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Eyes on the future: The impact of a university campus experience day on students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds

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Abstract

Students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas, non-English speaking backgrounds and those who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education in Australia. The *UC 4 Yourself* experience day is an outreach program by the University of Canberra for schools identified as having substantial numbers of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. It provides a full day of participation in, and gaining information about, university life. The current article reports on two survey studies ($N = 525$; $N = 183$) investigating the effectiveness of this program. Students who participated in the program were more likely to plan to attend university and were better able to imagine themselves as university students after their campus visit. Findings from the two studies suggest that the actual visit, despite its brevity, provides a unique experience by simultaneously establishing a knowledge base and facilitating the psychological transformation necessary to imagine a new future.

Keywords

Disadvantaged, socioeconomic status, aspiration, university attendance, Secondary school students, gender differences

Despite the rhetoric about 'living in a digital age', we nonetheless conduct our lives in a physical world – both online and offline. Arguably, access to a wider array of information may serve to increase the desire to see and experience phenomena first hand. To turn desires into reality, however, often requires assistance from experienced others. For young people

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navigating the world beyond school and home, the experiences of those around them are crucial. While students from more privileged backgrounds have access to a wider range of possibilities, students from families with more limited resources face restricted options in terms of post-school opportunities (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002) and the ability to explore these options (Pugsley, 2004).

Such inequality was explicitly recognized in the Australian Government's Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) and by the subsequent development of the Australian Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Funding from this program is directed specifically toward increasing the participation of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education. One of these programs at the University of Canberra is the *UC 4 Yourself* experience day, an on-campus experiential and discovery day for high school students. The *UC 4 Yourself* experience day is part of a larger outreach program, the *Aspire UC* program. The results of the studies reported in this article demonstrate the impact of this visit on young people's aspirations for their own futures. In addition to increasing intentions for further education, high school students were better able to imagine themselves as university students after their participation in the *UC 4 Yourself* day.

Socio-economic status and aspirations

Students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend university than their wealthier counterparts (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012; Bradley et al., 2008; Devlin, 2013; Edwards, 2008). This is not surprising given their lower rates of Year 12 completion (James, 2002; Marks, Fleming, Long, & McMillan, 2000) and their greater likelihood of entering vocational training (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Dalley-Trim, Alloway, & Walker, 2008). Lower levels of parental education (Zappala, 2003) and a lack of appropriate support networks such as those provided by family and friends (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013; Young, 2004) further decrease the likelihood of these students pursuing higher education.

Tranter (2012) argues that the stratification of the school curriculum interacts with university entrance procedures to reproduce a higher education system based on advantage. This is partially due to self-selection by some disadvantaged students into pathways that inhibit further study (Dalley-Trim et al., 2008), but also to a lack of subject availability – which limits future course options – and the attitudes of teachers who, justifiably or not, consider the academic ability of these students to be inadequate for higher education (Tranter, 2012).

Such findings are not limited to Australia. In a study in the US by Auwarter and Aruguete (2008), teachers rated a description of a hypothetical student described as being from either a high or low socioeconomic (SES) background. Although boys described as being from high SES backgrounds were rated more favourably (e.g., more competent) than boys from low SES backgrounds, the reverse was true for girls. That is, girls from low SES backgrounds were rated more favourably than girls from high SES backgrounds. Moreover, all children portrayed as being from low SES backgrounds were rated as having less promising futures – including dropping out of school – than those from high SES backgrounds. Similarly, studies in the US and New Zealand showed that teacher perceptions play an important role in students' approaches to learning (Rubie-Davies, 2010), and in students' beliefs in their own abilities (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2010).

Differential expectations are also evident at the school level, with school culture and beliefs playing a role in both student achievement (Jacobs & Harvey, 2010) and

aspirations (Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010; Schuchart, 2013). It is not surprising, then, that young people from low SES backgrounds internalize these views and behave accordingly by pursuing other vocational pathways. For example, Ball, Reay, and David (2002) found post-secondary choices to be highly influenced by social class.

In addition, more Australian girls than boys report aspiring to higher education (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2002; Alston & Kent, 2003). Suggested reasons for this include the idea that boys traditionally have a wider range of non-academic options available to them (Alston, Pawar, Bell, & Kent, 2001). This applies particularly to boys from low SES backgrounds, where blue collar work is often synonymous with masculinity. Yet, for the many females, and the fewer males, from low SES backgrounds who aspire to further education, numerous barriers exist to the realization of this goal.

Barriers to university study

In an international review of the literature, Gale, Tranter, Bills, Hattam, and Comber (2010) highlighted four major barriers to university study, namely distance, cost, low academic achievement, and low motivations/aspirations. Students from economically poorer backgrounds typically live in locations that are geographically further from places of higher education than do students from more affluent families (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). The ever-increasing costs of attending university – even without the added cost borne by travelling greater distances – disproportionately affect students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, changes in the way family income is means tested and adjustments to youth allowance have further disadvantaged rural students (Alston & Kent, 2003; Godden, 2007).

Similarly, there are considerable differences in the educational outcomes of students at public schools compared with private schools, as well as students in different regional areas or even different suburbs (Di Bartolo, 2005; Polesel, 2008). Consequently, students from different backgrounds do not receive the same preparation for life beyond high school. Again, this is apparent both in students' academic results (Marks, 2009) and in their hopes and goals for the future (Hay, 2009), not only in Australia but elsewhere, for example, in Coulson's (2009) review of studies from 23 countries.

Although the barriers of cost and distance are both practical and tangible, each has psychological implications. Moreover, even with the establishment of scholarships and other financial supports, students need to know of their availability in order to take advantage of their benefits. Hoover (2008) found that it is not uncommon for students to be unaware of any financial assistance to enable their further education. This lack of knowledge contributes to the uncertainty that families from low SES backgrounds experience with regard to futures involving higher education (Bradley, 2012).

It is not surprising, therefore, that students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be motivated or aspire toward university (Schoon, 2006). Faced with actual obstacles and a lack of knowledge and/or experience of those close to them, many of these young people do not see university as either relevant or possible (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; James, 2002).

In contrast, Appadurai (2004) and Bok (2010) ardently maintain that aspirations are not the preserve of the middle classes. Rather, they claim that *all* young people have aspirations and that, what differs, is their access to 'maps' or 'scripts' and the resources necessary to

realize these dreams. Again, however, solutions put forward by those authors are not limited to the provision of scholarships and/or accommodation. Aspirations must be mapped, or scripted, into coherent paths although even the clearest directions can be difficult to follow without prior experience.

Finding one's way, therefore, requires some degree of knowledge, preferably accompanied by actual experience. Finding one's way in unknown terrain also requires the ability to improvise which, in turn, requires a certain level of creativity and imagination.

Imagined futures

Imagining one's future is central to aspirations (Sellar & Gale, 2011; Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2011) and a vital component of decision-making (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999). We have proposed elsewhere (Fleming & Grace, 2014a) that imagining one's future requires psychological transformation – from where one is at present to an imaginable future state. The psychological work involved in imagining a different (or better) future is an essential step in achieving that future. Such a view places the individual firmly within the wider social setting in which these imaginings take place and is thus situated between the individualistic psychological approaches investigating mental states (e.g., Anderson, Dewhurst, & Nash, 2012; Bohn & Berntsen, 2013) and the more sociological or political accounts (e.g., Feher, 2009; Raco, 2009). The focus on rural and remote students having to relocate in order to attend university denies these young people, and their families and communities, the physical and psychological connection that is important to them (Drummond, Halsey, & van Breda, 2011; Drummond, Halsey, Lawson, & van Breda, 2012). Rather, imagined futures (or aspirations) must take account of normative cultural contexts (Appadurai, 2004; Sellar & Gale, 2011) which have the potential to address not only the broader issues of social inclusion (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012) and equity (Gale, 2011; Sellar & Gale, 2011) but, paradoxically, would provide *individual* students with tangible knowledge and skills necessary to pursue these paths.

Mapping one's future, therefore, requires information and imagination. Both of these can be assisted by others with more experience and/or who have successfully navigated the same path. Navigating a path to university, therefore, can be aided by the experience of an actual campus visit, in the company of one's peers, and guided by those who have recently taken this step themselves.

UC 4 Yourself experience day

Funded by the HEPPP, the University of Canberra hosts a number of *UC 4 Yourself* experience days throughout the year. The *UC 4 Yourself* days are part of the broader *Aspire UC* schools outreach program which is delivered to students from Year 7 through to Year 10 in numerous schools with substantial numbers of disadvantaged students. Schools were selected based on discussions with the ACT Education and Training Directorate, the NSW Department of Education and Communities and The Smith Family. Additionally, measures of the schools Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) were considered in the selection of schools. As a result, the schools that were invited to participate in the *Aspire UC* program were those identified as having large numbers of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds.

The program includes delivery of in-school scaffolded sessions designed to raise aspiration, together with the *UC 4 Yourself* on-campus visit, usually undertaken in Year 9. The *Aspire UC* program has been shown to increase students' aspirations for post-school education (Fleming & Grace, 2014b). Students from schools participating in the *Aspire UC* program are brought to the university campus and shown the range of programs and facilities on offer. The *UC 4 Yourself* days take students through an organized series of activities that include mock lectures, hands-on workshops and tours of student residences. Central to the philosophy of this day is that students physically experience campus life and activities, meet university staff and students and do so in the company of their familiar peers and teachers. In this way, the *UC 4 Yourself* day provides knowledge, tangible experience and the opportunity for students to imagine themselves, and their futures, in new ways.

The University of Canberra is not the only university to offer this 'taster' experience (Gale et al., 2010). Naylor et al. (2013) identify 17 higher education institutions in Australia that offer some form of 'pre-entry university experience program' (p. 45) funded by the HEPPP. The studies reported in this article thus investigated the impact of such an experience for students attending one of three *UC 4 Yourself* experience days.

Study 1

The first study examined views of students before and after their day at the university. While the aim of the day was for students to learn about the university and to have a positive experience, the focus on aspirations led to the investigation of possible gender differences whereby, consistent with previous research (e.g., ACER, 2002; Alston & Kent, 2003; Reynolds & Burge, 2008), more girls than boys were expected to aspire to university.

Study 1 method

Participants. Five hundred and twenty five students (231 males, 294 females) from 29 high schools attended the *UC 4 Yourself* experience on one of two consecutive days in September 2013 and completed surveys at the beginning and end of the day. The majority of students were enrolled in Year 9 ($N = 431$; 187 males, 244 females). The remainder comprised 47 Year 7 students (28 males, 19 females), 39 Year 8 students (13 males, 26 females), seven Year 10 students (three males, four females) and one (female) Year 12 student.

Thirty-one students (14 males, 17 females) were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. Three hundred and ninety-three students (75% of participants) reported having participated in the *Aspire UC* program at school prior to the *UC 4 Yourself* day, while 376 students (151 males, 225 females; 72% of total sample) reported that this was their first visit to a university campus.

Design. In this first study of the two reported in this article, only one item was collected in both the pre-program survey and the post-program survey, namely the extent to which students agreed with the statement 'I like the idea of going to university'. Responses to all items were compared between males and females.

Materials and procedure. Upon arrival at the university, all students were given a two-page questionnaire and asked to complete the first page entitled 'Pre-program survey'. This part

collected demographic data regarding the school year level, gender and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, together with questions asking if this was their first visit to a university campus and whether or not they had participated in the *Aspire UC* in-school sessions prior to their campus visit. Finally, students were asked to rate three statements on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), namely (i) 'I have often considered going to university'; (ii) 'I like the idea of going to university'; and (iii) 'My plans for after high school *don't* include university'. Questionnaires were then kept in students' backpacks throughout the day.

Before returning home, students were asked to complete the second page of the questionnaire entitled 'Post-program survey'. Along with a request for feedback about specific aspects of the day (e.g., mini lecture and tour of student residences), students were again asked to rate a series of statements using the same five-point scale. Specifically, students were asked, '*After* your day at UC… (i) 'I like the idea of going to university'; (ii) 'I feel more comfortable on a university campus'; (iii) 'I can imagine myself as a uni student'; (iv) 'I feel more confident that I could attend uni'; (v) 'I want to find out more about uni'; and (vi) 'I want to go to university'.

Study 1 results

No differences in terms of aspirations, either before or after the program, were found depending on students' year level, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, previous experience with *Aspire UC*, or for first visit to a university campus. Hence, these variables were not entered into any subsequent analyses.

Given their conceptual similarity, and after reverse-scoring for the question, 'My plans for after high school *don't* include uni', the three pre-program questions were combined to form a highly reliable composite score (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85). A between-groups independent *t*-test revealed a significant gender difference, $t(506) = 3.77$, $p < .001$. Although both were high, females ($M = 4.08$), significantly more than males ($M = 3.77$), had considered – and liked the idea of – university.

The six post-program questions were also combined and produced a highly reliable composite score (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94). A between-groups independent *t*-test was conducted to further examine gender differences. Again, females' scores ($M = 4.25$) were significantly higher than males' ($M = 3.94$), $t(512) = 4.30$, $p < .001$, with both groups, again, well above the mid-point of the scale.

The single item that was administered in the pre- and post-program survey, 'I like the idea of uni' was then examined in a 2 (gender) × 2 (pre/post) mixed ANOVA. Main effects for gender, $F(1,510) = 17.13$, $p < .001$ and for 'like idea of uni', $F(1,510) = 79.18$, $p < .001$, were subsumed by a significant gender by 'like idea of uni' interaction, $F(1,510) = 6.51$, $p = .011$. Despite relatively high pre-program scores (mean scores: males = 3.87; females = 4.10), both males and females liked the idea of university significantly more following the *UC 4 Yourself* experience day, with this increase being even greater for females (mean scores: males = 4.08; females = 4.48).

Study 1 discussion

Data collected prior to students' participation in the *UC 4 Yourself* experience day revealed quite high levels of reported interest in university study. Given that many of the students

came from financially disadvantaged backgrounds and the concomitant career trajectories that are typical for such students (e.g., Naylor et al., 2013), this is somewhat surprising, though not uncommon (e.g., Bowden & Doughney, 2010). James (2002) also reported high levels of university aspirations in students across socio-economic backgrounds with more nuanced differences found with regard to believing that university study was a likely outcome (p. 31). It is precisely this belief in students' own abilities that is targeted by the *Aspire UC* programs.

In addition to students' genuine interest in university, possible explanations include (i) initial excitement from being on a university campus, and/or (ii) that students felt they *should* indicate a high level of interest (i.e., demand characteristics). Both explanations are plausible in that (i) it was the first visit to a university for most (72%) of the students, and (ii) students were aware that they were in receipt of a cost-free excursion to the university. For this reason, they may have felt some level of obligation to respond favourably. Irrespective of any possible inflation in students' reported level of interest, females reported a greater interest in university than did males. This finding is consistent with previous research on gender differences in aspirations to higher education (ACER, 2002; Alston & Kent, 2009; James, 2002) and is addressed further in Study 2.

Gender differences were also evident in students' post-program responses, with females, again, reporting greater interest in going to university than did males. Again, however, scores for *both* males and females were quite high. Irrespective of whether, in the same manner as the pre-program scores, these results might have been impacted by factors other than the one-day campus visit, they still point to a high level of interest in university and a greater sense of ease (i.e., more comfortable) with a university campus. The major limitation with the current results, of course, was the inability to compare pre- and post-scores on the composite scores due to the different items on which they were based. This issue was addressed in Study 2.

The issues raised above are, at least partially, addressed by the single item administered to students both before and after their day at the university. When students were asked specifically about whether or not they liked the idea of university, the high pre-program scores did not prevent even higher scores being reported at the end of the day. Whether or not students were excited to be on campus and/or felt obliged to appear interested in university, the significantly higher scores at the end of the day indicated that the day's experience led to increased interest in university. As with all other measures, females indicated higher levels of interest than males – both before and after their day at university.

Study 2

The encouraging results from Study 1 were limited by the inability to compare pre- and post-program data. Also, the results obtained in Study 1 pertained to general measures of students' feelings about, and plans for, university. Given these initial positive findings, a more detailed analysis of students' perceptions and plans was warranted.

The aim of the second study, therefore, was to investigate more closely potential changes in plans for, and attitudes about, university before and after the *UC 4 Yourself* experience day. In addition to gender differences, this study aimed to examine more closely students' plans for university along with students' perceptions of potential barriers and, importantly, their perceptions of *themselves* as future university students.

Study 2 method

Participants. One hundred and eighty-three students (71 males, 112 females) from five high schools attended the final *UC 4 Yourself* experience day in December 2013. As in Study 1, the majority of students were enrolled in Year 9 ($N = 115$; 40 males, 75 females), with the remainder comprising five Year 8 students (four males, one female), 38 Year 10 students (15 males, 23 females) and 25 Year 11 students (12 males, 13 females).

Twenty-three students (12 male, 11 female) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. One hundred and fifty seven students (86% of the sample) reported having participated in the *Aspire UC* program at school prior to the *UC 4 Yourself* experience day, and 123 students (69%) had seen the video provided by the *Aspire UC* program. For 126 students (70% of the total sample), this was their first university campus visit.

Design. This second study comprised a 2 (gender) × 2 (pre/post-program) mixed model design. All participants completed the two-part questionnaire – at the beginning and end of their university experience day.

Materials and procedure. As in Study 1, all students were given a two-page questionnaire upon arrival at the university. They completed the pre-program questions before participating in any of the activities and kept the questionnaires in their backpacks throughout the day. Students completed the post-program questions and returned the questionnaires before returning home.

Importantly, the key questions of interest in this study were identical for both the pre- and the post-program questionnaire. In addition to these key questions, the pre-program questionnaire collected demographic information, while the post-program questionnaire asked about students' views of the specific activities undertaken during the day and provided the opportunity for additional comments about the day.

The key questions were posed as statements for which students were asked to indicate the extent of their disagreement/agreement on a five-point scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). While two of the statements pertained to university plans (e.g., 'My future plans already include going to university') five statements pertained to potential barriers to university (e.g., 'It would be expensive to go to university') with the remaining three statements regarding perceptions of themselves as university students (e.g., 'I can imagine myself as a university student').

Study 2 results

As no differences in aspirations were found depending on year level, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, or previous experience with *Aspire UC*, these variables were not entered into any subsequent analyses. One effect emerged, however, depending on whether it was a student's first visit to a university campus or not. This effect concerned how students perceived themselves as students. This finding is discussed in further detail below.

Cronbach's alphas were then computed for each subgroup of questions. Pre-program these were: (i) university plans = 0.84; (ii) barriers = 0.56; and (iii) self as student = 0.80; and post-program: (i) university plans = 0.90; (ii) barriers = 0.60; and (iii) self as student = 0.83. Given the unacceptably low reliability of the 'barriers' measure, analyses proceeded with these items separately. However, the combined items were retained for 'university plans' and 'self as student'.

Plans for university. A 2 (gender)× 2 (pre/post experience day) mixed model ANOVA was conducted on 'university plans'. This revealed significant main effects for both university plans, $F(1,179) = 27.08$, $p < .001$, and gender, $F(1,179) = 4.03$, $p = .046$, but no interaction effect. Despite high pre-program scores ($M = 3.98$), students were significantly more likely to plan to attend university after the experience day ($M = 4.23$). As expected, females ($M = 4.23$) were more likely to plan to attend university than were males ($M = 3.97$).

Self as student. Results of the subsequent 2 (gender)× 2 (pre/post experience day) mixed model ANOVA on 'self as student' showed a main effect only for self as student, $F(1,177) = 28.36$, $p < .001$. Students – both male and female – were more likely to imagine themselves as university students after the experience day ($M = 4.23$) than before ($M = 3.99$). A difference was found, only in the post-program scores, between students for whom this was a first visit to a university compared with those for whom it was not, $t(173) = 2.26$, $p = .025$. Students who had visited a university campus before were even more able to see themselves as university students ($M = 4.44$) than were students on their first visit ($M = 4.18$). While this points to the success of such visits, alternative explanations appear in the discussion.

Barriers to university. Separate 2 (gender)× 2 (pre/post experience day) mixed model ANOVAs were conducted on the five 'barriers' items separately. Only three main effects emerged. These were for 'expensive to attend uni', $F(1,179) = 4.01$, $p = .047$, 'hard to find accommodation', $F(1,174) = 42.10$, $p < .001$ and 'not smart enough to attend university', $F(1,180) = 6.49$, $p = .012$. After the *UC 4 Yourself* experience day, students considered it less expensive to go to university ($M = 3.45$) than they did before ($M = 3.62$), and less difficult to find accommodation ($M = 2.44$) than before ($M = 3.02$). Interestingly, they were also less likely to consider themselves 'not smart enough for university' following the experience day ($M = 2.30$) than they did before ($M = 2.50$). No gender effects were found for any of the 'barriers to university' items.

Not surprisingly, no change was recorded for 'My family could not afford for me to go to university', nor for 'My family do not want me to go to university'. Of particular note, however, was that responses to family (not) being able to afford university were around the mid-point of the scale (pre = 2.78; post = 2.59), whereas responses to family not *wanting* their sons or daughters to go to university were quite low (pre = 1.62; post = 1.55).

Study 2 discussion

This study had two primary aims. The first aim was to improve the comparability of students' responses before and after their day at university. The second aim was a more detailed examination of the factors involved in young people's consideration of university as a viable post-school option. As with Study 1, high levels of interest in university were evident already at the start of the day. Importantly, however, these levels rose to even higher levels following students' university experience. Consistent with Study 1 and with previous research (e.g., ACER, 2002; James, 2002; Schoon & Polek, 2011), females demonstrated greater interest in university than did males, and this was evident both pre- and post-program.

In addition to interest in and plans to attend university, the high school students were asked to think about themselves as university students. Prompted by Sellar and Gale's

(Sellar & Gale, 2011; Sellar et al., 2011) conception of aspirations as 'imagined futures', the current research recognized the importance of this psychological transformation in preparing for an unfamiliar goal. Again despite relatively high pre-program scores, the day at university enabled students to better imagine themselves actually attending university.

The one difference – in post-program scores only – between students for whom this was their first visit to a university campus and those for who had not been to a university campus previously further suggests the effectiveness of an actual campus visit to enhance students' ability to imagine themselves continuing on such a path. It appears that additional visits further enhance the capacity to picture oneself in the situation, that is, to conceive of oneself as a student of the university. However, it is also possible that those students who had been to a university before had done so for specific reasons. That is, they may have previously indicated interest in university and thus facilitated a visit. They may have shown aptitude in a particular area and may have been chosen for a specific university visit. Alternatively, they may already have visited a campus as a result of a sibling attending university. Finally, these particular students may have parents whose aspirations for their son or daughter had already led to them visiting a university. Any of these reasons would increase the likelihood of these students demonstrating an interest in university. What is surprising, however, is that no difference was evident in the pre-program scores. Given this was the only finding in this regard, and the current data provide no possibility to test these explanations, these suggestions remain speculative.

Finally, no gender differences were found with regard to 'imagined futures' which indicated that both males and females were more likely to see themselves as university students after their day on campus.

Similarly, no gender effects emerged with respect to any of the barriers to university. However, evidence emerged of change for the well-documented barriers of cost and accommodation (e.g., Gale et al., 2010). Following their campus experience, students reported that university was less expensive to attend than they had previously thought and that it would be easier to find accommodation than they had previously believed. In addition to preconceived general ideas about what going to university actually entails, the day provided the students with up-to-date information on these issues. Because these factors have been repeatedly identified in the literature (Karimshah et al., 2013; Young, 2004), they have received direct attention from universities. At the University of Canberra, for example, a variety of scholarships has been introduced for financially disadvantaged students. Moreover, information about specific course costs, along with deferred payment options, was made available to students on the day of their visit. Affordable accommodation is known to be an issue for students (Lloyd-Jones & Halcrow, 2013) and the University of Canberra has embarked on an ambitious scheme to increase substantially its residential accommodation for students. The residences that the university has recently opened have been supported by funding from the Australian *National Rental Affordability Scheme*, which allows below-market rents to be charged to students. Provision of information about affordable accommodation options is crucial for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom marketing and outreach activities are frequently the primary source of information about university (Bradley, 2012).

Perceptions regarding the final barrier of students not seeing themselves as suitable for university study also changed. After their day at university, students – both males and females – were less likely to consider themselves 'not smart enough for uni'. This finding is particularly encouraging given the role that – lack of – belief in one's own abilities plays in

(inhibiting) participation in further education and training (Reynolds & Burge, 2008). Although, unlike the previously discussed barriers, the activities of the day did not focus on this issue, it further points to the positive impact of the *UC 4 Yourself* day on these students.

General discussion

Together, the two studies presented in this article highlight the effectiveness of an actual university campus visit for enhancing the aspirations and plans of teenagers whose backgrounds would typically not lead to higher education paths. Although only a one-day experience, there is no shortage of anecdotal experience concerning the impact of even brief episodes on people's life trajectories. Within the educational literature, evidence of long-term impacts of short-term programs has been reported. For example, Markowitz (2004) reported a positive impact on students' decisions to continue science study and to pursue a career in science up to seven years after their participation in a summer science program. Similarly, Sprague and Percy (2014) found positive effects of a university practicum experience program on career decisions up to six years after students participated. Despite the *UC 4 Yourself* day being considerably shorter than these programs, the experience gained from an actual visit which enables students' interactions with actual university students and staff should not be ignored. At least three reasons for this finding are suggested.

First, and importantly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the provision of information is paramount. Parents who have not been to university themselves are often ill-equipped to provide the relevant information to their children. This is not, as was shown in Study 2, likely to have been due to a lack of aspiration on the parents' part, as students in the current research considered that their parents were not against university study. What many parents lack, however, is the 'reservoir of cultural and social resources' (Devlin, 2013, p. 940) necessary to talk to their children about the possibility of university study and what it may look like. Indeed, reliance on different sources of information is, itself, influenced by social status and social fractions (e.g., Ball & Vincent, 1998). In addition, even many teachers are unable to advise their students adequately (Haynes, McCrone, & Wade, 2013; Smyth & Banks, 2012). Hence, the provision of information directly to the students not only increases the likelihood of accurate transmission of the information, it equips the students for future discussions with their parents and/or teachers.

Second, the day provided students with a real and tangible experience of what being at university entails. Analogous to flying in an aeroplane, visiting Uluru, or seeing the Pyramids, the physical experience is beyond that provided by any written or digital account. Actual physical experience, even of a limited time, provides an added dimension to both a knowledge base and the ability to use this knowledge imaginatively.

Facilitated by the physical experience, the psychological transformation into an imagined future thus becomes a critical element of the successful campus visit. Having experienced university life – even if only for a day – was enough to allow these young people to imagine *themselves* as part of the university and its community. It is precisely this ability to imagine a new future for oneself that is needed in order to link aspirations to a belief that such a future is both possible and likely. While the current data provide some support for this contention, future research examining this proposed link would be worthwhile.

Consistent with much previous research (e.g., ACER, 2002; Alston & Kent, 2003; James, 2002; Reynolds & Burge, 2008), the current studies found more girls than boys aspiring to

higher education. As a measure of success, and regardless of pre-program scores, both males and females reported increased interest in attending university after their visit. That no gender differences emerged regarding perceived barriers to university, or on perceptions of themselves as students, suggests that the *UC 4 Yourself* experience day was equally influential for both sexes. This is not surprising given that financial concerns among high school students are unlikely to be borne by one gender more than the other.

What the current findings support, however, is that providing students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds with the opportunity to experience a university first-hand has the potential to increase the likelihood of these students attending university. While the precise mechanisms for this remain unclear, it is suggested that a combination of a tangible physical experience, and its subsequent impact on the imagination – a psychological transformation – has the potential to increase students' perceptions of university study as a possible future pathway.

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