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## Precarious education and the university: navigating the silenced borders of participation

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# Precarious education and the university: navigating the silenced borders of participation

## 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 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

silenced, participation, navigating, borders, university, education, precarious

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**Precarious Education and the University: Navigating the silenced borders of participation**

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## **Precarious Education and the University: Navigating the silenced borders of participation**

### **Abstract**

Access and participation to university education is a key equity issue, with increased effort to widen the participation of secondary school-aged students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds an agenda in many countries worldwide. In Australia programs aimed at widening university participation generally target LSES children and young people engaged in schooling. Thus access to such programs demands a connection to schooling. Yet not all school-age young people have such connections; they have what we term ‘precarious’ relationships to education. Without school connections, young people with precarious relationships to education have extremely limited opportunities to engage (or to imagine engaging) in higher education. This paper considers this issue from the perspectives of young people who have such precarious relationships with school education. Drawing on qualitative research investigating disadvantage and university education, the paper reports on how the imagination of university education, what 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 (2004) book *Precarious Life*, the paper puts forward the argument that the precariousness of education is relational and as such, universities have a moral responsibility to recognise and respond to the educational precariousness of the Other.

## Introduction

- Interviewer: Would you consider going to university?  
- 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 IUE Interviews, 2013)

Mazzy and Clare state a point that underpins the rationale for improving access to university: the possibility it can lead to 'a better life'. Both had left schooling well before any of the important education credentials could be achieved, 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 7 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 eight and nine 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, came to this [youth education service]. (Clare, Capital City – Outer Metropolitan, IUE 2013)

Both young women have backgrounds of inter-generational disadvantage. For example, Clare 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 remain caught at the silenced borders of social inclusion. Quite simply theirs are experiences of educational exclusion in the ‘dead zone’ of the widening university participation agenda. Here imagination of university participation is not only a far fetched idea, 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 justification since they invoke an ethical rationale of care for the young people; accordingly it is right to not consider young people such as Clare and Mazzy suited 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 do so from an angle focused on the perspectives of young people at the silenced borders of

university participation. Drawing ideas from Judith Butler's (2004) work, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, our aim is to mount the argument that universities need to find ways to listen to and accommodate to Others of higher education who occupy the most silent of its borderlands.<sup>i</sup>

We begin by discussing precarious education and the moral dilemma it presents for the university (and by extension, to those connected to youth and education). This leads us to describing the research informing this paper, work that includes research with young people experiencing educational disadvantage in Australia and in the United States as well as research conducted with university students who mentor Indigenous young people in an initiative to connect them with education and university. We then turn to discuss the precariousness of imagining university participation. This leads us to consider the importance of identifying as 'we' with the university. We also explore how this connection needs to occur at varying points along the experience of education – that is - if participating in university education is to be reached or maintained. We conclude by making the case that the university has the responsibility to recognise 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, p. 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 notable and respected educator in our societies.

It is certainly the case that the question of ‘addressing the Other’ has been recently acted upon via widening university participation for students from low socio-economic status (LSES). 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 programs designed to encourage pre-university aged students from non-traditional backgrounds to engage in university education (Gale, Hattam, Parker, Comber & Tranter, 2010).

Targeting school attenders, such participation initiatives obviously miss young people not engaged in education. Yet low SES young people disengaged from schooling comprises categories of students that are among the least represented at university. This includes Indigenous students who have higher rates of school disengagement (Universities Australia, 2008). While no data is available that specifically reports on university enrolments on students who have experienced significant school engagement problems, this population is thought to be rarely represented in Australian universities. Disengagement from school involves a lack of engagement with the daily activities of schooling. This can be indicated by school attendance and at its most extreme, complete withdrawal from education or it can include irregular attendance at the school and individual class level. School disengagement can have lifelong consequences on employment, health and welfare (National Youth Commission, 2008). These young have difficulty



reconnecting to secondary education (National Youth Commission, 2008; Social Exclusion Unit United Kingdom Cabinet Office, 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 noticeable issues such as 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 recognised 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; it needs to include 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 research on four related projects into educational disadvantage. Research has involved work with young people experiencing precarious education as well as research with university students who mentor young people with precarious relationships to education. The first component of this project, *Imagining University Education*<sup>ii</sup>, focused on perspectives of university from young people who live in communities in comparable low SES regions of Australia (in Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland)<sup>iii</sup>, all with low rates of university participation. Two hundred and fifty 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 involved research focussed on young 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 identity in relation to education. Data was collected from twelve young people (7 females, 5 males, aged 16-25). Participants described themselves as originating from Karenni and Chin States of Burma, from Myanmar, Burundi, Southern Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone, and Togo.

To better understand precarious relationships with education our team conducted research with education programs working with cohorts of disadvantaged young people who had precarious relationships to education.<sup>iv</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 of fieldwork in 2011. Young people who had experienced significant levels of disadvantage and educational disengagement were interviewed about their perceptions of education.

We also conducted research with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) program at one Australian university site to investigate the experiences of university student mentors who had worked with Indigenous Australian young people.<sup>v</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 program 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 twenty of the two hundred and fifty 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;

(Young People, IUE, Adelaide, 2012)

These 'big' depictions can be appreciated when the context of the young people's communities is understood. For instance, Lisa, aged fourteen years, imagined university as "A two-storey building with lots of classrooms and different subjects and... a big oval. It's huge..." (Lisa, Adelaide, 2012). When asked to reflect on who might go to university Lisa replied "[people from] two storey houses with lots of bathrooms" (Lisa, Adelaide, 2012). Lisa lived not far from a new university<sup>vi</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 are of the buildings in the university that Lisa described.

[insert images 1 & 2 here]

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" (Adelaide, 2012).

[insert images 3 & 4]

The new houses in Images 3 and 4 are 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.

[insert images 5 and 6]

Images 5 and 6 are of housing in one of the suburbs in this area that are considered amongst 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 to Lisa imagine a university as 'big' and the people who go there as from "two storey houses with lots of bathrooms".

When asked if they could imagine going into the place (the university) they had imagined, the responses were typically negative. For example, Chris aged thirteen for replied "No I would never" (Chris, Adelaide, 2012). John was also very clear 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, Adelaide, 2012)

Such dislocation from the university site was 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 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 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 to the young people interviewed for the 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 Karrennii who has lived in Australia for one year.

Before [entering school] I think I can be doctor, then I study and than 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, one being 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 their belief in the ‘gap being too great’ dampened their dreams of their futures, and in effect, drew to a close the possibility of imagining having a university education.

As Cassity and Gow (2005) 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” (p. 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. Amongst 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 it 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: Yeh, 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, yeh to Wagga or Perth, get a job.

(Joseph, NSW, 2011)

As is evident, poverty is not only associated with living in Australia, but with the abject poverty of the loved ones left behind. Under these circumstances, despite the dreams, waiting another six years to finish school and complete a degree as 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 better described in this instance 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 Arendt to distinguish between dreaming and imagining. From this interpretation, dreaming is as 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. The 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, as well as 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 Imagining University Education interviews, the young people frequently depicted themselves, their family or their friends as “lazy” or “dero” (slang for derelict). When asked if he’d consider university participation, one young man exclaimed, “No, my family’s all lazy” (Carl, Adelaide, IUE 2012). One young woman, declared “I’m nowhere near smart enough to go to any of these places” (Tina, Adelaide, 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 all their interactions in education (they didn’t expect these people could have encountered problems with education). Such people were “rich people”, “smart people”, “wealthy people”.

This response reveals the extent of the young people’s awareness of the subjectifying (Harwood 2006) processes wrought by education. As they saw this occurring in relation to education, unsurprisingly they were determined to avoid university. The extent of this subjectifying process was made clear in one of the interviewee’s responses to the question ‘do people talk about university?’ Ana, a young woman who left school when she was thirteen replied:

I don’t like listening to it because then I feel like even more of a dero... I didn’t even pass year eight. (Ana, Adelaide, 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 forged to university, a shift needs to occur. One example of this process was with 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 were of 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 for educational justice. Here we noted how young people experiencing disadvantage who had previous disengagement issues described attendance at university as a possibility. Both schools were charter schools, with each having different 'charters' but similarly focused on the education of young people experiencing disadvantage who could no longer attend mainstream schools. The first school's charter (the social justice school) concerned the provision of a social justice curriculum for young people living in disadvantaged circumstances in a large US City<sup>vii</sup>, catering for Kindergarten to Year 8 students. 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 attendee's despite his life circumstances being very similar to the 'they' he included as non-university attendees. It is significant how Declan's language differed from the language used by young people who continued to experience the subjectification and 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 referred to by the young people who were interviewed. Declan, like other of the young people at the

schools, was also observed engaging in the school environment in ways that echoed an alignment with educational participation. Conversations were observed between students, between students and teachers and between teachers. At the social justice school, when asked what they would do after they finished high school, their assumption of attending tertiary education was clear. Similarly, the young people at the 'sober school' described the assumption of college attendance. At the sober school the young people also discussed considerations such as support structures which were needed primarily due to previous patterns of drug use. For example, one young woman emphasised 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. Notably, due to the 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 program. Working across twenty university sites in Australia, AIME recruits university students at each university to mentor and assist Indigenous young people to stay in school and consider university as a viable. Indigenous young people are at considerable risk of not completing school education (Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Graham, 2012; MCEECDYA, 2010) and not surprisingly, university participation is alarmingly low (1.3%) and there are extremely low rates of Indigenous PhD graduates (0.5%) (Evans & Carr, 2011).

As such, the Indigenous young people taking part in this program 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' (p79). Colley (2003) 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' (p95). For Colley, these practices expose the 'contradiction' of mentoring, when the '...brutal commodification of the self is cloaked in the guise of human

relationships based on warmth and compassion' (p.95). 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 program. Such actions represent mentees' individual agency and the mentors in this study reflected upon adopting a more individualised approach to mentoring, characterised by working through rather than 'on' people, 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'.

Developing an insider perspective hinged on the type of mentoring relationships created with the university students. As our mentor interviews revealed, it was not simply that of teacher – learner, as frequently characterised by the mentoring role (Colley, 2003); the relationship enabled deconstruction of the university environment with the young people from a university student's 'insider' perspective. Importantly, sharing this 'insider perspective' and moving from 'they' to 'we' demanded the university mentors to make a 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 potential fears of 'big buildings' could be responded to by the university mentors. In this way feelings of alienation could be removed during conversations where the mentors were able to normalise and demystify the university environment. Importantly, this enabled establishing a connection of 'we'. This 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 2009 / 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 was a 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 for 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 told by Paul, a returning mentor (he had mentored in previous years) described relationships between himself, the AIME organisation and his mentees. He identified himself as "a

young Indigenous male” and credits his involvement in AIME as a mentor as what “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 program down. (Paul, 22 AIME Mentor, 2011)

Indeed, Paul’s commitment to, and involvement with, the AIME program appeared to provide him with routine, accountability and 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 program, 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.

The kinship connections are made very clear in the above statement, an important point that Paul later clarified 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 tangible repercussions for 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 program has also contributed a substantial difference to reducing an Indigenous university student's precarious relationship with the university. Furthermore, the connections with AIME would appear to have positive repercussions on the precariousness of relationship 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 perspectives of the Other is a moral responsibility of the university. Returning to Butler's discussion of 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 awakesness, to use his 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 with the precariousness of the university.

This ethical agenda shifts the way the relationship to the Other of university is conceived. Moral actions by the university premised, to paraphrase Butler, (2000: 135) on 'awakeness to the university and an extrapolation to the another' have the fundamental flaw of failing in the moral responsibility of education. This is because starting from the point 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>viii</sup> In a roundtable discussion on the topic of precarity, Butler (2012) proposed two ways to think about precarity: precariousness and precarization:

(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) precarization as an ongoing process, so that we do not reduce the power of precarious to single acts or single events. Precarization 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. (2012, n.p.)

Precaritization then, could be deployed as a term to capture the ongoing processes, the “slow death” that occurs for young people with precarious relationships to education who live disadvantaged context. It is a means, however provocative, to capture the cruelty of neo-liberalism and its connection to intergenerational disadvantage. The photographs of the disadvantaged communities are 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 of 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 Wallstreet “[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” (2012, n.p.).

How different then, would it be to take stock of the uncomfortable fact that universities engage in acts of precariatization and that universities are a ‘we’ and those with whom universities share its most precarious relationship are the ‘they’? An interlocutor may well argue that its very nature, demarcation between ‘we’ and ‘they’ is a necessary by-product of higher institutions. The point, however, is not to engage with and 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 recognise the precariousness of the Other and do so because of the identification of the precariousness in 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 idea 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 imagine something new, an imaginative act required to imagine participating in education and to move to a position of ‘we’ in relation to the university. Drawing on Arendt, Zerilli (2005a, b) 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 explained 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 have precarious education and who undoubtedly slip through the nets cast to widen participation. In this respect Schimmel cites Korsgard’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 our purpose was to bring perspectives from young people with precarious relationships education into the conversation about education. As we've shown, young people who have their life experiences with education shortened (for instance 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, this experience has shifted away from the 'they' of the Other to the 'we' of 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 successfully occurring 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 program 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 program, has sought to recognise the precariousness of the Other.

While structural factors must always be taken into account, it is also 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 seriously consider how it can remedy how 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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<sup>i</sup> In this paper we discuss LSES young people who have precarious relationships to education. These young people are one of the Other's of higher education and we acknowledge there are more groups that need consideration, such as young people with disabilities.

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<sup>viii</sup> We wish to thank a reviewer for their detailed comment on precarity and the connections this paper has with the wider discussion on precarity (eg Standing, 2011). As this reviewer pointed out, quite different understandings of precarity and young people's relations to university are possible – for instance that of social incorporation into the status quo of the university or alternately, that of a political project that seeks to challenge and change the university. Our leanings are toward the latter.