

Mount Druitt University Hub

Report No.3



The Pleasures and Displeasures of Student Life: Experiences of low socioeconomic status youth in higher education

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The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the project partners

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Executive Summary

- Drawing on the fundamentals of social marketing on non-monetary cost/benefit “pricing” with a focus on pleasures and displeasures a starting point, this report examines the initial experiences of higher education recounted in 5 focus group discussions conducted in April 2013 involving between 5-9 undergraduate participants from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds from the suburb of Mount Druitt in Western Sydney
- This report specifically attends to their extra-curricular experiences of pleasure/displeasure at 5 higher education institutions in the metropolitan Sydney region
- From the discussions in the focus group, three factors appeared to affect these low SES students’ experiences of pleasure/displeasure: the availability of social activities; the accessibility of social spaces; and the possibility of establishing friendships
- From these factors, this report submits three working hypotheses for further investigation and possible intervention within specific institutional contexts:
 1. The perceived possibility of friendships but lack of access to social spaces and unavailability of social activities are linked to experiences of displeasure;
 2. The perceived possibility of friendships but unavailability of accessible social activities and social spaces are linked to experiences of displeasure; and
 3. The availability of social activities, social spaces and friendships are linked to pleasurable experiences.

1. Introduction

Pleasures then, and the avoidance of pains, are the *ends* that the legislator has in view; it behoves him [*sic*] therefore to understand their *value*.

Pleasures and pains are the *instruments* he has to work with: it behoves him therefore to understand their force, which is again, in other words, their value. (Bentham, 2002[1907], IV.1)

In a column in the Higher Education Supplement of *The Australian* on 9 April 2013, Melbourne-based accounting lecturer Philip Wong argued that while “[t]he academic old guard often worries about the great hollowing out of on-campus cultures”, by-and-large these trends are a positive sign of the times because students “are happy to swap the campus atmosphere for flexible online delivery, wherever it helps them get ahead.” He points to how “O[rientation] Week isn’t what it used to be. The uni bar shuts earlier. Scavenger hunts no longer involve (as many) dangerous stunts... common areas are smaller and under-utilised [and because] students go work, come for a lecture, and then run back to work... obscure interest appreciation societies don’t stand a chance.” Hence, for Wong (2013), in an age where “[p]hysical presence seems passé when lectures are online, journal articles are instantly downloadable, and your “friends” are a status update away”, the majority of “[s]tudents know they are missing out, but are happy to swap the campus atmosphere for flexible online delivery, wherever it helps them get ahead.” He argues that this is a consequence of the increasing diversity of the student population, which includes “students [who] come from low SES backgrounds and need to support themselves throughout their study.” This new reality, Wong (2013) thus argues, “is far better than any idealised romantic notion of the old days... There is simply no ‘problem’ here to fix.”

While his newspaper column as an opinion piece cannot be subject to the standards of verification – indeed, its central claims about what students want appear to be based on personal anecdote only – this report finds that from a social marketing point of view, Wong’s approach lacks an understanding of the centrality of non-monetary benefits and costs in encouraging and sustaining diversity in higher education. Such an understanding includes attending to how extra-curricular social activities derided by Wong such as Orientation Weeks, gatherings at university bars, cafes and other public spaces that may form a part of a pleasurable higher education experience or conversely, how the “hollowing out of campus” or “loss of social events” regarded by Wong (2013) as “a small price to pay for better outcomes” may lead to situations of displeasure, all of which are factors considered by social marketing to significantly influence behavioural decisions like persisting in higher education or abandoning it (see *Box 1*).

This report seeks to understand some of the experiences recounted by beginning higher education students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds through the fundamentals of social marketing on non-monetary cost/benefit “pricing.” Social marketing names a broad suite of approaches that utilise tools, techniques and concepts derived from commercial marketing in pursuit of a range of social goals. On this basis, along with some supplementary reference to scholars that have explored the parallel relationship between social policy goals and pleasure in

Box 1

Tuning in to those dropping out

As students return for a new university year, a sobering fate awaits many of those just starting out. One in five will drop out of their course at more than a third of Australia’s universities.

At some, the attrition rates are much worse. Almost a quarter of first-year domestic students abandon their studies at Victoria University, Murdoch University and the University of New England. More than a third quit at Charles Darwin University, Central Queensland University and the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

Only two of the nation’s 39 universities - Melbourne University (7 per cent) and the Australian National University (9 per cent) - have single digit dropout rates for first-year domestic students, according to the latest 2010 figures from the federal Education Department.

Source: *The Australian*, 28 February 2012. Available online:

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/tuning-in-to-those-dropping-out-20120227-1tyk8.html#ixzz2jcgHgEA>

encouraging harm reducing behaviours, this report submits that higher education institutions and government programs should attend to situations that abet feelings of pleasure/displeasure experienced by low SES students in order to enhance the odds of retention amongst such students.

In Section 2, this report brings together scholarship in social marketing on the importance of gauging costs/benefits in seeking to persuade a target audience of a particular course of action alongside those in social policy that discuss the uses of pleasure/displeasure by liberal governments as initially advanced by philosopher Jeremy Bentham (2002[1907]). Section 3 will then consider the context of the problem that frames this report: that of increasing higher education participation rates while stemming attrition, especially amongst low SES students (and other historically under-represented students that are not focused on in this report) in order to reach specific Australian Government policy goals.

Using the cost/benefit with a focus on pleasures/displeasures as a rubric and the focus group method outlined in Section 4, this report then canvasses the experiential accounts of higher education that have arisen in 5 focus group discussions conducted in April 2013 in Section 5. These focus groups involved between 5-9 low-SES undergraduate participants from the suburb of Mount Druitt in Western Sydney and the analysis in Section 5 will attend specifically to the expressions of pleasure or displeasure as recounted by these students in their first semester of higher education at 5 institutions located across the metropolitan Sydney region. The common factors in these accounts will be identified and three hypotheses about the factors leading to pleasure/displeasure in student life within higher education will be advanced on the basis of the discussions in these focus groups.

In Section 6, on the basis of the common factors of pleasure/displeasure discerned from the experiences of the focus group participants in their initial months of higher education, this report will draw implications that warrant further consideration for educational institutions and government programs that seek to improve the retention rates of students from low SES backgrounds.

2. The uses of pleasure in guiding social behaviour

In his oft-cited description of social marketing, Alan Andreason (1995) defines it as the “application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society” (p. 5). From this concise summary two points are noteworthy with regard to the relationship between social marketing and its better known commercial variant: First of all, both forms of marketing share broadly similar techniques in order to understand and reach their target audiences as well as measure the effectiveness of their programs. And secondly, although social marketing utilises tools, techniques and concepts derived from commercial marketing, it deploys these in pursuit of social goals as opposed to commercial ones. That is, the majority of social marketing initiatives focus on changing behavior to increase the well-being of given individuals, communities and/or societies rather than on generating profits (Peattie & Peattie, 2001). In short, as Peattie and Peattie (2003) argue, what social marketers are offering to their target audiences are “behavioural propositions” such as “exercise is beneficial”, “drinking and driving ruins lives” or “voting is worthwhile” (p. 371).

In order to encourage the voluntary uptake of particular behavioural propositions, a key consideration for social marketing is the nexus of *product* and *price*. As Andreason (2002) argues, any strategy to influence behaviours should create “attractive benefit packages (products) while minimizing costs (price) wherever possible” (p. 7). Here, then, the product refers to the normative behaviour sought in the target audience and its supposed benefits, and price refers to the costs incurred in adopting that behaviour over other competing behaviours (Kotler, Roberto & Lee, 2002, p. 217). It is important at this point to emphasise that while product and price in social marketing may refer to the monetary benefits and costs associated

with the promoted behaviour, equal attention also needs to be paid to its non-monetary benefits and costs. Kotler et al (2002) thus alert social marketers that the non-monetary costs, while intangible, are no less “real” for the target audience: “They are costs associated with *time, effort, and energy* to perform the *behavior*; *psychological risks and losses* that might be perceived or experienced; and any *physical discomforts* that may be related to the behaviour” (p. 217; emphasis in original). So in cognisance of such non-monetary costs, any program that seeks to increase the voluntary choice of a desired behaviour must have a clear *pricing objective*, which includes the key point that whatever is offered to the target market in terms of intangible benefits has to be equal to or greater than what they will have to give up in terms of intangible costs (Kotler et al, 2002, p. 217) In addition, pricing objectives should also ensure that desired behaviours appear to have fewer costs and more benefits than less desirable alternatives (Thackeray & McCormack Brown, 2010, p. 167; see *Figure 1*).

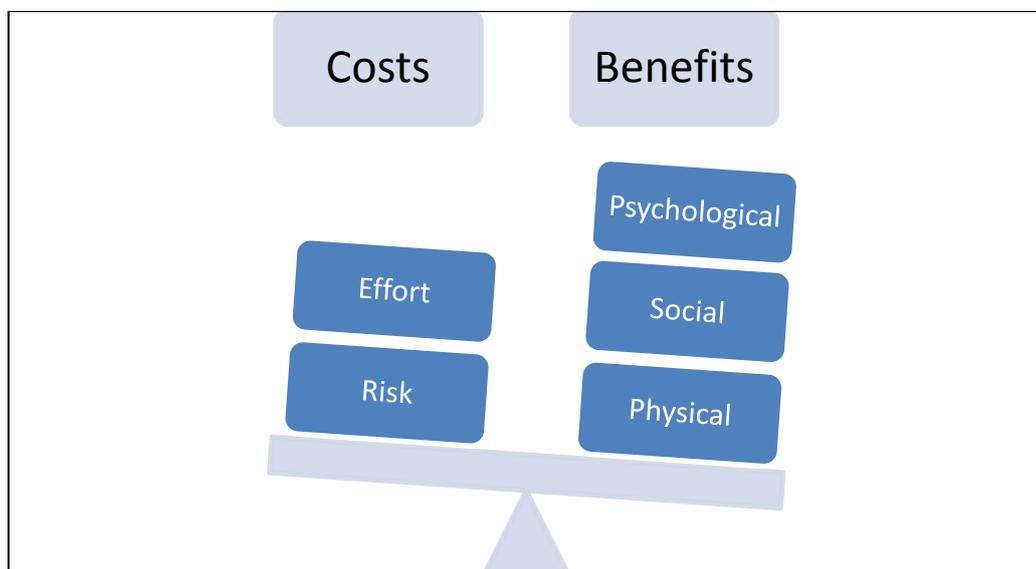


Figure 1: The pricing objective is that the benefits of desired activity should outweigh the costs

In seeking to persuade particular individuals and groups to make voluntary behavioural choices in directions that are more socially desirable, the goals of social

marketing can be understood more broadly in relation to the project of liberal government. Liberal modes of governing are distinguished in general by the ways in which it utilises the capacities of free acting subjects as a central means of achieving broader social goals (Peters, 2009, p. xxxi; also Foucault, 2008). In present day liberal societies like Australia – what Rose (1999, p. 59) terms “advanced liberal societies” – individuals are encouraged and induced to become “entrepreneurs of themselves” by making educated and knowledgeable decisions in respect to their bodies, their minds and their lives. In so doing, they are “bonded into society through the choices they make, the risks they take, and the responsibilities themselves and others which thereby arise and which they required to assume” (Donzelot, 2009, p. 8). At the heart of such liberal constructions of the free and responsible subject who chooses, then, is the pleasure/displeasure nexus as first proposed by social philosopher Jeremy Bentham (2002[1907]) whereby human beings are supposed, at the most basic level, to be subject to the “governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure” so that ultimately these “point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do” (IV.1).

According to O’Malley and Valverde (2004), pleasure and responsible decision-making are “foundationally linked” and “a given” in the way liberal government induces free choices toward socially desirable paths because it valorises certain actions or ends as “pleasant”, and which are accorded a positive value in the felicity calculus with the effect that individuals will prefer these (pp. 27-28). Conversely, actions and ends that government regards as problematic are designated as “unpleasant.” In this way, pleasure can be mobilised by liberal government as a tactic: “pleasure is Good and, warrantably, can only be assigned to the Good” (O’Malley & Valverde, 2005, p. 40).

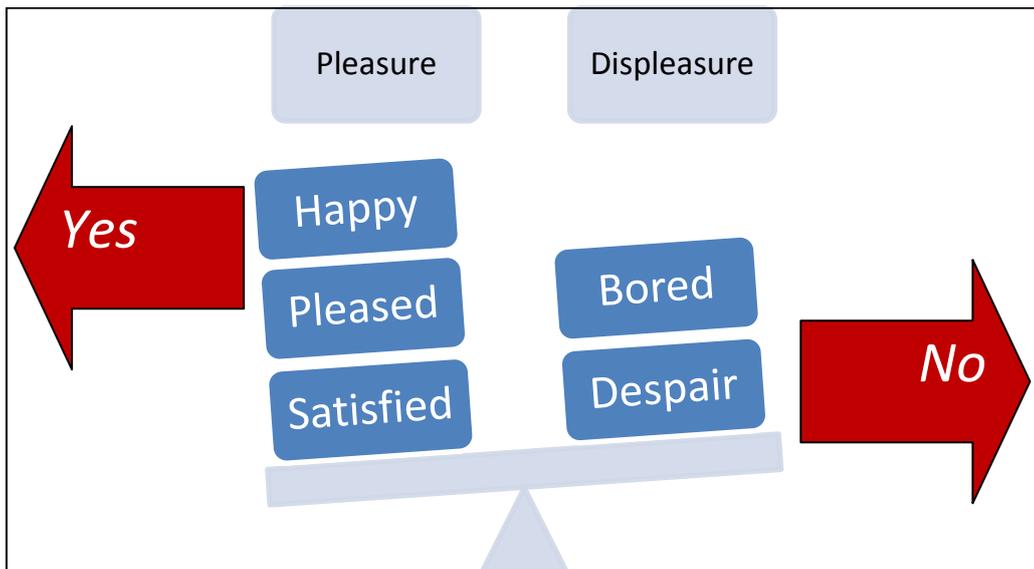


Figure 2: If pleasures of a desired action outweigh costs, then the action will be chosen (and vice-versa)

In a similar vein, Race (2007) in his work on harm reduction strategies for drug users counsels the use of pleasure as a social pragmatics for harm reduction practice because it provides “an alternative to the normalizing and pathologizing tendencies implicit in therapeutic morality, in that it enables the recognition of practices of safety and care that would otherwise go unregistered in the current punitive political environment” (p. 422). In other words, pleasure is a more subtle (and possibly effective) register for augmenting safe behaviour than moralistic denunciations that Race (2007) characterises as an “overblown moral drama about good and evil, wholesomeness and guilt” (p. 422). This is because the former accords harm reduction’s target market – the drug-using subject – a certain freedom to act in ways that minimise harm within their lived situations.

3. Context of the problem: Higher education participation and attrition

Given the commonality between the objectives of social marketing on non-monetary benefits/costs pricing and liberal government's use of pleasure/displeasure – that is, both seek to direct voluntary behaviour towards desired social goals – what insight might these approaches offer to the problem of higher education retention amongst students from low SES backgrounds? Before addressing this question more specifically, it is necessary to offer a sketch of the policy context in Australia that has rendered retention as a problem to be addressed.

In 2009, the Australian Federal Government released the *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* document, which laid out its policy agenda for reforming higher education towards a “vision of a stronger and fairer Australia” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 5). Higher education in the reckoning of this document “fuels economic development, productivity and high skilled jobs and supports Australia's role as a middle power and leader in the region” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 2). In order to achieve this broad vision, a key part of the Australian Government's reform agenda is its commitment to “radically improve the participation of students from low socio economic backgrounds (low SES) in higher education, and enhance their learning experience” in order that “graduates [will be equipped] with the knowledge, skills and understandings for full participation in society and the economy” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 9). This aspect of the higher education policy agenda is, in turn, based on a favourable response to the 2008 *Review of Higher Education* – known also as the ‘Bradley Review’ – which set the target participation rate for domestic low SES undergraduate students at 20 per cent of total student populations by 2020 if the overall goals of the Australian Government are to be met.

According to most recently available student data from the Commonwealth Department of Education in 2010-11, significant progress towards the Bradley Review's 20 per cent equity target has been made across most Australian universities, with 16.7 per cent of domestic undergraduates recruited from low SES districts, up by 5.4 per cent from the previous year (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, 2012). However, of the 15 universities across Australia already above the 20 per cent target in their recruitment of low SES undergraduates, 9 also have attrition rates above 20 per cent and all but one have attrition rates above the national average of 18.1 per cent (Ross, 2011). Student attrition, therefore, appears to stand as a significant foil to the success of university recruitment in increasing enrolments from students of low SES.

4. Method

Given this particular problem within the context of Australian higher education, what might the above discussion of social marketing and pleasure/displeasure contribute? This report's conjecture is that by attending to the situations in higher education that bring benefits/costs in the form of pleasure (*P+*) or displeasure (*P-*) to students from low SES backgrounds, governmental and institutional interventions can be better targeted to stemming the attrition of such students. The remainder of this report will consider the experiences recounted by first semester undergraduate students from low SES backgrounds recounted in 5 focus groups – numbered G¹⁻⁵ in order of their appearance in this report – conducted in the period from 1 April to 30 April 2013 in their home suburb of Mount Druitt, Western Sydney.

In order to protect the privacy of the student participants, they are labelled alphabetically within each focus group (e.g. G^{1a}, G^{2b}, G^{3c}, etc.) in the order in which they have been cited in this report to ensure the security of their identities and prevent the content of discussions to be linked to individual students or groups. In addition, ethical and procedural approval for this research was sought and given by a consortium of institutional stakeholders that are involved in the Mount Druitt University Hub, a project that seeks to increase higher education participation amongst youth in the region involving the Australian Catholic University, the Parramatta Catholic Education Office and two local high schools – Loyola Senior High School and Rooty Hill High School.

A total of 35 participants from 6 metropolitan Sydney universities participated in these focus groups, with G¹ consisting of 7 participants (4 female and 3 male), G² with 9 participants (5 female and 4 male), G³ with 5 participants (3 female and 2 male), G⁴ with 5 participants (4 female and 1 male) and G⁵ with 9 participants (5 female and 4 male). All participants are

categorised as undergraduate students undergoing ‘financial hardship’ under the present Universities Admissions Centre’s (UAC) ‘Educational Access Schemes’ criteria, which processes claims to financial disadvantage with reference to individual and family circumstances in its eligibility requirements on behalf of 24 higher education institutions incorporating all of the publicly-funded universities in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. All participants also indicated that they were the first members of their families to attempt higher education at a university-level.

Each focus group was provided with refreshments and ran for approximately one hour each. Participants were ensured of the security of their identities in any discussion that was recorded and transcribed, all data was encrypted and stored in a private hard drive in its electronic form, preventing any access from public networks. While an extensive recount of the entirety of the discussions in each focus group is impossible within the scope of this report, it is nonetheless possible to give an account of some recurrent discussion themes across G¹⁻⁵ that may highlight situations of *P+*/*P-*. To discern what experiences may be categorised as either *P+* or *P-*, this report draws on consumer behaviour scholars Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) working definition of pleasure as measured by participants’ verbal assessments of their experiences as: happy as opposed to unhappy; pleased as opposed to annoyed; satisfied as opposed to unsatisfied; contented as opposed to melancholic; hopeful as opposed to despairing; relaxed as opposed to bored (also Foxall, 1997; see *Table 1*). It is predicted that these may offer a partial snapshot of the non-monetary benefits/costs experienced by students from low SES backgrounds in higher education that may, in turn, be consequential to their retention in university.

Table 1: Types of experiences categorised as pleasure (P+) and displeasure (P-)

<i>P+</i>	<i>P-</i>
Happy	Unhappy
Pleased	Annoyed
Satisfied	Unsatisfied
Contented	Melancholic
Hopeful	Despairing
Relaxed	Bored

5. Situations of pleasure/displeasure analysed

The first situation that emerged in focus group discussions most germane to P+/P- appears to be related to opportunities social interaction. This was particularly pronounced in G¹ where students at a particular campus complained of the lack of planned social activities and accessibility to spaces for social interaction:

G^{1a}: There's not enough social stuff happening at this uni. Like, we are getting pretty pissed off because [student from another university] keeps on posting stuff on Facebook about all these parties he's going to. And he keeps telling us: "oh, you should've come to this [other] uni!" Such a dickhead!

G^{1b}: At this uni nothing happens. There's no bar, no cafe...

G^{1c}: Yeah, and the cafeteria in there is bloody expensive! I went and bought a yoghurt this morning and it cost seven bucks... And it tasted like shit anyway.

G^{1d}: I wouldn't buy coffee from there! Four bucks or more...

G^{1a}: There's nowhere to go and hang out, you know, like meet people and stuff. We see people around all the time and recognise them, but we have no chance to actually meet them.

G^{1e}: Like, it's nice here because it's really chilled out and relaxed, but I wouldn't mind more social activities. Like they have at other unis.

G^{1b}: I know! I thought starting uni, there would be a time when you have heaps of things happening and clubs to join... there wasn't anything at all here. So there's stuff happening around sports, but nothing else. We need a bar like at other unis and a place we can hang out after class.

G^{1e}: I reckon this place would be cool to run a Halloween party in! Do you know where I can apply to do something like that, get money to run it? I don't even know where to start. Do I have to run for SRC or something? Because I would totally, but I don't even know where to ask about it.

For the participants in G¹, the situation at their campus presents several experiences that can be categorised as *P*-, and which can be categorised into two broad themes. The first of these is the perceived temporal lack of social activities that may provide opportunities for social interaction amongst students as expressed as the absence of prospects expressed temporally as the inadequate by G^{1a} and G^{1e} or the absolute non-occurrence of social activities by G^{1b}. While the participants did not specify in detail the types of social activities that they wanted to participate in, G^{1a} expressed a certain degree of resentment at a peer from another university campus who publicises the “parties” the latter attends via social media and G^{1e} expresses a wish for the campus to “be like other unis” and to organise a “Halloween party.” G^{1b} also suggests that the social activities supposed as lacking in this discussion are beyond the scope of “stuff happening around sports.” A second distinct theme is the perceived lack of spatially accessible opportunities for social interaction as voiced by G^{1a}, G^{1b}, G^{1c} and G^{1d}. This is articulated variously as a physical absence of such social spaces like

bars, cafes or places to “hang out” (G^{1a} and G^{1b}), as the economic inaccessibility of the existing sole option (G^{1c} and G^{1d}), or as the lack of knowledge about the procedure for suggesting and acting in an attempt to improve the situation (G^{1e}).

Despite the apparently overwhelming number of experiences that can be categorised as $P-$ with regard to social activities and social spaces, the discussion above does offer some instances of $P+$ in this regard at the university campus attended by the participants of G^1 . For example, G^{1a} suggests that there is a certain familiarity between the students to the point of recognition, G^{1b} points to the availability of social spaces and social activities associated with sports and G^{1e} states that the overall social environment on the campus is both easy-going (“really chilled out and relaxed”) and envisions possibilities for successful social activities (e.g. “Halloween party”) within the physical space of the campus. It is implied that such a social activities would also effectively change the perception of the existent campus space into a social space in light of the positive social environment.

The relationship between $P+/P-$ and opportunities for social interaction owing to social spaces and social activities appear to correlate with the experiences articulated by the participants of G^2 at a different university campus. However, the discussion in this group centred on the excitement and enjoyment of the parties and social clubs the participants had access to:

G^{2a} : Are you guys going to the party tonight at [particular university bar]?

G^{2b} : Hell yeah man! [Themed] party at uni tonight... so keen!

G^{2a}: Yeah, me too!

Moderator: Sounds like you enjoy the social life here.

G^{2c}: I'm like in six clubs and they all have something on, all these parties and stuff. It's pretty cool, meeting all these people and stuff. In [particular special interest] club, we meet at [particular on-campus café], and the coffee there is so good. So yeah, we just hang out and drink coffee and talk. But wait till we tell them we're from Mount Druitt! Haha...

G^{2d}: Due to uni calling strike on Tuesday and Wednesday next week... again! I will have gone to uni six days out of the possible fifteen in the first three weeks... What's that all about? I miss out on all these club meetings and after class drinks where I get to hang out with other people from class, which is heaps sick.

In G², then, the participants appear to experience several situations at their campus as *P+*. For G^{2a} and G^{2b}, this is expressed in their apparent enthusiasm for programmed social activities like a “[specifically themed] party” while for G^{2c} and G^{2d}, it is the combination of accessible social spaces such as cafes (G^{2c}) or bars (G^{2d}) and special interest clubs on campus – which can be categorised here as a form of social activity – that appear to be sources of *P+*. The only instance of *P-* expressed in this exchange is by G^{2d} and is centred on the perceived deprivation of *P+* activities such as “club meetings” and “after class drinks” owing to a disruption caused by an industrial action.

From the comparison of the discussions in G^1 and G^2 , then, it would appear that there is a correlation between $P+$ and the existence of certain planned social activities (e.g. special interest clubs, parties) and social spaces that are accessible (e.g. cafes, bars) – taken both physically and economically – that allow for such social interactions to occur. This logic may then be simply represented as in *Figure 1*, where the combination of social activities and social spaces for interaction is supposed to lead to situations of $P+$.

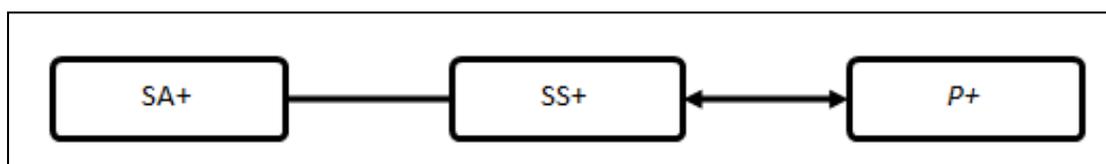


Figure 3: Availability (+) of social activities (SA) and social spaces (SS) is supposed to be linked to (\leftrightarrow) situations of $P+$

However, the discussions in G^3 and G^4 suggest that even on campuses where these elements appear available, participants may still not experience $P+$. In G^3 , for example, the accounts of some participants at a particular university campus indicates that even when participants actively involve themselves with social activities and access social spaces, the overwhelming sentiment expressed is $P-$:

G^{3a} : I find myself alone most of the time. People, like, I see them once a week and they are polite to me and stuff, but after the class you're like, "Ok..." [awkwardly] People are friendly to your face but they're not very open. It's like they've got their guard on. It's kind of hard because I'm a loud person and I'm never alone, but now at uni I eat lunch by myself and stuff. So normally I go to this grass area or [on-campus] café where everyone sits around with a group of friends, but me, I eat lunch alone.

G^{3b}: Yeah, I thought there would be more people from out West at [particular] uni, but there's not! They're from Mosman or Kirribilli and when I tell them I'm from Mount Druitt, they either don't know where Mount Druitt is or they look at me like, "Oh, ok." [warily] Then they either just feel awkward and avoid you or they get condescending. Like this one time I was at a movie night and I sat next to this lady in the theatre, When I told her I'm from Mount Druitt, she was like, "Oh, have you got enough money for the bus home tonight?"

G3c: I went to this big O Week party and pretty much sat by myself the whole time. I was thinking to myself, "Shit, is this what it's going to be like for the next 3 or 4 years?"

Moderator: And has it been so far?

G3c: Yeah, pretty much. Like [G^{3a}], I'm by myself most of the time. So everyone else looks like they're doing all this fun stuff, and I'm like this loser who sits by themselves on the grass [area] there...

G3a: And we were never losers like that at school! We were never like loners when we were with our friends! But now we are.

Moderator: Do you [G3^{a-c}] hang out together?

G3d: We're all doing different things so we're not in the same place [on campus]. And there's only five of us, so it's not like there's heaps of people we know from our area [i.e. Mount Druitt region].

In this discussion, the elements of social activities such as a “movie night” (G^{3b}) and an “O Week Party” (G^{3c}) appear available, as do accessible social spaces like a “grass area” (G^{3a} and G^{3c}), a “café” (G^{3a}) and a “theatre” (G^{3b}), which for G^2 were expressed as what augmented experiences of $P+$. However, for the participants in G^3 the combination of these elements does not suggest the same consequent experiences. This seems to be a result of the participants' perceived position in relation to other students at that particular university campus. So for G^{3a} , other students are described as “polite” and “friendly to your face” but “not very open” and having “their guard on”, which suggests that this participant experiences a relational barrier that obstructs what is termed in this report – for want of a better label – *friendship*. This relational barrier to friendships is also evident in the $P-$ experiences of G^{3b} and G^{3c} . For the former, it is described as a type of wariness, aversion or condescension understood by this participant to arise as a result of stating their place of origin (“when I tell them I'm from Mount Druitt”). For G^{3c} , $P-$ is experienced as isolation from others in social activities (“O Week party”) and social spaces (“the grass [area]”) that are ostensible opportunities for interaction and the development of friendships. This sense of isolation appears to be compounded in the $P-$ experience of G^{3d} because of the dispersion of very small numbers of students from Mount Druitt across their campus.

Such experiences of $P-$ due to perceived barriers to the development of friendships despite the presence of social activities and social spaces are also evident in the situations

described by participants in G⁴ at a different university campus. Here, the themes around friendships appear to be foregrounded:

G^{4a}: I went to a few social things at the bar and talked to a few people from class. They're alright, but they have all these in-jokes with their friends and stuff. It's hard because they all have friends from school, like a fair few of them, but we don't have many people from our school at the uni, like four or five of us and we are all in different parts of the uni [campus].

G^{4b}: Yeah, when we go to [social] things, they stay in their own groups with their mates and don't really want to know us. So I don't even go to those things anymore.

G^{4c}: Maybe because we're from the Druiitt? I don't know. I've made two friends. One is a student from China. She's really nice and we hang out heaps when we have frees [i.e. free time], but yeah most of the time it's hard because you see people for like one hour a week and that's it. But with [friend from China] we talk about how we're going, how we feel a bit out of place, and it's really nice to get to talk about it with someone else. It's nice to know you're not the only one. It gets pretty lonely.

In this discussion, G^{4a-c} each express *P-* in relation to what they perceive to be barriers to the development of friendships. For G^{4a} and G^{4b}, such barriers are experienced as exclusion from existing relational groups that other university students have carried over from high school *despite* attending social activities (“social things”, “[social] things”) in

available social spaces (“the bar”). These are manifest for G^{4a} and G^{4b} as a lack of facility with a shared discourse (“in-jokes”), a numerical lack of existing friendships from the participants’ high school (“we don’t have many people from our school... like four or five of us... in different parts of the uni”) and actions perceived as deliberately exclusive of friendships (“stay in their own groups... don’t really want to know us”). In the account of G^{4c}, the difficulties experienced in developing friendships are attributed to others’ perceptions of Mount Druitt and/or the nature of the university schedule and modes of pedagogy at that particular campus (“most of the time it’s hard because you see people for like one hour a week and that’s it”). While G^{4c} does experience *P-* in the form of isolation (“It gets pretty lonely”), this appears to be attenuated by the *P+* of a few friendships that have developed (i.e. “made two friends”), and in particular a Chinese student with whom G^{4c} can discuss their experiences of university life (“how we’re going”) and shared experiences of isolation and exclusion (“how we feel a bit out of place”).

Taken in contrast to what was surmised from the experiences of the participants of G², participants’ experiences in G³ and G⁴ suggest that the existence of social activities and social spaces do not necessarily equate to situations of *P+*, especially where there are perceived barriers to the development of friendships. However, when also considering the accounts of G¹ participants whereby the absence of these elements is also experienced a barrier to friendships in an otherwise friendly – or “really chilled out and relaxed” – environment, two working hypotheses may be inferred: firstly (H1), that social activities and access to social spaces are necessary but insufficient elements of campus life for *P+* in the absence of possibilities for the development of friendships; and secondly (H2), that possibilities for the development of friendships as *P+* are unrealised in the absence of social activities and social spaces for interaction (see *Figure 2*).

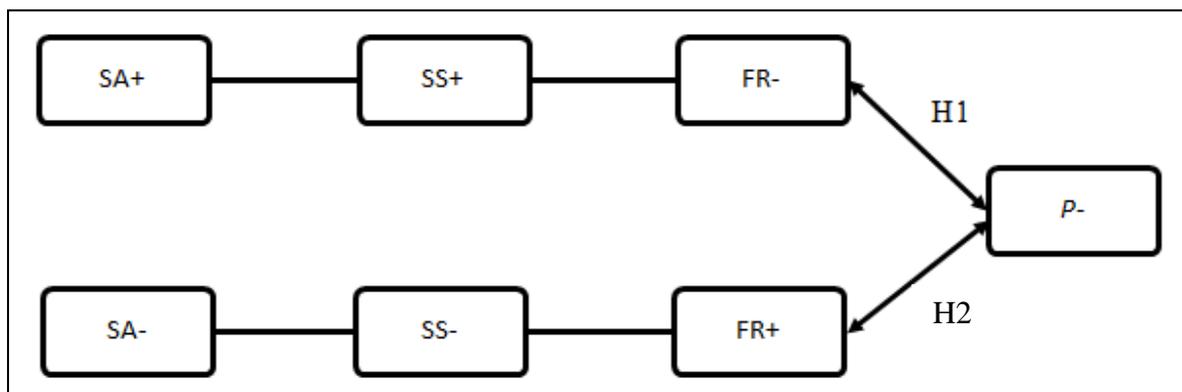


Figure 4: H1 is that the availability (+) of social activities (SA) and social spaces (SS) with non-availability (-) of friendships (FR) is linked to (\leftrightarrow) P-; H2 is that the non-availability (-) of SA and SS with the availability (+) of FR is linked to (\leftrightarrow) P-

Given H1 and H2, is it then possible to infer from G^{1-4} that the availability of social activities, social spaces and friendships together will lead to $P+$? There is little in G^{1-4} to suggest that this is the case given that the experience of $P-$ was the dominant theme in the discussion of extra-curricular aspects of university life in G^1 , G^3 and G^4 while in G^2 , the theme of the availability or non-availability of friendships based on the participants' experiences did not emerge as a noticeable theme of discussion. However, in G^5 , the discussion of extra-curricular aspects of university life at the participants' campus does suggest the availability of social activities, social spaces and friendships as part of an overall experience of $P+$:

G^{5a} : I'm really enjoying this campus... They have a fair bit of stuff going on. Everyone's really, like, not snobby. Like there was an O[rientation] Week boat cruise and I got to meet heaps of people. I see them all the time on campus now and we always stop to talk unless we're, like, late for class or something.

G^{5b}: Or don't turn up [to class] if the conversation gets interesting! Just hang in the courtyard or the common room, play pool or table tennis. There's always people there down for a game. Or watch TV. And there's also lounges to chillax. Who even goes to class? Haha! Nah, jokes.

G^{5a}: I'm not you! Haha! Seriously but, this is a sweet campus. There's pubs and cafes and stuff that everyone goes to in [surrounding suburb] and so we sometimes go after class. And all the events are posted on the uni website, so we always know what fun stuff is happening... and we get to catch up with people we meet at the previous events.

G^{5c}: I'm so loving life at the moment! So happy I came here. The people are nice and the university is pretty nice, like the environment and there's stuff happening we can get into. No one really leaves us out because everyone's from different places.

In this discussion, the participants of G⁵ express their experiences of their particular university campus through words and phrases associated with *P+* like “enjoying” and “sweet” (G^{5a}), “interesting” (G^{5b}), and “loving life”, “happy”, “pretty nice” (G^{5c}). With regard to the first of the elements in the abovementioned hypotheses, the participants suggest the availability of planned social activities at their campus variously as “fair bit of stuff going on” (G^{5a}), “O[rientation] Week boat cruise” (G^{5a}), “events” (G^{5c}) and “fun stuff” (G^{5c}). In addition, G^{5a} mentions that “all the events are posted on the uni[versity] website”, which implies a concerted attempt

to disseminate information about social activities by organisers at that campus. social spaces, the second element of the hypotheses above, also appear readily accessible for participants at this particular campus. This is described by G^{5a} as “pubs and cafes and stuff” and G^{5b} as “the courtyard” and “the common room”, the latter of which is understood to have facilities for social interaction (e.g. to “play pool and table tennis”, “watch TV” and “lounges to chillax [i.e. calm down and relax]”).

Most interestingly, the development of friendships appears as the dominant theme in this discussion insofar as social activities and social spaces are framed by the participants of G⁵ as events or spaces *for* friendships. For G^{5a}, student peers at this campus are described in general as down to earth as given in descriptions such as “really, like, not snobby” so that social activities like the “boat cruise” become recounted as events where G^{5a} developed friendships (“got to meet heaps of people”). This participant also suggests that because of friendships, the campus in general is seen as a broad social space (“I see them all the time on campus now and we always stop to talk”). Likewise for G^{5c}, *P+* is expressly tied to the conjunction of friendships (“people are nice”) – which is attributed to some degree of diversity and inclusiveness “because everyone’s from different places” – with social spaces (“university is pretty nice... the environment”) and what is perceived to be accessible social activities (“stuff happening we can get into”). From G⁵, a third working hypothesis (H3) may be suggested: that the development of friendships in conjunction with accessible social spaces and social activities is linked to a general experience of *P+* (see *Figure 3*). H3 may also be implied in the *P+* experiences in G², where the explicit mention by G^{2c} and G^{2d} of social activities and social spaces

leading to $P+$ is also connected to suggestions of friendships in “meeting[s]” and opportunities to “hang out.”

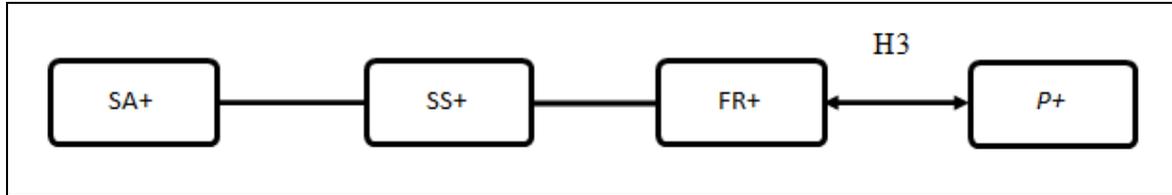


Figure 5: H3 is that the availability (+) of social activities (SA), social spaces (SS) and friendships (FR) are linked to (\leftrightarrow) $P+$

6. Implications

Given the issue of attrition among students from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education in Australia abovementioned, there are several implications for higher education institutions arising from the discussions of $P+/P-$ in G^{1-5} that warrant further consideration. Firstly, with regard to H1, it is important to consider the non-monetary costs of a perceived lack of friendships by low SES students as a disincentive to persist in higher education. In order to do this adequately, qualitative inquiries into the specific features, if any, of how such students may construe “friends”, “friendship” and “friendliness” in the social environment of higher education institutions are necessary. On the basis of this, quantitative studies that seek to discern if there are larger scale patterns of friendships in relation to $P+/P-$ experienced by low SES students at various higher education institutions may also be instructive.

When taken together with H2 – and this is the second implication – it is also important to consider the types of social spaces and social activities that may supplement the development of the key features of friendships and $P+$ as experienced by low SES in higher education institutions. In this regard, qualitative distinctions between different types of social activities and social spaces, as well as case studies of different configurations of them that abet or hinder the development of friendships may be most insightful.

Finally, it is worth pursuing the veracity and limits of H3 that experiences of $P+$ in the social environment of higher education institutions are contingent on the perceived availability of social activities, social spaces and friendships through the multiplication of detailed case studies that affirm or negate it. In addition, quantitative research into possible correlations, if any, of $P+$ derived from a combination of social activities, social spaces and

friendships on the one hand and retention or attrition figures on the other may offer more clarity on how higher education institutions can better intervene in the social lives of their students on campus in order to facilitate better outcomes for low SES students.

7. Conclusion

“Pleasure is a difficult behaviour.” (Foucault, 1997, p. 129)

This report has drawn upon scholarship in social marketing on the importance of gauging non-monetary costs/benefits in seeking to persuade a target audience of a particular course of action alongside those in social policy that discuss the uses of pleasure/displeasure by liberal governments to guide certain kinds of freely choosing subjects. Using costs/benefits as an analytical device with a specific focus on pleasures/displeasures, this report then canvassed the experiential accounts of social environments in 5 higher educations in Sydney that have arisen in focus group discussions conducted in April 2013 involving undergraduate participants from the suburb of Mount Druitt, Western Sydney. From these, three factors were discerned that appeared to affect these low SES students’ experiences of pleasure/displeasure – social activities, social spaces and friendships – and submitted three hypotheses: firstly, that the perceived availability of friendships but unavailability of accessible social activities and social spaces are linked to experiences of displeasure; secondly, that the perceived availability of friendships but unavailability of accessible social activities and social spaces are linked to experiences of displeasure; and thirdly, that the availability of social activities, social spaces and friendships are linked to pleasurable experiences.

On the basis of these three factors discerned from the focus group participants’ accounts and the three hypotheses submitted on experiences of pleasure/displeasure, this report suggested implications for further inquiries that warrant consideration by educational institutions that seek to improve the retention rates of students from low SES backgrounds. These include: a more comprehensive understanding of what, for students from such a milieu,

constitute “friends”, “friendships” and “friendliness”; possible patterns of friendship and experiences of pleasure/displeasure; specific types and configurations of social activities and social spaces that affect the development of friendships and experiences of pleasure/displeasure; whether the availability of all these factors indeed lead to pleasurable experiences in higher education; and whether experiences of pleasure/displeasure arising from these factors correlate to numbers of retention and attrition in particular higher education institutions.

If the task of encouraging retention of low SES students in higher education is indeed a matter of urgency, then it is important to judge the salience of various levels and types of benefits/costs – including non-monetary ones such as experiences of pleasure/displeasure respectively – for current and alternative behaviours from the target population’s point of view (see Lefebvre, 2011, p. 63). For only having done so, as scholars of social marketing and some scholars of social policy suggest, can the development of effective interventions to realign the benefits of retention and costs of attrition resonate with those for whom they are meant to influence and ultimately benefit.

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