and socioeconomic status. While influenced by parents, family environment and socioeconomic background, aspirations for university study and the academic ability to pursue them are largely conceived as conditions for which the individual is responsible. In particular, aspiration was

considered an important condition for university entry, but of relatively distant concern for policy makers and higher education institutions.

Anderson et al. (1980) describe a set of interrelationships between the four conditions. For example, the level of achievement required for university entrance is related to availability:

> There is competition for [university] places when the number of qualified aspirants exceeds the number of places. In Australia the competition is settled by selecting students according to their level of academic achievement or potential. Thus alteration of the availability of places influences the level of achievement required for entry. (p. 4)

There are also relationships between aspiration, achievement and accessibility. For example, increased achievement may have positive effects on both aspiration and accessibility: 'high *achievement* may raise a student's level of aspiration; it may also improve *accessibility* by helping him [sic] gain a scholarship or simply by increasing his determination to overcome obstacles to *accessibility*' (p. 4, emphasis original). And, in turn, an increase of aspiration may have positive effects on both achievement and accessibility: 'a high level of aspiration is likely to lead to better achievement and to greater determination to gain access' (p. 5). Notably, the two conditions considered most readily influenced by policy—accessibility and availability—are not imagined to have any effect on aspirations, which are considered to lie largely beyond the purview of policy makers.

However, the separation of aspiration from availability reflects certain assumptions about the inherent desirability of the university places on offer. In a subsequent study drawing on the same 'four conditions' model, Anderson and Vervoorn (1983) recommend three policy strategies for increasing access and participation, especially for disadvantaged groups. These include: increasing the number of qualified students through the reform of schooling policy (intervention to increase achievement); expanding the higher education system (increasing availability); and creating alternative pathways to higher education via the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector (increasing accessibility). Anderson and Vervoorn argue that once 'the structural considerations—an enlarged base [of qualified students], an enlarged system, and flexibility across sectors—have been attended to it then becomes appropriate to turn to motivational factors' (p. 175).

Enhanced financial assistance is one motivational factor discussed Anderson and Vervoorn, but aspirations are not explicitly addressed. Indeed, it is suggested that 'improvements in the availability of higher education, such as the removal of barriers to access like tuition fees, are unlikely to be effective in democratising participation if unchanging environmental conditions depress scholastic achievement or keep aspirations low' (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983, p. 4). The separation of aspiration from the effects of policy rests on the assumption that the normative context of higher education is not related to the aspirations of those for whom it makes places available. That is, students who do not aspire to take up university places are considered to have 'low' aspirations—a motivational problem of individuals and their environments—while access to these places is considered to reflect both high aspirations and relative advantage.[2] Or put another way, students

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[2] For example, the Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations measures educational disadvantage according to an Index of Education and Occupation drawn from the Australian Bureau of

that do not seek university places are considered to have low aspirations that place them at risk of educational disadvantage, while the assumed desirability of the university places on offer remains embedded in policy as is largely unquestioned.

Three points are worth highlighting in relation to these studies from the early 1980s. Firstly, the discussion is characterised by the contrast between high and low or lacking aspirations. High aspirations enable entry to higher education while low aspirations are an obstacle. Discussion of aspiration in these terms implies a normative telos based on the implied value of higher education in its current forms. Secondly, aspiration is described as an individual resource that is largely distant from the influence of policy makers and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are considered more likely to lack this resource. Finally, there is no description of the relation between aspiration and availability. It is accepted that governments and institutions determine the number of university places for which an excess of qualified aspirants will compete, based on their level of academic achievement. Of course, this analysis reflected the social theories, policy contexts and demographic trends of a different period. However, the four conditions described by Anderson et al. (1980) have continued to significantly influence discussions of higher education access and participation. We argue that, in the current Australian context, a rethinking of aspiration in relation to each of these three points is necessary, for both empirical and theoretical reasons.

The rising prominence of aspiration as a public policy issue

In the current Australian context, it seems that most universities will have to create demand for higher education places in order to contribute to meeting the government target of 40 per cent of 24 to 35 year olds holding bachelor degrees by 2025. This is because student demand for higher education is only marginally higher than the current supply of university places. Moreover, demand for higher education will need to be generated among groups in the Australian population—particularly those whose participation will also contribute to the 20 per cent target for low SES student participation—who do not currently have much regard for higher education and are not convinced of its value.

The first issue to be confronted, therefore, is that the proposed expansion of the Australian higher education system will require universities to convince more people to seek entry. Indeed, around 220,000 more graduates than current policy settings can be expected to produce by 2025 will be required in order to meet the 40 per cent target. If achievement has been the currency of university admissions in the past, due to competition for scarce places, then aspiration is likely to become a rival currency in the future. Some institutions could conceivably continue to trade solely in achievement but it would mean their expansion would come at a cost to enrolments in other

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Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (ABS, 2006). This index measures relative advantage and disadvantage in terms of educational attainment and the skill level required by different occupations. Of the 9 variables included in this index, 3 indicate relative advantage in a given area: percentage of people aged 15 years and over at university or other tertiary institution; percentage people aged 15 years and over with an advanced diploma or diploma qualification; percentage of employed people who work in a Skill Level 1 occupation. The link between participation in higher education, or holding a job that likely required such participation, and increased access to social and economic resources is evident in this measure. What is elided is the arbitrary link between the need to succeed in the *cultural* terms of mainstream educational institutions in order to access these resources.

institutions. Most institutions will need to also engage with potential students' aspirations. Therefore, efforts to create demand may be better delivered in partnership between universities rather than in competition. Broader institutional change is more likely to support the attainment of the targets than competition for an increasingly scarce reserve of potential students.

There are a number of different cohorts of students that could potentially help institutions to meet the 20/40 targets. These include mature age students, migrants and young people currently enrolled in school or Vocational Education and Training (VET). In the first instance, mature age students will not contribute to meeting the targets. Across Australian universities mature age student enrolments have been low in recent years, although their numbers are likely to increase given the current global financial pressures—which will encourage redundant workers to return to education—and due to the Australian government lowering the qualifying age for mature age status to 21 by 2012. While many of these students tend to be from low SES backgrounds, and will therefore contribute to the 20 per cent target, they are currently too old to contribute to the 40 per cent attainment target.[3]

The 25 to 34 year old cohort of 2025 is currently aged 9 to 18. At present, these students (at primary school, secondary school, Vocational Education and Training and first-year university) constitute around 2.7 million of the Australian population. By 2025, they will number around 3.7 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008a). Because no more can be born into the cohort, their increase of around 830,000 by 2025 will come from migration, including refugees. Some of these migrants will be sourced from those in the international student population who apply for Australian citizenship or permanent residency after completing their Australian education qualification. Potentially, they will be numbered among the 40 per cent, but not necessarily among the 20 per cent due to migration requirements that specify a minimum level of financial support. Others will become citizens or permanent residents through more direct routes.

On current projections, at least half of the cohort's migrants will arrive in Australia after they have past the secondary school leaving age. Some will come seeking university entry, some with a bachelor's degree already, while others will not swell the numbers of either. This is not very different to what currently transpires. What will change is the desire for 40 per cent of the cohort to hold a bachelor's degree by 2025. Hence, this migrant contingent will become increasingly important as a source of potential students for universities and will come with attendant cultural and possibly linguistic issues that universities will need to accommodate. Australian universities are now well versed in such matters. For many it will be more of the same, although for some it should provide the impetus to pay more attention to what cultural and linguistic resources these students bring to higher education and how these can be engaged in ways that enrich the higher education learning experience for all. There will also need to be outreach activities specifically targeting and sensitive to the issues of refugees, who are likely to be among the low SES cohort targeted for the 20 per cent increase in proportional representation.

However, the largest portion of the 2025 cohort of 25 to 34 year olds are Australian citizens already residing in Australia. It will be this sub-group which will need to supply most of the 40 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds holding bachelor degrees by 2025. The problem is that, in terms of current levels of

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[3] This potential incompatibility of the 20% and 40% targets is particularly an issue for regional institutions, which tend to have higher concentrations of mature-aged students.

successful applicants for university places, a significant number of this group will not be adequately qualified for and/or interested in higher education. Unmet demand in Australia, which is measured in terms of the number of unsuccessful eligible applicants for university places, currently (as of late 2009) stands at around 8% (DEEWR, 2009). This translates to 18,500 unsuccessful eligible applicants (DEEWR, 2009: 75).[4] In order to meet the 40 per cent target, approximately 18,000 additional graduates will be required per year from 2011, the first year in which the 35 year old cohort in 2025 could reasonably be expected to have completed a three-year bachelor degree. A shortfall of eligible applicants for an increasing number of university places is therefore likely, particularly if the recent trend of declining unmet demand continues.

In an attempt to redress this shortfall, the federal government has also recently set a 90 per cent Year 12 (or equivalent) retention target by 2015 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), and the absolute number of Year 12 students is certainly increasing (ABS, 2008b). However, the Year 12 retention rate is in decline, even if only marginally (ABS, 2008b), and a dramatic change will be required to increase the current rate of between 75 and 77 per cent (ABS, 2008b) to 90 per cent by 2015.

While Australian young people between 15 and 19 years of age are participating in education and employment at rates marginally below their international peers (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2009, pp. 53-55), participating in VET seems to be holding their interest. The participation rate of 15 to 19 year olds has risen over the last four years, and currently stands at around 30 per cent of all VET students (NCVER, 2009, p. 8). However, in 2007 only 10 per cent of undergraduate students who gained university entry came via a VET pathway, and only 2 per cent were of low SES. In contrast, 47 per cent of university entrants came via a schooling pathway (Wheelahan, 2009, p. 12). While VET will provide a cohort of students that can help institutions meet the 20/40 targets, it will be a modest number in relation to the 40 per cent target and an even more modest number in relation to the 20 per cent low SES target.

Given these demographic trends in participation and attainment across Australian education sectors, pursuing the 20/40 targets is likely to change the relationship between the demand for and supply of higher education places, potentially moving the system toward an unprecedented period of *unmet supply* rather than unmet demand. This will significantly affect the relation between availability and achievement. While competition between qualified aspirants has traditionally driven selective entry to higher education in Australia, the nature of this competition could be unsettled during the next phase of the system. And if aspiration was relatively marginal to the concerns of policy makers and institutions in the past, it is now increasingly on their minds.

This increasing prominence of aspiration as a policy problem is not exclusive to Australia. For example, the United Kingdom's widening participation agenda emphasises the importance of 'raising aspirations' in response to government commitments to increase higher education participation to 50 per cent among 18 to 30 year olds (United Kingdom Department for Education and Skills, 2003a). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has identified the need to 'stimulate and

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[4] The level of unmet demand in 2009 went against the recent downward trend, arguably due to the effects of the GFC. Unmet demand in 2008 was the lowest since 2001 at around 6% or 12,600, down from 13,200 in 2007 and 14,200 in 2006 (DEEWR, 2009, p. 75).

sustain new sources of demand for HE among under-represented communities and to influence supply accordingly' (HEFCE, 2009, p. 18). In order to support this increase of demand, HEFCE funds the Aimhigher program 'to widen participation in HE by raising aspirations and developing the abilities of people from under-represented groups' (p. 19). Interestingly, higher education participation in the UK context is also conceived in terms of a four conditions model, which emphasises aspirations in combination with attainment, applications and admissions (United Kingdom Department for Education and Skills, 2003b).

In setting the 20/40 targets, Australian government policy rhetoric also emphasises the importance of raising aspirations. For example, papers accompanying the 2009 budget state that 'the major barriers to increased higher education participation by students of low socio-economic backgrounds includes . . . low awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education resulting in *little aspiration to participate*' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 13; emphasis added). The importance of intervening early in school in order to be 'effective in *increasing the aspirations* of students to attend university' (p. 13; emphasis added), and of providing funding that links schools and universities to help 'teachers *raise the aspirations* of their students' (p. 14, emphasis added), is also described. This rhetoric clearly reflects the ascending importance of aspirations for governments and institutions. No longer conceived as a 'private trouble' that is primarily the concern of individuals and families, aspiration is now a 'public issue' (Mills 1959) that higher education policy and university outreach seek to influence directly. However, while aspiration has gained increasing recognition as a public issue, it is still conceived in relatively homogenous and individualised ways that support deficit constructions of the problem.

Recent Australian research analysing relationships between students' aspirations for higher education and their socio-economic background has advanced the discussion by drawing attention to the possibility that institutional change, such as curriculum reform, may affect students' attitudes toward university study (James, 2002). This effectively draws a relationship between aspiration and availability: changing the kinds of places available may positively affect aspiration. James found that students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to perceive financial barriers to accessing university than their peers. However, he also argues that:

> It is misleading to conceptualise the problem of differential access merely in terms of barriers to access, whether these are financial or based on educational achievement: participation imbalances are caused by demand side factors as well as supply side factors. . . . The problem runs deeper and is associated with psychological or psycho-social effects that result in differing levels of importance and value being attached to higher education. These are not factors that can be rapidly influenced through short-term policy measures. (p. 51)

The study recommended that outreach be targeted at students earlier in school: 'since many students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds set their sights lower than other students, sustained efforts are needed to improve their awareness of what might be possible for them' (p. 52). It also called for 'continuing improvement in the pathways into higher education that bypass competitive selection procedures' (p. 53) and for further research to examine 'the effects on

participation of the diversification of curricula to incorporate educational alternatives relevant to a wider range of personal interests, abilities and life stages' (p. 53).

Evident in this study is the continuing influence that the four conditions described by Anderson et al.—availability, accessibility, achievement and aspiration—have on higher education research and policy in Australia. And James' (2002) discussion continues to emphasis the psychological and relatively individualised nature of aspirations, as well the need to 'broaden' them among under-represented groups. This emphasis on the individual is also evident in the argument for making curricula more responsive to 'personal' interests and abilities. We agree that further investigating the possibilities of curriculum reform is important and may hold significant prospects for increasing university participation among under-represented groups. However, we suggest that the success of this strategy will depend on a conception of aspiration as a *cultural* capacity rather than an individual psychological phenomenon. Such an approach opens up the possibility of a more complex and culturally sensitive theorisation of aspiration and its relation to higher education.

The limits to 'raising' aspiration: reifying dominant norms and displacing disadvantage

Descriptions of low SES students' attitudes to higher education in terms of 'low' or 'lacking' aspiration assume that university participation is an important aspect of a relatively homogenous vision of the 'good life', to which people simply aspire in differing degrees. These descriptions also assume the common subscription to cultural norms that shape this vision of the good life and current forms of higher education. When the under-representation of particular groups is conceived as a problem of low aspirations, to be effectively remedied by 'raising aspirations', current institutional structures and dominant cultural norms are left largely unquestioned. However, while aspiration is often conceived in individual terms, the influence of parents, family environment and socio-economic background is generally acknowledged. Paradoxically, these are *cultural* influences. The values and attitudes of parents, families and socio-economic groups, which have 'psychological' or 'motivational' effects on individuals, are mediations of broader cultural contexts. From this perspective, low aspirations for university may signal a cultural disjuncture between the normative contexts of under-represented groups and those of higher education institutions, rather than a 'lack' of aspiration among particular students and families within a uniform cultural regime.

Raising aspirations, when understood in cultural terms, requires changing the broad cultural values of under-represented groups. However, these values are often generated in complex and potentially oppositional relationships to dominant norms (Appadurai, 2004; see also Willis, 1977). Raising aspirations therefore involves the subsumption of cultural differences through increasing under-represented groups' subscription to dominant norms. However, to the extent that privileged groups trade on their implicit familiarity with these norms, in order to take greater advantage of education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), raising under-represented groups aspirations for more education has dubious merit as a strategy to redress their relative disadvantage. Further, if students' aspirations for higher education are mediated, at least in part, by a sense of how successfully they can compete for and in higher education based on their relative academic achievement, significant numbers of extra students will not be inclined to participate while the rewards of academic success remain closely linked to proficiency with dominant norms. Appadurai's theorisation of aspiration in the cultural terms introduced here, in conjunction with Bourdieu's reflection on the shifting dynamics of

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institutional education, suggests the need to pursue more robust theorisations of the relationship between aspiration, higher education participation and educational disadvantage than currently informs the rhetoric of raising aspiration.

Appadurai (2004) develops his theorisation of aspiration as part of a broader argument that culture has a relationship to the future and not just the past:

> For more than a century, culture has been viewed as a matter of one or other pastness—the keywords here are habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other hand, development is always seen in terms of the future—plans, hopes, goals, targets. . . . In a word, the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor of the future. (p. 60)

Appadurai's starting position is that there is a relation between culture and the future, and it takes the form of aspiration. Discussions of people's plans, hopes and goals that omit culture as an analytic frame risk losing 'sight of the intermediate and higher normative contexts within which these wants are gestated and brought into view. And thus decontextualised, they are usually downloaded to the individual and offloaded to the science of calculation and the market—economics' (p. 68). Once the problem is framed in these terms, market-individualist approaches to remediating disadvantage gain increasing traction in policy debates. These approaches favour affirmative social justice strategies that target individual deficit, rather than more transformative approaches that aim to redress inequality by changing the underlying frameworks that contribute to its ongoing reproduction (Fraser, 1997, p. 23). In contrast to these decontextualised approaches, Appadurai argues that aspiration is a cultural capacity and that by strengthening this capacity, 'especially among the poor, the future-oriented logic of development could find a natural ally, and the poor could find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their poverty' (p. 60). While greater access to economic resources is one element required to successfully contest poverty, Appadurai draws particular attention to the importance of contesting the terms of recognition through which the poor are known.

Drawing on Charles Taylor's discussion of the politics of recognition—which involves struggle over the cognisance of different cultural groups in social and political spaces—Appadurai argues 'that poverty is partly a matter of operating with extremely weak resources where the terms of recognition are concerned' (p. 66). He explains that 'the poor are frequently in a position where they are encouraged to subscribe to norms whose social effect is to further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of access to material goods and services' (p. 66). Sociologists of education have long demonstrated, across a range of different national schooling systems, that the cultural norms of a society's more privileged groups are the valued currency in its schools, which enables students' from these groups to more readily take advantage of schooling and the social, cultural and economic goods to which it provides access (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Connell et al. 1982; Delpit, 1995; Teese, 2000). When lack of aspiration is offered as an explanation for the under-participation of less privileged groups, the common sense response is intervention aimed at raising aspirations. However, this involves increasing less privileged groups' recognition of, and subscription to, the very cultural norms that help contribute to their educational disadvantage. It potentially reifies adverse terms of recognition for disadvantaged groups.

Raising aspirations without unsettling the normative terms of recognition is an affirmative remedy for injustice that leaves its underlying causes intact (Fraser, 1997). Appadurai (2004) describes this tension and highlights the importance of pursuing more transformative approaches:

> In recognizing those who are wealthy, the poor permit the existing and corrupt standing of local and national elites to be further bolstered and reproduced. But when they are recognized (in the cultural sense), it is usually as an abstract political category, divorced of real persons. . . . The poor are recognized, but in ways that ensure minimum change in the terms of redistribution. So, to the extent that poverty is indexed by poor terms of recognition for the poor, intervention to positively affect these terms is crucial. (p. 66)

Recognition accords legitimacy to the cultural norms of those who are recognized. For example, raising aspirations serves to legitimize dominant attitudes to higher education without taking seriously the disjuncture between these attitudes and those of groups that do not have the same regard for university in its current forms.

In order to positively alter their terms of recognition, Appadurai argues that disadvantaged groups' 'capacity to debate, contest, inquire, and participate critically' (p. 70) in the cultural and political life of the broader society must be increased. Strengthening 'voice' in this way involves creating opportunities for disadvantaged groups to performatively enact their capabilities and preferred futures, in order to alter others' perceptions of them. Such performances have the potential to disrupt normative understandings of disadvantage, and the successful realisation of aspirations strengthens the capacity to do so again. For example, when disadvantaged students succeed at school this can disrupt dominant narratives about their deficits as learners (thereby altering the terms of recognition), while simultaneously increasing their access to powerful social, cultural and economic goods (thereby altering the terms of redistribution).

Realizing aspirations requires the capacity to narrate and navigate the relations between immediate wants and preferences and broader cultural contexts—what Appadurai (2004) terms the *capacity to aspire*. He argues that this capacity is unevenly distributed and more strongly developed among the relatively wealthy and powerful. In other words, privileged groups have a more powerful relationship to the future; both their own and the collective future over which their position allows them disproportionate influence. These groups have greater access to the resources that enable more frequent experiments with and experiences of successfully pursuing their aspirations. Appadurai describes the capacity to aspire as the ability to navigate aspirational maps that 'consist of a dense combination of nodes and pathways' (p. 69). The capacity to successfully navigate these maps is reinforced by its successful performance, which in turn reinforces the norms that shape the aspirations of privileged groups. Appadurai explains that the capacity to aspire is therefore:

> subject to the truism that 'the rich get richer,' since the archive of concrete experiments with the good life gives nuance and texture to more general norms and axioms; conversely, experience with articulating these norms and axioms makes the more privileged members of any society more supple in navigating the complex steps between these norms and specific wants and wishes. (p. 69)

A similar kind of 'feedback loop' works to undermine the capacity to aspire for less powerful groups, who due to their relative 'lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures), have a more brittle horizon of aspirations' constituted from 'a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms' (p. 69). In this sense, aspiration is an unevenly distributed capacity to navigate toward different visions of the good life, and to give voice to the cultural norms that shape these different visions.

This is a non-deficit account of aspiration. Appadurai clearly emphasises that disadvantaged groups do aspire. However, their relative lack of access to social, cultural and economic resources provides less opportunity to develop, give voice to, and enact these aspirations. While they may have a weakened capacity to aspire, Appadurai explains that this is 'not because of any cognitive deficit on the part of the poor but because the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation' (p. 69). From this perspective, it is not a matter of raising aspirations but of providing opportunities for students to develop, describe, experiment with, and experience the realisation of their aspirations. However, it also means according recognition to the cultural values in relation to which these aspirations are formed. For higher education policy makers and institutions, such recognition necessarily involves changes to accommodate these values. This is a more transformative approach to social justice that seeks to redress disadvantage by changing institutional structures and deficit discourses in ways that create more favourable terms of recognition for disadvantaged groups. Interventions that employ the more affirmative strategy of raising aspirations, within existing terms of recognition and existing institutional forms, risk simply displacing and reproducing the problem they seek to redress.

This risk is clearly described in Bourdieu and Champagne's (1999) discussion of the shifting dynamics of educational institutions. In the context of the French schooling system, increasing participation for groups that have not traditionally pursued academic pathways 'has had the effect of intensifying competition and increasing educational investment on the part of groups that were already heavy users of the school system' (p. 422). This phenomenon of increased participation is not unique to France. New populations of students are now participating to greater degrees in the schooling systems of many OECD countries. Bourdieu and Champagne suggest that this will not necessarily have the effect of ameliorating educational disadvantage:

> In the altogether different school system created by new student populations, the differential distribution of academic profit and correlated social profits has essentially been maintained through a complete carryover of the disparities—with, however, a fundamental difference . . . the school system turns into a permanent home for potential outcasts. (p. 422)

Proportional increases in the participation of under-represented groups will not necessarily provide them with greater access to social, cultural and economic goods—thereby reducing disadvantage—if the institutions in which these groups are being encouraged to increasingly participate remain unchanged by their presence.

However, Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) argue that the presence of these new student populations *is* changing institutions, but in a manner that further disadvantages less powerful groups:

> It is clear that children of the most culturally and economically disadvantaged families cannot gain access to the different parts of the school system, and to the higher levels in particular, without profoundly modifying the economic and symbolic values of degrees (and without, at least apparently, creating risks for the holders of such degrees). (p. 423)

As increasing numbers of students participate in higher levels of education and obtain tertiary education qualifications, the value of these qualifications is reduced. For many in the new student populations, more education brings relatively diminished rewards. For these students and families, who aspire to education as a means to increase their socio-economic position, 'the school system increasingly seems like a mirage, the source of an immense, collective disappointment, a promised land which, like the horizon, recedes as one moves toward it' (p. 423).

In this sense, raising aspirations—without changing institutions in recognition of the cultural values and capabilities of the different groups that higher education ostensibly serves—may increase and widen participation, but not in ways that more fairly distribute the benefits of education. As more students enter an expanding Australian university system it is likely that access to relative advantage will be displaced to elite universities both nationally and internationally, while less elite universities will increasingly provide new student populations with devalued degrees. Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) argue that institutional shifts which simply include more students within existing structures are likely to create a system that 'keeps hold of those whom it excludes, just relegating them to educational tracks that have lost more or less of whatever value they once had' (p. 425). Indeed, as they also note, greater participation may serve to depress aspirations as students encounter intensified competition for valuable qualifications, which must be limited in supply in order to retain their value:

> Obliged by the negative sanctions of the school system to give up the academic and social aspirations that the system itself had inspired in them and constrained . . . they drag themselves listlessly through a school career they know has no future. (p. 425)

Two significant issues potentially undermine the strategy of raising aspiration. Firstly, when under-representation is conceived as a problem of low aspiration, intervention generally focuses on individuals and families while cultural disjuncture between the normative contexts of disadvantaged groups and those of higher education are largely ignored. Without recognising this cultural conflict, and changing institutions in response, significant increases of meaningful participation seem unlikely. Secondly, culturally decontextualised approaches to increasing participation are likely to import relative advantage and disadvantage into the education system without significantly changing the balance between them. While the competitive academic curriculum continues to unevenly reward those who are most proficient with dominant cultural norms, more education will make little difference to educational injustices.

However, policy and outreach to affect aspiration and increase participation can be designed in terms of strategies that take a more transformative approach to equity and social justice. In the final section of the paper we conclude by briefly discussing the key features of the YuMi Deadly Maths program, which is one example of such an approach.

YuMi Deadly Maths: recognising culture and strengthening the capacity to aspire

The National Centre for Student Equity recently completed a DEEWR funded project entitled *Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students*. Component C of the project involved a case study analysis of several university outreach programs that work with schools. One of which is YuMi Deadly Maths. This program is a complex, non-deficit and culturally sensitive intervention that engages with the aspirations of students from the most disadvantaged groups in Australia—Indigenous communities. It is an outreach program operated by a team of academics from two Australian universities: Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University.[5] The program focuses on improving students' academic achievement in mathematics, as well as their educational engagement more broadly. It is driven by the research of university academics and the action research of teachers in schools, and employs decolonising methodologies that include negotiating interventions with community Elders before entering schools; working with students, teachers and community members to build connections between western and Indigenous epistemologies; and positioning researchers and teachers as learners in relation to Indigenous knowledge and culture.

The program seeks to unsettle deficit views of Indigenous students by emphasising their capabilities as mathematicians. It seeks to both recognise Indigenous mathematical understanding, and its potential contributions in the classroom, and to simultaneously scaffold students into western mathematical knowledge. Emphasis is placed on developing students' familiarity with mathematical structures in meaningful and contextualised ways, rather than providing a functional mathematics education focussed on applications. In this sense, the program demands that students engage in intellectually rigorous learning in the institution's terms, while also recognising Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate and rigorous ways of knowing.

The program focuses predominantly on teacher professional development, but has responded to an emerging pattern of teachers transferring from Indigenous communities and taking the learning provided by the program with them. YuMi Deadly Maths now works with teacher aides, who are often long-term community members, to sustainably build mathematical and pedagogical capacity into communities. In order for this approach to succeed, program staff acknowledge that challenging incoming teachers assumptions about and attitudes toward teacher aides is important. This is just one instance where a politics of recognition is explicitly developed as a central element of the overall methodology. The program also engages with students from the earliest years of formal education through to tertiary study. This includes providing support for Indigenous students to undertake research degrees, and for non-Indigenous students to research Indigenous issues, under the auspices of the Deadly Degrees program.

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[5] See the program website http://bmec.oz-teachernet.edu.au/ for further information.

YuMi Deadly Maths does not approach intervention in terms of raising low or lacking aspirations, but rather as a cultural dialogue which necessitates institutional change. The work of the program is addressed to students, teachers, teacher aides and community members. It does not seek to alter the cultural values held by these groups, but works to strengthen students' academic capabilities and their capacity to envisage and pursue a future in which education plays a significant role. By supporting Indigenous research degrees, the program is working to enable this future education to engage with the culture of Indigenous students, rather than higher education participation simply requiring their subscription to dominant norms. In this sense, a connection between aspiration and availability has been made. Making available university places that connect with the cultural values of under-represented groups is a more hopeful and just strategy for increasing participation than simply making more 'normal' places available and blaming these groups for their lack of aspiration when they do not seek entry to an institution that has traditionally been inhospitable to them.

YuMi Deadly Maths is just one example of how culturally contextualised understandings of aspiration, such as that developed by Appadurai (2004), could be enacted as outreach that supports academic achievement and strengthens the capacity to aspire among cohorts of students and their communities. In our current moment, when governments are placing much importance on increasing higher education participation, particularly among traditionally under-represented groups, this example offers useful leads for future policy and practice.

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