Experiences of Alienation at University:
Some themes amongst Mount Druitt youth

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Project consortium partners:

The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the consortium partners
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Executive summary

This report is based on the experiences of five participants from Mount Druitt in Western Sydney, Australia, who are beginning their higher education at five different university campuses in the Sydney metropolitan region. The responses given by these five participants were made to the question: ‘Can you tell me a bit about what university life has been like for you?’

On the basis of their responses, a thematic analysis was conducted that explored how these participants experienced alienation specific to their milieu arising from:

1) *Loneliness* because of:

   a. isolation from peer groups; and

   b. a lack of pre-existing friendship groups at university;

2) *Feeling out of place* because of:

   a. demographic differences from peers,

   b. residing at a great geographic distance from campus; and

   c. negative self-concepts in relation to others at university;

These experiences engendered different (3) *coping strategies* involving:

   a. *exiting* the institution;

   b. *adapting* to their experiences of it; or

   c. *hoping* that a change in the future will bring better experiences.
These themes and sub-themes are related to other work on alienation in higher education. Finally, this report offers a brief consideration of the limitations of the approach taken here, as well as some implications of the findings for higher education providers and stakeholders.
Introduction

Widening participation initiatives in Australian higher education have broadened from an initial focus on increasing the recruitment of traditionally underrepresented students to include the retention of such students for the duration of their enrolled courses (e.g. see Ross, 2012; Gale, 2013). Alongside this broadened emphasis on retention is a growing strategic interest in initial student experiences of higher education – a period that scholars and academic advisors have rightly discerned as critical to eventual student success (Scott, Shah, Grebennikov & Singh, 2008; Coates, 2010; Nelson & Kift, 2005; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Nelson, Clarke, Kift & Creagh, 2011). This has in turn led to a proliferation of initiatives at various institutions aimed at improving new students’ experiences of university life (e.g. University of Technology, Sydney, 2013; University of Sydney, 2014). Without denying the import of institution-wide initiatives, however, there are questions that linger over their efficacy in mitigating the particular difficulties faced by those in their first year of higher education, particularly vulnerable students like those from regions of high socioeconomic disadvantage.

This report examines the experiences of alienation recounted by five participants from Mount Druitt – a severely disadvantaged region in Western Sydney, Australia – who are beginning their higher education at five different university campuses located in the central or northern regions of Sydney (termed “Metropolitan Sydney” for brevity). It begins by recounting the responses given by these five participants to the question: ‘Can you tell me a bit about what university life has been like for you?’ On this basis, a thematic analysis of their experiences is conducted, exploring themes and sub-themes that suggest alienation specific to their milieu and that may be passed over by broader survey categories such as
“low socioeconomic status (SES)” or “disadvantaged.” This report then relates these themes to other work on alienation in higher education. Finally, it offers a brief consideration of the limitations of the approach taken here as well as some implications of the findings for higher education providers and stakeholders.
What is alienation?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2013), ‘alienation’ is defined as the noun form of the verb to ‘alienate,’ which denotes certain actions or processes that “make (someone) feel isolated or estranged” or “make (someone) become unsympathetic or hostile.” Interestingly, the *Macquarie Dictionary* (2013) takes a more individual or subject-oriented approach to defining alienation, which is stated to entail “a withdrawal or estrangement, as of feeling or the affections” and/or a type of “mental illness characterised by feelings of unreality brought about by a sense of estrangement from one’s social setting.” Common to both these definitions is the key notion of estrangement from particular social relationships or settings.

As preliminary definitions, the contrast between these two approaches also serve as useful markers for distinguishing between two, broad ways of studying the phenomena of alienation: namely, those that focus primarily on societal or institutional level actions or processes that my alienate individuals or groups, which may be termed as ‘macro’ level studies of alienation for the purposes of analysis; and those that focus on the experiential or psychological dimensions of alienation, which may be termed ‘micro’ level studies.

While affirming the work developed at a more macro or theoretical level that focuses on the relationship of alienation to social, cultural, economic and political conditions (e.g. Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes, 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008) – what occurs in policy
discourse under the heading of “social exclusion”¹ – this study seeks to supplement such scholarship on student experiences by giving an account of possible patterns of alienation as they are lived within a small, contextually-specific group of individuals. As Stokols (1975) points out, the microcosm of the small group “offers an advantageous context in which to study alienation for it permits a dynamic, situational analysis and thereby facilitates the development of predictive theory from which experimental hypotheses can be derived and tested” (p.27). Further, Schulz and Rubel (2011) argue that for practical purposes in educational institutions having detailed understanding of alienated students fosters the creation of more sensitive and targeted intervention strategies, but that such understanding can only be achieved through an increase in research that foregrounds the lived experiences of such students as participants.

¹ It is important to mention that “social exclusion” is a corollary though not necessarily synonymous term for alienation in use in the Australian context (as in other countries such as the United Kingdom, for example). This term usually arises from macro level social analyses denoting specific sections of an overall population that suffer the “restriction of access to opportunities and [a] limitation of the capabilities required to capitalise on these [opportunities]” (Hayes, Gray & Edwards, 2008, p.6). This term in turn implies a normative state – that of “social inclusion” – which means people having the opportunities and capabilities they need to be (re)embedded into societal institutions and participate their prevailing practices. This includes the ability to: “participate in education and training... participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work including family and carer responsibilities... connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities [and] influence decisions that affect them” (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2012, p.12). Therefore, as the Australian Government Institute for Family Studies (2011) surmises, social exclusion is taken to be “fundamentally about a lack of connectedness and participation” (p.2). In this study, the term alienation is preferred over social exclusion because the former better foregrounds the experiential dimension at the micro levels of the latter without subsuming particular experiences into broader, normative assumptions about the primacy of social institutions and a lack of involvement with them (see Mouffe, 2005). Nonetheless, I take the two terms to describe the phenomena of alienation that may be at different but mutually constitutive levels of social life.
Methodology

In order to discern the existence and possible patterns of alienation at university as they are experienced by a small group of individuals from a particular milieu, this study adopts a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, described broadly, is a theoretical perspective that aims to suspend all explanations of a given phenomenon (e.g. alienation at university) while turning to the content of concept itself: “see[ing] philosophy’s task as that of describing the essences of phenomena, the explication of various levels of meaning of phenomena, and their interrelationships” (Stewart & Mickunas, 1974, p.8). When applied to specific situations at the experiential and psychological rather than philosophical level, however, a phenomenological approach does not seek universalisable “essences” but the “structure of concrete experiences” that remain at the level of lived reality (Giorgi, 2009, p.98). So while the claims made are that there may be structures that are generalizable to similar situations, the findings here inevitably bear the context and factors pertaining to a specific milieu.

In this paper, the discernment of structures of experience is approached systematically through the method of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Broadly speaking, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (or themes) within qualitative data by minimally organising a data set and describing it in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). In doing so, a thematic analysis can either proceed deductively by identifying themes according to a particular research question or theoretical
framework that the analyst is concerned with, or it can proceed inductively by identifying themes that are evidently observed across a data range (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.83). While the present research is concerned broadly with the possibility of alienation at university as experienced by a specific group of participants, it proceeds inductively in order to foreground these experiences prior to any specific definition of alienation. In this way, it also approaches the data semantically – that is, where the themes that are identified occur within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.84). The process followed in this paper for analysing qualitative data follows Braun & Clark’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis consisting of: (i) familiarisation with data; (ii) generating initial codes of interest from data; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming the themes; and (vi) producing the report (p.87).

Following this method, the primary point of reference in this study is the lived experiences of five participants from the Mount Druitt\(^2\) region in Western Sydney who are currently attending five different universities in metropolitan Sydney. The five participants were chosen because they were at five different university campuses, were each categorised as low SES students (i.e. receiving youth welfare payments at the time) and had responded to a request for an interview sent to twelve participants via email for feedback on their initial experiences of university life. The interviews were conducted with the five participants over mobile phones while they were physically at their respective university campuses. Each

\(^2\) In relation to the Greater Sydney region as a whole, Mount Druitt is a region with higher than average unemployment rates and very high rates of youth unemployment, a larger proportion of residents occupying the lowest SES brackets of the population, receiving government welfare assistance and living in government-subsidised housing, and perhaps most germane to this study, significantly lower than average participation rates in higher education in relation to the entire Sydney metropolitan area (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011).
interview lasted for approximately 10 minutes, which owed to the severe time constraints on five of the participants. As such, a semi-structured interview was taken to be the most appropriate form of data collection. According to Langdridge (2007), this approach to interviewing represents a trade-off between consistency and flexibility that best meets the needs of many qualitative researchers because “[c]onsistency is maintained through the use of an interview schedule consisting of a series of questions and prompts designed to elicit the maximum possible information... given the constraints of time and money that the researcher (and the participants) inevitably faces” (p.65, 67).

For example, the opening question used with all participants is consistent while the object of the discussion – “university life” – is left undefined in order to elicit data about how each participant constitutes it through their subjective experiences. The interview questions used are given below in Table 1. After going through the six steps of thematic analysis, an initial draft of this paper was delivered via email back to the participants, who were given an opportunity to amend or qualify their original accounts and evaluate the themes I had discerned.
Table 1: Semi-structured interview questions used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences of university life</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So what I’m going to do now is ask you a few questions about your experience of university life so far. There’s no right or wrong answer. Just respond based on your experiences. Does that sound ok to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, then ask:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can you tell me a bit about what university life has been like for you?</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Prompting questions used:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Is it still like that?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Or</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you feel the situation is getting better or worse or staying the same?</td>
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<td>Or</td>
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<td>What is it like now?</td>
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<td>Or</td>
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<tr>
<td>So how do you cope?</td>
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<td>Or</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why do you think this is?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Or</td>
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<td>Why aren’t there?</td>
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<td>Or</td>
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<td>What do you see as the main reasons for this experience?</td>
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<td>Or</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you see it being any different?</td>
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</tbody>
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Participants’ accounts

Participant “Penny”

Interviewer: Can you tell me about what university life has been like for you?

Penny: In regards to my university, there are many activities and social events that are open for interaction and purposely aim to help students engage with each other. But it was difficult for me to approach these events as I was a stranger to the whole area. Everyone knew someone prior uni, whilst I was alone. So these events were rather intimidating. Like, O-Week consists of lonely walks. I signed up with a few groups just to talk to someone, haha!

Interviewer: Is it still like that?

Penny: Gradually I was able to make friends, but it did take a while to adjust to the hectic atmosphere. Coming from the Western suburbs, I was surrounded by Northern Sydney students, which of course became very intimidating. I didn't feel comfortable with socialising with others, and university did become a lonely place for me. It was difficult to feel comfortable around my fellow peers, but I did end up finding a group who were also from Western Sydney that I was able to communicate and associate with comfortably. After this, university became a better place to attend too. But in comparison to high school, it isn't easy. I felt like an outcast because everyone else perceived themselves as very intellectual.

Interviewer: Why do you think this is?

Penny: My university is too big. There are too many people which leaves less room for intimacy. I am able to engage with others on a comfortable level [with tutors and lecturers],
but I don't stay at uni longer than I need to. The crowds of people can be at some times, overwhelming, and it is difficult to create and maintain solid friendships, or bump into the same person twice. Also, not just the social aspect of the university, but because of the distance and time consumed in travel. But there were times where I felt like I didn't want to be there anymore. But at this present moment I won't transfer for this year, but consideration is made towards transferring next year.

Participant “James”

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about what university life has been like for you?

James: Trying to maintain a social life outside of school after HSC is hard enough, let alone trying to start and make a new social life at university. This is especially hard for me as I did not go to uni with any of my friends, we all went to separate universities. Trying to make friends with people who already know or have people from their school groups at uni is hard, because they don’t feel the need to communicate with someone that they don’t know or want to know.

Interviewer: Do you feel the situation is getting better or worse or staying the same?

James: Nah man, worse! Coming from the western suburbs into a uni dominated by shire and north shore students it’s always hard because it’s like they are a different group or race of people. I try to not tell people I live in mount Druitt, which is bad, because I am proud of my area, however people see me differently because of this. But I am more than confident that I will be at a different uni or

“Trying to make friends with people who already know or have people from their school groups at uni is hard, because they don’t feel the need to communicate with someone that they don’t know or want to know.”
campus next year. Stuff this! I am looking at transferring into [another course] and I want to study it at [another university] rather than [this university].

**Interviewer:** What do you see as the main reasons for your experience?

**James:** One problem is location. Where I live and have grown up, many people at uni have looked down on their whole lives, which puts me in a disadvantaged group. I feel as though I am constantly being judged based on where I live, rather than the person I am. Another problem with location is that everyone is from a different area in Sydney, so it is harder to go visit someone when people want to meet up, basically because I don’t want to travel 2 hours just to meet someone.

**Participant “Patricia”**

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little bit about what university life has been like for you?

**Patricia:** I’m really enjoying the course I picked, but I hate uni! I find the coursework fascinating but the culture of uni is very foreign. It is taking time to adapt to the terminology that people use and general way of life. Feeling very lost and not sure where to go. I don’t like having to ask for help because it makes me feel stupid. Like, when I do ask people are helpful but I feel as if we come from different worlds. In a workshop we did an introduction exercise and when I stated I was from Mount Druitt there was a student who laughed. When talking to a classmate about where I am from he said: “Oh, is that out West?” And then he said: “I think I have one friend out there.”

**Interviewer:** What is it like now?
“It feels a bit embarrassing to be poor.”

Patricia: Well, I do not really talk to anyone, one of the few people I have made friends who come from the Western Sydney area. I don’t have much in common with many other people. And I am absolutely self-conscious when I go to uni. Some people come in suits and I am in casual clothes thinking I will try harder to dress better. It feels as if I am below them at times. It almost feels like they belong there and I am the outsider. I have more acquaintances rather than actual friendships; it is very superficial. You can have a conversation but it feels different. It would be really helpful to have people from out west area in my classes. It is nice to have someone to bounce ideas off of and even just complain sometimes, but there’s none.

Interviewer: Why aren’t there?

Patricia: Seems as if most people there are based in the city or close to it so being from the west I feel isolated. Even the way people dress is so different. Like, I have classmates who wear suits or really nice clothes to uni, and here is me with my Target jeans and hoodie. It feels a bit embarrassing to be poor.

Like, there is a law society and they run events. They even threw a ball but it was expensive and I didn’t really know anyone. I feel like next year it will be easier because I will be more familiar with everything. I haven’t really gone to the uni social events because people usually go in groups and I feel like it would be worse to go alone.

It hasn’t been an easy transition, like you really feel the leap. There are moments because of this that makes me feel like I shouldn’t be at uni at all. I don’t feel like being at another uni would be different.
Participant “Frank”

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about what university life has been like for you?

Frank: Really strange, ay. People haven’t really been very engaging or anything. Like it’s hard to meet people. People all act really cool in their groups, but there’s not many of us from out Mounty out here. And when they run events, it’s not even for people like us. It’s not very good for meeting people. Students from wealthy areas used SRC and events as more of a title to represent that they are better than others whereas when we were at school, it is because you want to help people. So yeah, it’s been hard.

Interviewer: So how do you cope?

Frank: It feels like this is just the way it is and you simply have to adapt to fit in. Like, you become totally conscious of your body, your movements, your actions, behaviour, everything. I notice what I wear and how I must look to them. Nowadays I try not to care too much and so it feels better. I think maybe I expected it to be friendly and so I cared too much. The worst part about it is that I just didn’t expect it to be this bad. I have probably 5 people I can actually approach without it being completely awkward in the whole of uni. I wish I would have been told that it was going to be hard to fit in and that people are very different.

Interviewer: What do you see as the main reasons for this?

Frank: It all comes down to a difference in culture from where you grew up. It feels like I have to conform to how others are, there are very few people I can actually be myself around. Like in Mount Druitt, we just say “hi” to people if they are near you. But at uni you say “hi” to people and they look at you like you are weird. I mean, it would be comforting to have others from my neighbourhood but it wouldn’t change it. It feels like I am in a different
country. While I still hate the feel of uni, but I do believe it has helped me grow stronger as a person.

**Participant “Juanita”**

**Interviewer**: Can you tell me a little bit about what university life has been like for you?

**Juanita**: The story of my life is I have no friends at uni. Haha! I don't know of anyone from school at my campus and well, I feel like I go to my lectures and pracs [practicum], do my work and leave. Plus most of my friends go to different unis, TAFEs or get a job, so it’s like being in Year 7 all over again.

“It’s like being in Year 7 all over again.”

**Interviewer**: Do you feel the situation is getting better or worse or staying the same?

**Juanita**: I don’t know, maybe because I’m not really at uni that often so I don't really feel the need to make that many friends. Plus most of them are older and I’d only see them for that one semester as people in classes change, you know? Does that make sense?

**Interviewer**: Yes, it does make sense.

**Juanita**: Like, I’d feel so much better and I’d feel so much more confident if there were more people from my school or Mount Druitt at my uni. Maybe people would feel weird if suddenly there were lots of people from Mounty [i.e. Mount Druitt], like we are going to roll [i.e. mug] them or something... haha! Seriously but, it would be so much less awkward and I would be able to spend lunch breaks with and study and do assignments with someone. At the moment, I just chill by myself in the corner.

**Interviewer**: Do you see it being any different?
Juanita: Like, yeah, if there were more people from my neighbourhood then it might be
different. Or school because there’s not many. But I’m kind of shy and awkward so
sometimes I guess it’s just me being socially awkward. Lol [i.e. Laugh out loud]! Although
I’ve made a few friends, but not too many. I found it hard. I guess it’s because some of the
people I’ve met like in my class, I've felt like they try and challenge you, rather than them
helping out or being friendly it seems they’re in some kind of competition and they’re
competing against each other. Or maybe I just haven't found anyone that has similar interests
as me. Honestly, I probably meet someone new every day, but then I don't see them again.
And the only reason I've made one or two friends at uni is because we had mutual friends.
Yeah, so most of the people I’ve met, I've met them outside of class. But there’s not many
because there’s not many from our area here, you know what I mean?
Themes and sub-themes

From these five accounts, three themes can be discerned across the data that represent common experiences shared amongst the participants about university life: (1) loneliness; (2) feeling out of place; and (3) coping. In turn, these three themes encompass two, three and three sub-themes each respectively: loneliness owing to (1a) isolation from peer groups and (1b) a lack of pre-existing friendship groups at university; feeling out of place owing to (2a) demographic differences, (2b) geographic distance and (2c) negative self-concepts; and coping with these experiences by (3a) exiting to an alternative environment, (3b) adapting to what is perceived as inevitably the case at universities and (3c) hoping for a change in the situation (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: "University life" as object of discussion with participants’ experiential themes and sub-themes

Firstly, the theme of (1) \textit{loneliness} contains two sub-themes: (1a) isolation from peer groups and (1b) a lack of pre-existing friendship groups at university. This is evident in Penny’s account of university life as consisting of “intimidating” events, “lonely walks” and a feeling of being “a stranger to the whole area” because it appeared to her that “[e]veryone knew someone prior to uni, whilst I was alone.” Similarly for James, university life is experienced as difficult because of the felt need to “start and make a new social life at university”, which he found additionally difficult because he did not find himself with friends he had known prior to university (“This is especially hard for me as I did not go to uni with any of my friends, we all went to separate universities”). Patricia’s account also suggests
loneliness owing to isolation from friendship groups when she describes her lack of “actual friendships” at university, which has for her consisted of acquaintances at a “very superficial” level. This is confirmed by her sentiment that having more students from Western Sydney in class would be positive because it would be “nice to have someone to bounce ideas off of and even just complain sometimes, but there’s none.” However, it is in Patricia’s description of university events – for example, a Law Society Ball – that evinces most starkly her isolation: she had not attended any events because “people usually go in groups and I feel like it would be worse to go alone.” This isolation from peer groups is also reflected in Frank’s experiences at university, a place where “it’s hard to meet people” and where other people “all act really cool in their groups”. This has engendered feelings of loneliness (“I have probably 5 people I can actually approach without it being completely awkward in the whole of uni”) and disappointment for Frank given his expectations that it would be otherwise (“I think maybe I expected it to be friendly and so I cared too much. The worst part about it is that I just didn’t expect it to be this bad... I wish I would have been told that it was going to be hard to fit in and that people are very different”). Finally, Juanita’s account also suggests one of loneliness wrought by isolation from peer groups at university: “The story of my life is I have no friends at uni”. She suggests that this is because, on the one hand, “most of my friends go to different unis, TAFEs or get a job” and, on the other hand, because of isolation from other people she has encountered at university who “try and challenge you, rather than them helping out or being friendly it seems they’re in some kind of competition and they're competing against each other”. If there were more fellow students at her university from Mount Druitt, Juanita feels like she “would be able to spend lunch breaks with and study and do assignments with someone.” However, in the absence of this, she expresses loneliness: “At the moment I just chill by myself in the corner.”
The perceived absence of others from Mount Druitt or Western Sydney at university brings up the common feeling of being (2) out of place as a second theme that is evident in the accounts. Attached to this theme are three sub-themes in the experiences of the participants: (2a) demographic differences; (2b) geographic distance; and (2c) negative self-concept. The experience of (2a) demographic differences refers to those immediately apparent physical features such as race and sex (Allport, 1954), as well as other visual or auditory cues like clothing styles, body movements and speech characteristics (e.g. accents) that are widely used to form impressions of others vis-à-vis the self in social interactions (Parsons & Liden, 1984). The differentiation perceived between others and the self may be perceived as more pronounced when demographic diversity is historically uncommon in a situation because “novel, infrequent, or distinctive stimuli are likely to increase the salience of the particular category that the stimuli represents” (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade & Neale, 1998; also Taylor & Fiske, 1978).

The experience of being out of place due to demographic differences can be seen most starkly in Penny’s statement: “I felt like an outcast because everyone else perceived themselves as very intellectual.” It is also evident in James’s perception of others at university as “a different group or race of people” and his attempts to conceal where he lives because “people see me differently”. Elaborating on this experience of being seen differently because of where he lives, James asserts that he feels typified by the majority perception of Mount Druitt’s residents, a place where “many people at uni have looked down on their whole lives, which puts me in a disadvantaged group. I feel as though I am constantly being judged based on where I live, rather than the person I am.” The experience of being out of place is also evident for Patricia, who feels that in relation to others at her university, “we
come from different worlds” and “I don’t have much in common with many other people.” The demographic contrast that contributes to this experience appears most starkly in her comments about clothing, where she perceives that “[e]ven the way people dress is so different... I have classmates who wear suits or really nice clothes to uni”. This causes her to reflect on her own clothing (“my Target jeans and hoodie”) and feel ashamed by contrast (“feels a bit embarrassing to be poor”). This resonates with Frank’s experience of feeling estranged from others because of his outwardly behaviour – that is, “just say[ing] “hi” to people if they are near you” – which while common in Mount Druitt, is seen as out of place at university (“they look at you like you are weird”). Juanita, using humour, poses an interesting counterfactual about the feeling of weirdness; she questions how others at her university would react if there were an influx of people from Mount Druitt (“Maybe people would feel weird if suddenly there were lots of people from Mounty...”), implying that the other people may feel that their security threatened by this (“like we are going to roll them or something”).

Apart from being a marker of their demographic difference from others at university, the participants’ identities as residents of Mount Druitt is also experienced as (2b) geographically distant from university, which contributes to the feeling of being out of place. These two sub-themes are co-present in Penny’s statement that: “Coming from the western suburbs, I was surrounded by Northern Sydney students”, a statement that indicates both geographic as well as demographic distance in terms of income, race and social status (see Hodge, 1996; Forrest & Dunn, 2007), and which for Penny was immediately “intimidating”. For her, the geographic distance between Mount Druitt and university – what she experiences as “the distance and time consumed in travel” – compounds her negative feelings about being there. This too is a problem for James, who identifies “location” as a key problem partly
because of the demographic differences outlined above, and partly also because “everyone is
from a different area in Sydney, so it is harder to go visit someone when people want to meet
up, basically because I don’t want to travel 2 hours just to meet someone”. In Patricia’s
account, geographic distance was brought to the fore in classroom situations: one during a
workshop introduction exercise where she mentioned being from Mount Druitt and “there
was a student who laughed”; and when speaking to a classmate who showed little awareness
of where Mount Druitt might be (“Oh, is that out West? ...I think I have one friend out
there”). Such incidents appear to have contributed to Patricia’s sense of isolation as a student
from the Western Suburbs, which she perceives to be “most people there are based in
the city or close to it”.

A third sub-theme of the participants’ experiences of being out of place can be
identified as having (2c) a negative self-concept. Broadly defined, self-concept is a person's
perception of her- or himself formed through experience with and interpretations of one's
environment (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985, p.107). A person’s self-concept is identified by a set
of features that are perceived as unique oneself and hence a marker of difference from others
(Kihlstrom, Beer & Klein, 2003, p.69). By negative self-concepts, then, I denote the
identification by participants of personal features that mark then out differently in a negative
way. This is most evident in Patricia’s account, where she feels “absolutely self-conscious”
when going to university. She twice mentions the example of people wearing suits to classes
while she dresses casually in what she describes as “my Target jeans and hoodie.” Patricia’s
negative self-concept is clear by her self-description as deficient in relation to her peers: that
it “feels a bit embarrassing to be poor”; that it “feels as if I am below them at times”; and that
because of this she “will try harder to dress better”. Frank’s account also offers a clear
example of a negative self-concept at university when he describes how one becomes “totally conscious of your body, your movements, your actions, behaviour, everything. I notice what I wear and how I must look to them.” For Juanita, a negative self-concept is evident when she attributes her lack of friendships at university to personal idiosyncrasies: “I’m kind of shy and awkward so sometimes I guess it’s just me being socially awkward.” For the other participants, negative self-concepts can be seen as implied in such statements as: “It was difficult to feel comfortable around my fellow peers” (Penny) and “I try not to tell people I live in Mount Druitt” (James).

The third and final theme that can be discerned from the data is the theme of (3) coping. That is, in light of their negative experiences at university, participants developed several ways of responding to the situation. The first way and sub-theme articulated by some participants was to consider (3a) an exit strategy. This is most evident in the accounts of Penny and James. While Penny did not intend to transfer to another university for the remainder of the year at the time of the interview, she did mention a tentative exit strategy: that “consideration is [being] made towards transferring next year.” James is more insistent on his exit strategy, suggesting in higher modality language that he was past a tipping point in the decision to leave his present university campus: “I am more than confident that I will be at a different uni or campus next year. Stuff this! I am looking at transferring into [another course] and I want to study it at [another university] rather than [this university].” Patricia rejects this strategy for coping because she does not “feel like being at another uni[versity] would be different.” Rather, she opts for coping by a mixture of (3b) adaptation and (3c) hope, which is given her statement: “I feel like next year it will be easier because I will be more familiar with everything.” Frank likewise suggests that his primary means of coping will be adaptation because “[i]t feels like this is just the way it is and you simply have to
adapt to fit in.” He points to unmet expectations as a primary reason for his negative experiences and reframes this as a positive experience for his development: “While I still hate the feel of uni, but I do believe it has helped me grow stronger as a person.” Interestingly, while Frank experiences the difference between the region of his residence and university life, he is sceptical about whether having a greater presence of peers from his region would change the latter: “it would be comforting to have others from my neighbourhood but it wouldn’t change it [university life].” Juanita expresses the opposite sentiment, believing that she would “feel so much better [and] feel so much more confident” if there were more people from her school or region at the university. This suggests a hope on her part that “if there were more people from my neighbourhood [or school] then it might be different.”
Limitations

This report foregrounds the experiences of alienation in university life that have arisen for a group of students from Mount Druitt, a disadvantaged region in Sydney, Australia. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, it neither makes a claim for a generalised notion of alienation experienced by university students nor a claim that students from disadvantaged regions in higher education necessarily experience alienation in the forms expressed above. Rather, what it has sought to do is to foreground the experiences of university life for a particular group of students from a disadvantaged region in Sydney, arguing that certain experiential themes emerge that can be characterised as alienation whether by recourse to a broad dictionary definition or to scholarly work on alienation in higher education.
Implications

Two related implications can be drawn from this report – one methodological and one interventional. Firstly, qualitative studies of the experiences of students from particular milieus are necessary for higher education providers and those with a stake in improving access to higher education for disadvantaged populations insofar as they offer a portrait of specific problems that pertain to a group. For example, the feeling of being out of place due to residing at a great geographic distance from campus is an experience that operates beneath the broad categories of “low SES” or “disadvantaged” often used in policy formation (e.g. see Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science Research and Tertiary Education, 2013).

Secondly and in relation to the first implication, such experiential data may also add nuance to programs in higher education institutions that seek to “include” traditionally excluded students. For example, given their experiences of loneliness and feelings of being out of place, how likely are students such as the five participants above to participate in university-funded and organised social events or mentoring programs? By assembling differentiated and

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qualitatively rich and specific data on student experiences pertaining to particular groups, higher education institutions may then be able to deploy smaller-scale, more precise interventions aimed at meeting the needs of specific student milieus, attenuating defined problems and fulfilling modest hopes.
References


