

# LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES: COMPLETING TEACHER EDUCATION IN AN AUSTRALIAN RURAL CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of a demand for higher graduation rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the regions, this study examined the factors impacting on retention and motivation of teacher education students. The focus group data from a mixed method study provided an opportunity for students to articulate their perceptions of the barriers to success. The issues raised included the importance of support from family, peers and academics; the pivotal impact of contact with the profession; the stressful challenge of juggling paid work and cost of study pressures; and the challenge of adjusting to academic language culture and expectations.

## BACKGROUND

Australian teacher education programs need to respond to a demand for higher graduation rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the regions. In a discussion of the goal to lift the proportion of young people engaged in tertiary study Universities Australia noted that:

*This goal is particularly important in regional areas to redress the disadvantage of rural youth and the marked under-representation of people in regional and remote areas studying at university (Universities Australia, 2013, p. 14).*

As the number of students from a low socio-economic status (SES) background studying in universities is expected to double by 2015 (Universities Australia, 2013, p. 6) the needs of these groups must be urgently addressed.

A report by the Australian Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE) into patterns of university enrolment in 2012 found that a significantly higher percentage of low socio-economic status (SES) applicants, and students from regional Australia, selected universities from the Regional University Network compared with applicants from high SES students and metropolitan areas. In comparison with high SES and metropolitan applicants, low SES and regional applicants were more likely to apply for courses in education and nursing (DIISRTE, 2012, p. 33). Of the enrolments in education courses the gap between the number of low SES students and high SES is the largest for any course (DIISRTE, 2012, p. 33). Given this context, the current study of the first year experience of teacher education students in a regional university is timely and pertinent.

## THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

In 2013 Universities Australia noted that students from rural and remote areas remained seriously underrepresented in higher education. In fact they noted a decline in representation:

*In 2007 regional students were 18.7 per cent and remote students were 1.0 per cent of domestic undergraduate students. In 2011 regional students were 18.6 per cent and remote students were 0.9 per cent of domestic undergraduate students (Department of Industry Innovation Science Research and Tertiary Education, 2012, table 2.2)*

The Bradley Report of 2008 acknowledged a need to *significantly increase funding of students from rural and regional areas* (2008, p. xiii). Rurality is a contested term. The National Framework for Rural and Remote Education identified population size, movement and density relative to metropolitan centres

and distance from large population centres as key features of *places variously termed rural, regional, country, remote and isolated* (2001, p. 1). The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines rural in the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) Section of State (SOS) Structure as areas that are not part of any 'Urban' area, with urban areas defined as *a population cluster of 1,000 or more people*. (2011). The site of the university at the centre of this study draws students from low population locations often dependent on the agricultural industry for their survival. Some may have populations exceeding 1,000 but their distance from service centres and dependence on the single industry of agriculture qualifies them to be described here as 'rural'.

The challenge of staffing rural schools (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013, p. 1) is a typical example of an *unmet demand of the rapidly moving global economy* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). The participants in this study have elected to study teacher education at an inland university and most are expected to find employment in an inland school. Rural education is increasingly recognised as a social justice issue as inequities between non-urban and urban schools continue to rise (Woodrum, 2011). These potential graduates will be valuable rural education recruits, so we need to maximise their opportunities for success.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu has expounded the relationship between success in education and the nature and volume of cultural, social and economic capital held by individuals. Bourdieu elaborated the link between the nature of the capital held by low socio-economic status students and poor academic achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). He described the development of the habitual ways of being in the world, or 'habitus', of people as a result of the volume and type of capital available to them. The social, economic and cultural capital held by low socio-economic students will be associated with the development of habituses that do not fit well into the context of tertiary education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). A case mounted by Noble and Davies (2009) refuting this claim was strongly challenged by Harrison and Waller (2014) in a paper restating the case for a link between low socio economic status and educational disadvantage.

Education research has long articulated a concern about inequities in access to learning. Working class and rural background students have consistently been underrepresented in Western tertiary education. Social background has been recognised in the literature as a serious barrier to equitable access. Programs like the British *Aimhigher* and *Excellence Challenge* and *Partnerships for Progression* targeted support to students identified as having no higher education in their background. Parent income and geography have also been used as indicators of disadvantage (Harrison & Hatt, 2010).

In the context of Canadian tertiary study, Lehmann (2012, p. 530) noted students from working class backgrounds were more likely to become cultural outsiders, that the development of their identities as learners is more complex and that they experience habitus dislocation. He argues these factors result in students approaching university with higher levels of apprehension and uncertainty and higher dropout rates. Changes in habitus will become part of the tertiary experience as students adjust the nature and volume of cultural capital they hold. The idea of the transformative habitus provides the theoretical explanation for these processes. University students from low socio economic and rural backgrounds must accommodate transforming habituses. McNay highlights the usefulness of Bourdieu's idea of regulated liberties, to describe the potential for change that is inherent in Bourdieu's concept of habitus:

*Thus while an agent might be predisposed to act in certain ways, the potentiality for innovation or creative action is never foreclosed: [habitus] is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subject to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures* (McNay, 1999, p. 103)

Low socio economic and rural students who have been *predisposed to act in certain ways* (p. 103) in their home communities, may need some support to successfully claim the agency outlined by McNay. Their habituses may indeed require *modification* (p. 103) if they are to achieve the levels of engagement and motivation required to succeed with tertiary studies.

## METHOD

Researchers in a large regional university in Australia noted a high attrition rate in a teacher education course that enrolled a significant number of students from low socio-economic and regional backgrounds. A study to investigate student motivation, first year experience and the factors impacting on graduate completions was initiated in 2011. One hundred and ten on-campus students who were enrolled in core subjects in an initial teacher education (primary) degree were invited to participate in the study. Eighty three (75 percent) agreed to complete a series of questionnaires in week four and consented to the release of their university academic and other records. Over half of the students were recent High school graduates, just under half returned to study after a break. ATAR information was available for 62 of the participants. The indicative ATAR required for entry into the undergraduate degree program was 70. Sixty six volunteer students participated in focus groups in the last week of the first year of the four year degree.

The interviews were semi structured group conversations (four to six in a group) with a lecturer (the author of this paper) included in the conversation (see Given, 2008). Participants signed consent to discuss their experiences in small groups as they painted props for a student performance. The conversations were not related to any subject or course requirements and there was no intention that the conversations could influence assessment of students in any way. The researcher's position as a lecturer in the program under investigation however, must always be borne in mind as a potential influence on the data (Miller & Glasser, 1997). These conversations were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Interviews were numbered for identification and pseudonyms used to protect confidentiality. The transcriptions were examined for recurrent or noteworthy themes using an iterative grounded approach (Charmaz, 2005). Verbatim quotes were recorded in tables identifying general and specific ideas related to the barriers and support of student engagement. Students were asked to identify any 'supports or barriers to their successful completion' of the first year of the teacher education degree as a trigger to semi-structured open interviews (Charmaz, 2005).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The focus group student conversations encompassed a number of themes. Students spoke about workloads that were more intense and different in nature to their expectations. They noted the importance of empathy, encouragement and dialogue with their peers, family and lecturers, and identified the periods of practical classroom observation and practice as pivotal in motivating them to continue their studies. Students articulated a high level of concern about the financial strain imposed by tertiary study. They spoke about the high cost of accommodation, text books and transport. They also commented on the financial and cultural demands of tertiary study and the time cost of maintaining paid employment to support their studies. The rural location of this campus posed particular challenges for these students. Their homes were often isolated and located in sites of low casual employment. Both the barriers they faced and the inspirations they enjoyed facilitated habitus change in these students. Change is an important theme in this study.

## CHANGING HABITUSES

These students expressed a consciousness of the process of change that they were participating in. They were actively engaged in 'becoming' teachers:

Susan: *I don't know, you sort of just step into it and – ...*

Monica: *(talking over) Yeah you do, but you're only conscious where you'd like to go. I need to change .*

Their passionate determination to become teachers was often referred to as a motivating goal. The change they referred to was a hard won, desirable state:

Susan: *You don't feel like you're changing but you are actually learning and developing as a person – like it's a big step, like it's ... sort of becoming who we want to be ...*

Monica: *We know what we want to do .*

The participants in this study saw the experience of tertiary study as an opportunity to change their habitual ways of doing things. They were conscious of the need to develop dispositions better fitting the role of 'teacher'. Because of their motivation to become teachers they were actively involved in a process of habitus modification. Universities are charged with the responsibility to recognise and support this difficult process.

Despite successful schooling experiences, these students from low socioeconomic rural backgrounds did not arrive at university with the cultural capital they needed. *I'm not academic and I don't think I'm ever going to be, and that's why I'm struggling so much with it all, because it's all right up, the bar so high* (Corine). They were actively working at the remoulding of their habitus. The university experience was a difficult means to a desired end:

*Because I want to be a teacher, so I'm going to do what I have to do, to be a teacher* (Jemma).

*I want to be a teacher, and I'm willing to put in the hours and the work and take the criticism with the positive feedback* (Lucy).

Those who faltered in their resolve and became overwhelmed had to be reminded of their singular goal:

*My friends talked to me and said, that I've wanted to do it since I was 6, so I thought I'd better stay* (Jayda).

A passionate desire to become a teacher underpins many of the focus group conversations as they explored the factors that provided them with motivation and those that proved to be barriers to their motivation and engagement. Since Britzman's 2003 study of the course of 'becoming' a teacher, researchers have struggled to find a way to successfully record this process (Britzman, 2003). Florio-Ruane and Smith tried *multiple research methods to increase detail, complexity, and alternative interpretations* (2004, p. 632) the current study privileges the voices of the trainee teachers noting the recurrent issues they raise and articulating them through verbatim quotes.

This study identified a number of pressure points for students.

## MOTIVATORS

Social capital was identified as the key source of the motivation for academic success for these young people.

### Networks of support

According to the students, a network of people including peers, friends, family and lecturers provided the most important motivators and emotional support to sustain their studies. Support from families was often mentioned:

*It also comes down to family life, how supporting your family is, how they ..., "you'll be right", like "You went good in high school, you'll go good at uni, you'll be right". Like the assignments and that, "A pass is a pass, you know" it doesn't degrade you... (Fiona)*

Feedback from other students was also noted as critical. They described messages on their student-developed course Facebook page as typical of the support they needed:

Danielle: *Something simple as "Don't give up," or "You can do it" – just something that simple can pick you up from a down day.*

Lucy: *"You're awesome and you're going to get through it" – those little things*

Instead of the university-provided forum, they referred to their own Facebook site for peer, rather than academic, clarification of assignments and to share their anxieties:

Sarah: *Yeah, a bit of empathy like "We all know what's going on, we all know how everyone feels: Just think of the relief when you have put that assignment in the box".*

The Facebook site was also identified as a valuable venue for letting off steam:

- Lucy: *A lot of people just write, "Oh my God, this is so stressful, this assignment's killing me; I can't get started!" That's all they want to do, is vent.*
- Danielle: *Yeah and it's good.*
- Lucy: *And then like even –*
- Danielle: *Because you know that other people feel the same but too.*
- Lucy: *Am I the only?– "yeah how am I going to get this done!" and then you see other people are having trouble as well.*

The encouragement of friends and family was particularly important for those students from backgrounds that did not provide them with the cultural capital often privileged in the university setting.

### ***First in family***

Some students noted that one of their chief motivators for continuing their studies in the face of discouragement was their consciousness of the struggle their family had faced in entering the education system. Those whose parents had been the first in their family to go to university were intensely proud of this achievement and felt a responsibility to live up to this effort:

*Like I grew up in a housing commission house and Dad only worked and Mum is at home with four kids, and she is the first one from our family to go to university when she is the same age as me, ... I think, and so from there, so my brother, me, my brother, and now my sister have all gone to university. It's just like our families ... all of a sudden we've gone from what people would look at from the outside as being lower socio-economic to, like ... we're all ... like, all of us are pretty educated now considering Dad only just finished Year 10, Mum never finished Year 10, because Mum had me when she is 17, so to go from that to turn it around. I think she changed my way of seeing things (Tom).*

As they articulated an awareness of the barriers to their success in the tertiary setting these students were also able to explain the steps they would take to achieve their goals. Tom was very conscious of his *originary* class (Bourdieu, 1984). He was aware of the journey he was on and the potential for change afforded by education:

Fiona had a similar story:

*Well Mum did that, my mum did a master's degree in human resources and that's ... over my head, but she did that with, like, me and my brother as teenagers. So that wouldn't have exactly been the easiest time to be trying. And she did it. It is a lot of hard work, but (Fiona).*

These stories provide a context for appreciating the determination to succeed expressed by many of the participants. Their university studies were far from easy for them but they were highly motivated and determined. Tom summed up his story with the statement, *It's just, not negotiable, 4 years, finished.*

### ***Mature aged students***

Although the participants may be referred to generally as 'young people', many of them had been in the workforce for some years before beginning their teacher training. In the university context they are referred to as mature aged students. In this study, school leavers and mature aged students often positioned themselves as dealing with different issues in their studies. Their cultural and social capital stores were often quite different (Bourdieu, 1993). Mature aged students often cited their children as a motivating stimulus:

*I've got 3 kids, I mean how ... what sort of example will I set them if I is to just, you know, give up. I'm going to set a good example ... I mean there's a lot more at stake (Rachael).*

It was clear from the focus group conversations that these students made considerable sacrifices in order to enter the teaching profession. Mature aged students represent a significant proportion of the 2011 Bachelor of Education (Primary) cohort at this regional university. The *Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2012* report found that universities identified as part of the

Regional Universities Network (RUN) attracted 11.5 per cent of the total Australian undergraduate enrolment. Of this percentage, 7 per cent were non Year 12 leavers, and Year 12 comprised only 4.5 per cent (DIISRTE, 2012, p. 43). As already noted, nursing and education are courses popular with students from a low socio-economic background; they are also popular with non-school leavers (DIISRTE, 2012, p. 44).

These mature aged teacher education students position themselves as having made a personal investment in their education:

Mark: *Because we've probably got more to lose than ... like we've all left jobs.*

Lisa: *There's a lot more at stake.*

Mark: *... put other things to the side to do this, like I am the same, I had a mortgage, like I've just gotten rid of it, thank God, to leave that to go to a little part time job, rather than earning the good money I was on before, and having Julia Gillard help out a little bit as well. Now it's been a big adjustment, but, it's more the fact I've just told myself, I've just got to get used to that being normal now.*

For these mature aged students their studies have become their 'job'.

### ***The practicum***

Several students commented that the practical experience of going into school classrooms sustained their interest and ameliorated the apparent 'irrelevance' of the theoretical subjects:

*I found it encouraged me more, like before prac I was like "Oh, I'm a bit over uni, and stuff" and then you go on prac and then you go "No, this is what I want to do – I want to teach these kids" and I think that is also a big support (Tahlia).*

Corbett (2010) has pointed out the class implications in the capacity to distinguish relevance. He observed the difficulty borne by working class youth who are less equipped to make this fine distinction:

*This calculus for distinguishing between what is and what is not relevant and important remains, as Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated, the ultimate means of social class reproduction. Cutting out a space for exploration of what may seem immediately irrelevant appears to be the most powerful distinction between those families who are able to launch their children into high status postsecondary engagements necessary for professional careers (Corbett, 2010, p. 235).*

For these students the relevance of their studies tied directly to the practice of teaching. Their desire to teach provided the primary motivation for persevering. As Nikita explained:

*It all ties in with motivation, like a want to get into a classroom and do it. And that's why prac is so good, because it reinforced what I wanted to do. And it's different sitting in a lecture hall because you'll be sitting there and you're like, "Oh well this is crap", and then you get out and you get into the classroom and you actually get to put it into practice and it's good (Nikita).*

Lehmann (2012) sees this focus on career goals as a benefit to working class students as it sustains them and motivates their drive to change:

*For working-class students a healthy level of instrumentalism expressed through realistic career and social mobility goals appears to be a unique factor of commitment to their new academic environment (Lehmann, 2012, p. 543)*

Corbett is more cynical, as he claims that: *In many respects learning to leave spaces of the practical and to embrace irrelevance is the marker of academic success (Corbett, 2010, p. 230).* He elaborates this position, explaining:

*By 'embracing irrelevance' I mean the process in which some working-class families that have little experience and/or success in secondary and postsecondary education manage to bracket their mistrust of the apparent impracticality and irrelevance of academic work and encourage their children to take it seriously (Corbett, 2010, p. 230).*

Universities have a responsibility to amplify the links between the theoretical content of their courses and the practical application of this theory. The students participating in this study may not have been prepared for every aspect of their course but they were ready to endure a degree of dissatisfaction as a means to a pragmatic end. They also demonstrated a capacity to adjust to the demands of the course and to discover the relevance of material as they adapted.

- Researcher: *So the people who didn't continue, do you think they wanted to be teachers?*
- Natalie: *No, because if they wanted to be then they would have put in the hard yards and they'd still be here.*
- Naomi: *I guess that's true, but maybe they wanted to be, but [it is] probably not the way they expected it to be, with all the study, I think they might have also come in thinking these sort of things, like this is what you're going to do, and all that, like finger painting and all that sort of stuff – like it'd just be based on that sort of stuff, rather than just learning about the behaviours and all that sort of stuff ... maybe some people will just think, "Oh this isn't for me". Not a lot of it, but some of it you think, "Oh I didn't really expect this to be here, and that to be there." And same with [the] Social Justice [subject] at the moment, there's a lot of things we talk about, and sort of don't really think about it until it gets brought up.*
- Researcher: *Is it relevant?*
- Naomi: *Yeah, it is. Having that understanding of background, like of a child's perspective and understanding, and how we as teachers can change their focus and ideas about society.*

Naomi was aware of the difficulty some students have had in adjusting their expectations. She singled out the child development and social justice subjects as areas of particular challenge, but indicated that she had learned to value the unexpected insights they provided.

## BARRIERS

The barriers to motivation and engagement identified by the students may be characterised as deficit in either cultural, social or economic capital.

### *Economic barriers*

Janelle believed that financial constraints can end a tertiary career. She outlined four key areas of expense for these regional students:

*If you can't buy your textbooks you can't be here, you can't do your readings, you can't do the assignments, the work, and some people that live on campus have to pay for accommodation and food, and people that don't live on campus have to pay for accommodation and food and their petrol money to get here. I travel a hell of a lot to uni.*

Travel, accommodation, food and texts were identified as the key financial concerns of the students. Textbooks were described as *ridiculously expensive*. The need to *pay for them upfront* was identified as an additional obstacle to engagement with the course as it took time to accrue a further \$3,000 on top of establishing a new home. As first year students, they were just beginning to develop strategies for managing the financial demands of university:

- Amy: *I had to get help from my mum to get the last textbooks.*
- Brianna: *And I still have a borrowed textbook from Amy. I haven't bought them all for this semester.*
- Amy: *Yes, yes so she borrowed mine, because I didn't do one subject.*
- Brianna: *And I bought some secondhand ones this time, so by the time you actually chase those up, and then you're behind with your readings. And then you just need time to catch up.*

Brianna sourced the expensive texts without buying them new, as quickly as she could, but she was anxious about keeping up with the readings. Her focus was on sustaining a high standard. She was very matter-of-fact when she said, *I paid for myself, and I look after myself. There's no help from no one, it's hard.* But with supportive friends and strategic management she was achieving her goals. Some students were not managing as well as Brianna:

- Josh: *My job is in town so I had to give up work because I lost my licence.*
- Researcher: *So how are you surviving without your job and without your licence?*
- Josh: *Friends and no food.*
- Researcher: *No food. Does that work for you?*
- Josh: *No. I am on semi-catered so I get food at breakfast and then just eat nothing for the rest of the day – just noodles.*

Like Josh, Amanda lived on campus. Her rural background had helped her secure some government-funded assistance, but students who lived on campus had more difficulty securing jobs as they were further out of town and they had to move out of their accommodation for residential schools during breaks. It was also difficult for students from small rural towns to secure holiday work as there were few opportunities in rural communities:

*It's hard as well. I don't have a driver's licence so I'm pretty much isolated on campus except for the bus. So it's impractical for me to have a job. The only money – I'm dependent on Centrelink and scholarships to fund my university. But being from a small town, it's really hard to find work. So – and I don't have any financial assistance from my background, my home background. So it's extremely difficult financially to support – to manage – to support. Thankfully I don't drink – like the drinking and driving kind of helped with the money issues (Amanda).*

Amanda could not afford either petrol or alcohol. After a prolonged drought followed by floods, many of these rural young people were not able to look to their rural homes for financial support. The rural sector had been straining to survive, so these students expected to be independent. Their paid work was extremely important to them.

These students considered the four years they will spend studying as their current 'job' or 'profession'. They do not minimise the sacrifices required of this job, but they were clear about their goals:

- Rachael: *The fact is you know, each subject is worth like \$700.*
- Lisa: *Yeah that's it, there's a ... cost involved!*
- Rachael: *Yeah like for me –*
- Lisa: *And if you quit you've still got to pay that.*
- Rachael: *I just think it ... like me personally, I've got a mortgage as well and a little boy and ... when I graduate I'll be 32, so I don't have the time in my life to fail and re-do it again.*
- Researcher: *So economic capital is a major motivator?*
- Rachael: *Hell yes. Who has a spare \$700 in their back pocket for every subject!*

Economic capital has always been a factor in accessing tertiary study. For rural and low socio economic background students it is often the most significant factor.

### ***Other commitments***

Although they were very focused on their potential future career and the changes they had to make in their lives, the students were also dealing with pressure from other commitments. They were often the carers of children and elderly parents, contributed to a range of competitive sporting activities and frequently carried paid work responsibilities. These students were also aware that the tertiary



context was changing with them. Students of the past were characterised as privileged to dedicate themselves to academic activities, in contrast to the 2011 cohort who must involve themselves in paid practical work as well as their studies. *But we're extremely busy, and times are changing. We've got to have jobs now. We've got to. We're...maybe we're not all pen pushers anymore* (Daniel). The *Australian Survey of Student Experience* (Coates, 2011) found that 66 per cent of first-year students and 73 per cent of later-year students participate in off campus paid work and that most first years work between 6 and 20 hours, while later years tend to work between 11 and 15 hours a week (Coates, 2011, p. 1). The percentages would be much higher for students from a low socio economic background.

Students who had a job in a rural home town sometimes chose to stay in that town and commute to the university. This decision meant that they had to forgo government student support because they were living at home, they also placed their studies at risk because of the time required to commute the long distances between Australian country towns. The certainty of the local job may trap the student in a high risk situation. The combination of travel and paid work eating into time provides a double jeopardy for students:

- Belinda: *I think a lot of people who don't want to move here and who travel –*
- Sophie: *And it's so hard though because I mean she's living in Coota because it's –*
- Belinda: *And it's so expensive.*
- Sophie: *It's cheaper at home –*
- Belinda: *Oh, it's cheaper – yeah.*
- Sophie: *But she can't get Centrelink because she ...*
- Belinda: *She lives at home.*
- Sophie: *And if she is to move to Wagga she'd be paying more in rent. She'd have to quit her job.*
- Belinda: *But she'd pay less petrol.*
- Sophie: *But you know it's ... balance for people.*
- Belinda: *Yeah, it's a no win situation.*
- Sophie: *And then with uni accommodation being so much.*
- Belinda: *It's so expensive.*

The practicum experience provided significant motivation for students, but with other commitments in their lives it was also a logistical challenge. Students often had to travel to a remote site, find accommodation, organise childcare and get leave from their paid employment. Often an absence for a block of time provided casual employers with an opportunity to replace students with younger, cheaper workers.

*Someone else in our group got a bad mark for an assignment. And what had happened is she's working every afternoon after she finished prac and as a result the work didn't go into the assignment that needed to. And she is heartbroken. She is absolutely heartbroken. She didn't want to do badly. She wanted to do well but the fact – and I just feel so much for her in the fact that she had to go home after prac. After working a full day to go to her work in order to survive* (Mitch).

In their first year of study these young people often struggled to judge what they could manage.

The issues of travel and accommodation are closely linked as students juggle the cost of petrol against lower rural rents. This calculation is complicated by the vagaries of the academic calendar which imposes a long break between spring and autumn sessions. On-campus students must move out, and renting students may have to leave their accommodation empty for a period.

## **Academic language and culture**

Students in this study noted the difficulties they faced in decoding the academic language of the subjects they studied. Josh summed this up well: *For me this semester has been like reading gibberish. They felt the academic staff spoke a foreign language and provided inadequate translation aids. Sometimes you just – it goes straight over your head. And they just keep explaining it the way that makes sense to them but just – you don't get it!* (Fay). Despite this cultural capital deficit most students demonstrated great tenacity and determination in tackling their academic reading:

*A lot [of us struggle with the readings] yeah, using all those words that don't pop up every day, and you've got to try and, like, you'd read, and you'd have to figure out what that word means, and then go back and read again, and another line, you've got to figure out what another word is* (Jed).

For some, however, the volume of inaccessible reading, referred to by several participants, proved overwhelming:

Wendy: *Yeah massive words.*

Fiona: *It's hard.*

Wendy: *And that turned me off wanting ... I'm like ... doing assignments, I try to can't get motivated by what I'm writing about.*

Fiona: *If you don't know it you're not going to ...*

Wendy: *We don't have it in our heads and it's a challenge, so a lot of people go, "You know what, that is too challenging".*

For others, the unexpected content and complex language provided an exciting personal challenge that was welcomed:

*It's so hard. It's different, and I thought, oh yeah this is going to – for me like it's good because it's challenging, like when ... It's like, I don't want to just sit at a job, not that there's anything wrong with that, but for me, you can put whatever you want into it, like this is **You*** (Sophie).

Sophie was still having difficulty putting her ideas into words but she was stimulated by the opportunity to stretch herself.

## **Technology**

Participants also expressed some difficulty with the expectation that they have skills with technology and a capacity to access information:

Morgan: *I find the library really intimidating.*

Jacque: *It's just so big, and there's so much stuff in there.*

Morgan: *You don't know where to start looking even.*

Jacque: *And everything's online as well. Technology! It's terrible. We're expected to be able to be into technology, we're "generation ..." and stuff like that, and we're expected to know about smart boards and how to use them. I never come across them in my primary school. We never had them in my high school. So how am I meant to know how to operate them and use them?*

Jacque did not know which 'generation' she was supposed to be, but she was angry at the homogenised expectations placed on her group. She needed her unique background to be acknowledged.

## **Rurality**

Despite a high level of motivation, these students faced many obstacles to success in the tertiary sector. The regional location of their campus and their rural roots often meant extensive travel and difficulty in finding accommodation and financing their studies. It appears that a university

education requires these young people to 'defer' a number of things in their lives in order to achieve their longer term goal. In his exploration of the pressures on rural young people, Corbett observed that:

*Taking things seriously, 'deferring gratification' and working hard in school where the immediate relevance of what is happening is not always evident have been chief attitudinal markers associated with the middle classes (Corbett, 2010, p. 230).*

Corbett went on to observe that rural working class youths must also sacrifice rural paying jobs in order to further their education. He ruefully observed the cost of education as deferring *not 'gratification' but an immediate pay-cheque and the pragmatic rigours of adult life* (Corbett, 2010, p. 230). Mature aged university students have often sacrificed secure salaries:

*I have found a struggle being at uni, not making money, going from full time nursing to hardly anything, but it's the thing – if you come to uni and you want to be a teacher you need to sacrifice that (Susan).*

It could be argued that students also feel a 'loss of adult life' as they must continue to be dependent and compliant. Sarah outlined the challenge of finding a *balance* among all the pressures:

*So the support of my parents ... I'm an adult now, and you don't like to be – your parents are always there, and they say that they don't care, like of course, they're going to help me at uni, but you don't want to have to rely on your parents any more. And then that stress of, I need money to pay rent to live over here, and then, oh I'm stressed because, look at my uni load, it's just finding a balance ... It's hard (Sarah).*

To facilitate the successful completion of tertiary study by increasing numbers of marginalised students, universities must become more finely attuned to this 'balance'.

## CONCLUSION

If universities are to respond to the challenges of increasing participation of low socio economic and rural teacher education students they will need to facilitate their motivation and engagement and do what they can to reduce the barriers they face. These students face many challenges in modifying their habituses to accommodate the demands of tertiary study, but they are also highly motivated by their desire to join the teaching profession. The important role played by the practicum experience as a motivating link with the profession has long been acknowledged, but the cost of these programs is increasingly dominating conversations about teacher education rather than its invaluable contribution. Trainee teachers in rural areas face additional challenges from extended travel times to rural schools, geographic isolation and rural accommodation shortages.

Universities favour a particular type of cultural capital not readily available in isolated rural sites. They must actively provide access to this capital, particularly as it is evidenced in the language and technology privileged by tertiary courses.

Economic capital is also an issue as the inescapable need to accommodate paid employment time for students becomes an increasingly urgent matter. Affordable accommodation and public transport are also important factors in access and capacity to engage for students forced to move a long way from their homes.

In addition, steps need to be taken to facilitate the development and maintenance of strong social capital. Networks of support from peers, family, friends and academics were identified as crucial to students' capacity to sustain engagement and motivation. The move from small, tight knit rural communities to large anonymous urban sites can be very dislocating. The unique identities of learners from different backgrounds and locations need to be recognised. School leavers, mature aged students and students from diverse cultures and places face the challenge of maintaining a sense of self as they are in the process of habitus transformation. Tertiary institutions need to guard against homogenising the student body. Inclusive teaching strategies and a respectful university culture may begin to acknowledge and benefit from difference. At all levels of the university sector we need to find ways to

strengthen the supportive networks relied on by students and acknowledge the many barriers they find in their path as they embark on the tertiary learning journey.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge the work of my co-researcher Gerald Wurf, Course Director and lecturer at Charles Sturt University, who carried the responsibility for the quantitative

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