Report No.1

Raised Parental Expectations:
Some possible pitfalls

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The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the project partners
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1. Executive Summary

- This report is concerned with the participation of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) families and communities in Australian higher education. One means of achieving this as purported by the Australian Government and various universities is through the raising of family aspirations or expectations.

- It examines the localised effects of raised family aspirations and expectations of higher education as they are understood within the lived experiences of some students from a low SES context. The data was derived from the interactions in 4 focus groups of 8 participants and 5 follow-up individual interviews run in a low SES school in Mount Druitt in Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

- This report highlights how certain ways of expressing high expectations by parents may have a deleterious effect on student aspiration and attainment. This is especially the case where students perceive that they cannot fulfil the parental expectations of direct entry into university to undertake a specific course of study predetermined by the parent.

- Such a situation can be inferred to significantly reduce the incentives for higher education participation because if either the parental expectations of direct entry into university or the specific course of study are not fulfilled, parental sanction is expected. Therefore, alternative entry pathways and alternative courses of study are perceived to attract the same negative response from parents as may be the case if higher education were not pursued at all. This situation is known as the “double bind,” which denotes a situation whereby no matter what a person does, they cannot win.

- To attenuate the possibility of such negative outcomes, this report recommends several considerations at the institutional and policy levels that may nuance the current push of raising parental aspirations and expectations:
o It is recommended that policy discourse be more specific about the ways raised aspirations should be expressed in cognisance of different familial, socioeconomic and cultural contexts

o It is recommended that there be greater parental involvement at all stages of schooling and not only at the matriculation stages. This is understood to facilitate the matching of parental expectations to student interests and abilities over time

o It is recommended that schools encourage parental involvement that is associated with intrinsic motivation, which tends to increase motivation, academic engagement and self-efficacy while decreasing performance anxiety and attrition rates

o It is recommended that greater emphasis be placed on effective and efficient articulations between non-university post-school options such as Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the university sector. This is likely to reduce the stress associated with the high stakes nature of university entry via high school matriculation rankings (e.g. the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank [ATAR]).
2. Introduction

This report is concerned with the participation of students from low socioeconomic status families and communities in higher education in the context of the policy initiatives of the Australian Federal Government in response to the 2008 Review of Higher Education, known also as the ‘Bradley Review.’ Among the recommendations of the review that have been effected through Federal Government policy is the provision of funding to higher education institutions for the purposes of reaching the target of 20 per cent of Australian domestic undergraduate students being from low SES backgrounds by 2020.

In seeking to increase the university enrolment rates of students from historically under-represented segments of the Australian population, much emphasis has hitherto been placed by universities on the notion of “raising aspirations”, particularly of those coming from low socioeconomic status (SES) families (e.g. Adam 2010; James 2005). In general, this entails university programs targeted at low SES populations that seek to encourage prospective university enrolment by shifting “[p]erceptions regarding the value of higher education and for whom it is best suited” because for students in this milieu, it is posited, “university is an alien and inaccessible concept; they are less likely to have parents who went to university, and few people in the local community are likely to have attended.” (New South Wales Smarter Schools National Partnership [NSW SSNP], 2010, p. 8)

In light of this, the New South Wales Smarter Schools National Partnership – a broadly based venture consisting of the Australian Government, the NSW Government, the NSW Catholic Education Commission and the NSW Association of Independent Schools – has listed “Parent engagement (in relation to university aspiration and attainment)” as the first strategy for raising student aspiration, which is in turn taken to go “hand in hand with attainment.” (NSW SSNP, 2010, pp. 15, 8) With regard to the Bradley Review targets and figures mentioned above, then, attainment in this sense can be understood as necessitating both students’ initial enrolment and persistence in higher education.

Despite the emphasis on the need to raise aspirations amongst low SES parents or families in order to in turn drive projected student attainment, however, a definition of what is understood by aspiration is not elucidated. The noun “aspiration” when used in this context is
predicated on its verb forms “aspired” or “aspiring” denoting “to be eager (to do something)” and in phrases as “to aspire to,” which denotes “to aim at (something, usually something great or lofty)” (Macquarie Dictionary Online, 2012). To speak of the need to raise aspirations is therefore to make reference to augmenting expectations amongst a target group oriented toward a particular status and/or object – in this case participation in higher education and the benefits that are supposed to accrue from it, most prominently the economic benefits to the self and society (NSW SSNP, 2010, p. 9; also Borland, 2002; OECD, 2012).

While broader questions remain about whether higher educational attainment alone is sufficient for raising the economic status of individuals and nations, especially when considered apart from broader problem of the structure of the job market and wage determination in relation to the quantitative growth of university credentials as “positional goods” (see Wolf, 2002 and 2004; also Marginson, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008; Clarke, 2012), this report explores the localised effects of raised family aspirations as they are understood within the lived experiences of some students from a low SES context.

Based on the interactions in 4 focus groups and 5 follow-up depth interviews run in a low SES school in Western Sydney, this report draws attention to how certain forms of high expectation communicated by parents may have a deleterious effect on student aspiration and attainment.
3. Methodology

The primary point of reference in this report is the experiences of student participants, and from this it seeks to discern common experiential patterns that have emerged from their respective situations – what Laing (1976, p. 62) has usefully termed the “structure of experience.”

4 focus groups of 8 high school student participants were run amongst those who had indicated that they had applied for university entrance. This was done in an attempt to understand their points of view, including what their perceptions of higher education were, what factors in their lives have acted as impetuses for the uptake of higher education and what they hoped to achieve through it.

The focus group approach to collecting data was taken because this format tends to yield a backwards and forwards movement of discussion between the interviewer and the group. This encourages interaction between student participants rather than simply a response to “adult” questions, and which yields collective rather than an individual views (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p. 376). On the basis of themes arising out of the focus groups, 5 follow-up interviews were conducted with individual participants on the effects of parental expectations on their aspirations.

The 4 focus groups (FG1-4) were run over five weeks from September to October 2012. The designated topic for discussion was: “University: what encourages or discourages you?” These group discussions were held in the office of the Mount Druitt University Hub involving Year 12 participants (aged 17-18) of various ethno-national identifications and a gender proportion of 5 female and 3 male participants per focus group. All participants were formally applicants to various universities through the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) and can be categorised as students undergoing ‘financial hardship’ under the present UAC ‘Educational Access Schemes’ (EAS) criteria, which considers individual and family circumstances in its eligibility requirements. Each focus group was provided with refreshments and ran for approximately one hour each as planned, except for one group held after school hours that ran for two (on the participants’ request).
To ensure the confidentiality of the student participants, they are allocated alphabetical
identifiers according to their focus groups and the order of their appearance in this report (i.e.
FG1a-h, FG2a-h, FG3a-h, FG5a-h).
4. Findings

One of key issues that emerged from these groups was the role of parental expectations. For example, in FG1, a female participant FG1b emphasised how her decision to apply for university entry was strongly influenced by her mother:

**FG1a:** My dad does a really tough labouring job. When I was young said I wanted to do his job, but he just told me to go to uni and get a better job. I can do anything I want, just go to uni and don’t do what he did.

**FG1b:** You’re lucky. My mum just told me: “You’re going to uni!” Like, I told her I was thinking about going to TAFE [i.e. college of Technical and Further Education] and she didn’t seem too happy.

[Slight group laughter]

**FG1b:** No! For real! She just looked at me like: “What the hell?” So I guess I’ll be going to uni.

**FG1a:** What are you going to do?

**FG1b:** My mum wants me to do medicine or dentistry. I’m like, ‘yeah right.’ But she keeps going on about how she wants me to be a doctor. I don’t want her to get sh*tty with me, so…

**Moderator:** Are you interested in medicine?
FG1b: [Laughs] Nah!

In FG2-4, family expectations also featured as a prominent theme mentioned in relation higher education. In FG2, for example, the exchange between FG2b and FG2a highlights the different ways that family expectations can be communicated and experienced:

FG2a: Yeah, my mum wants me to do accounting… She said that she works with accounting people and they get good money, and she said musicians [his interest] make no money and she wouldn’t give me any if I was a broke musician.

FG2b: Mine were totally not like that! They [i.e. parents] told me that they would do everything to help me if I went to uni. Like, I wouldn’t have to worry about money and stuff because they would save for me. They had money saved from Iraq for me.

FG2a: Man, I wish my parents were like that.

Having noticed the pattern of family expectations as ‘push factors’ amongst participants seeking university entry in the first two focus groups, it was sought in the third and fourth focus groups to discern if there was a difference in subjective attitudes between participants who had been positively or negatively reinforced by these factors. So when family expectations emerged as a theme in the latter focus group, the moderator posed the question: “So has this made you want to go to uni more?”
The responses to this question in the two focus groups where this question was posed varied, but there tended to be less enthusiasm expressed by participants whose families expressed their expectations through negative reinforcements, as well as a greater confusion about their motives for going to university and why they opted for the courses they did.

In the third focus group, for example, FG3a and FG3b mentioned business and medicine as what they intended to study linked these choices directly to family expectations. For these two participants, neither seemed to express enthusiasm and curiosity about the fields of business and medicine respectively, nor interest in the universities that offered these programs:

**FG3a:** [To moderator] What do you mean “want to go to uni more”?

**Moderator:** I mean, you mentioned that your mum told you to study business. Has this made you more interested in business or universities that offer business courses?

**FG3a:** Um, not really. I mean, I don’t mind studying business. It’s alright.

[Approximately 15 seconds of silence]

**Moderator:** What about universities? Any preferences?

**FG3a:** Not sure.

[Approximately 10 seconds of silence]
**Moderator:** [Gesturing to FG3b, who had earlier indicated that her parents want her to pursue medicine] How about you?

**FG3b:** I don’t know. Maybe UNSW [i.e. University of New South Wales]? They have a medicine course, right?

**FG3c:** If you guys don’t want to go to uni, then why are you even applying?

Likewise, a similar exchange occurs in FG4, a discussion ensued between members of the group and FG4b who had expressed a desire to undertake university study in accounting based on her mother’s urging:

**FG4a:** As if! You suck at maths. You hate it!

**FG4b:** Yeah, I know.

**FG4a:** Then why do you want to do accounting?

**FG4b:** Because my mum reckons it’s a good job.

**FG4c:** But aren’t you really into dancing and sh*t?

**FG4b:** Yeah, but my mum reckons there’s no jobs in that.
FG4c: Have you checked out what they have at uni, like open days and stuff? Some of them have dance I think. Why don’t you do that?

FG4b: Nah... [quietly] can’t be bothered.

From a cursory reading of these excerpts from the focus group discussions, what is most obvious is the significant role that families play in establishing and reinforcing the expectations of university study. However, these focus group studies also appeared to suggest that for some participants in this school, parental expectations are not matched by an apparent interest in or motivation towards the courses they have chosen to apply to.

In order to gain a better understanding of how this situation is experienced by these participants, follow up interviews were conducted with FG1b, FG2a, FG3a, FG3b and FG4b. These interviews were minimally structured in order to encourage the participants to become engaged in conversation more naturally and open the possibility of rapport in the hope of abetting more open and honest responses (Langdridge, 2007, p. 68). The interviewer thus sought to pick up on the responses offered by participants and asked for further detail or clarification, as well as further questions as and when appropriate in order to focus attention on the issue at hand (see Langdridge, 2007, p. 68).

Of the 5 participants interviewed, all seemed to express several common moments within their experiences. The first of these is a relationship of communicative proximity between the parent/s and the student. That is, in each case the parent/s was a close and constant presence in the life of the participant.

FG1b, for example, is from a single-parent family and so “my mum is always watching what I do... asking about what I’m doing.” Likewise, FG4b and FG3a are also from a single-parent families, which means that the former “[has] to help [her] mum all the time to look after [her] little brothers and sisters... otherwise [she wouldn’t] know how things are gonna work at
home” while for the latter, “[he] feel[s] kinda responsible because [he is] the oldest, so [he has] to back mum up and set an example for the younger siblings.” For FG2a and FG3b, this relationship of proximity is manifest in the apparent investment of their parents in their education: “always checking on how I’m going in school” in FG2a’s case and “calling up my teachers and stuff and checking on me” in FG3b’s. For the latter, her situation of having both parents working long and odd hours also means that she bears a significant burden of care for her younger siblings, which she understands to be “sort of like the in-between person for my siblings and my parents.”

The second common moment shared by all 5 participants is the expectation from their parent/s that each will go directly to university. This expectation is accompanied by various forms of negative sanction for failing to do so. For FG1b, this appears to her as repeated exhortations to gain entry into university medicine or dentistry courses:

She’s always going on and on about how she wants me to study medicine or be a dentist. I try to tell her that it’s really hard to get in [to those courses], but she doesn’t really listen. She just keeps crapping on about it all the time. I don’t want her to get sh*tty with me... life is hell when she gets like that. So I just let her go on...

Similarly for FG2a, this expectation is experienced by him as a repeated insistence on a particular course of study:

My mum keeps telling me that I have to go to uni... to do accounting at uni. I don’t know what it’s about. But mum keeps telling me to do it because she reckons I’ll get heaps of money. She doesn’t really care about anything else. So yeah...

For FG3a, the possibility of choosing not to go to university was met with what he describes as intense opposition and anger:

When I told her I was thinking about doing an apprenticeship or something, sh*t hit the roof! Mum was pretty pissed. She said that it was uni or else she
would disown me or something. [Laughter] Yeah, so either uni or I’m f*cked.

Similarly, FG4b recalls an incident when she was contemplating dropping subjects at school to ease the immense pressure she felt under, but which would have rendered her ineligible to receive an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) necessary for direct university admission:

She [mother] fully wouldn’t talk to me for a few days. I felt like I died or something. Seriously! She’s alright now, but I know if I don’t go to uni, it will be the same thing, but maybe for heaps longer this time.

In FG3b’s case, the negative sanction appeared to her to manifest more as disappointment or sadness. She recalls asking her parents hypothetically one evening:

What if I don’t get in[to university] to study to be a doctor? They kinda looked at me, just looked at me. I looked at their face[s] and it was just depressing. I mean, I can’t stand it when they get like that. If you’re pissed off, just say it. They don’t, but. They just go all quiet and look at me like I am some criminal.

A third moment of commonality between the 5 participants, and one that was expressed by all the student participants as inextricably tied to the second moment of direct university entry, is the specification of a course of study determined by their parent/s to be the most suitable or desirable. This too was accompanied by the threat of negative sanction for failure to do so, as the comments cited above from FG1b, FG2a and FG3b have indicated.

In FG3a’s case, akin to FG2a, he understands his mother to want him to study business (accounting and finance in particular) and “not some other stuff that won’t actually lead to a job.” When asked if she would be supportive of him pursuing other lines of interest, FG3a responded by stating that:
Mum reckons she’s not going to support me if I do something that won’t get me a job. Like, she would give me sh*t or kick me out or something. I don’t know, but she’ll be upset.

For FG4b, her expressed interest in dance is something that her parent has insisted is “something I do in my free time” and “not an actual career”, and that:

Accounting will actually get me a job, ay. So I won’t bludge of her [i.e mother]. She reckons that if I do dance, I’ll be bludging money off her. Then she’ll whinge all the time about how I’m not helping contribute to things. I’ll go crazy if it’s like that.

In sum, there are three moments of commonality that emerged upon further discussion with each of the 5 interview participants from FG1-4 that expressed an experience of strong parental expectation pushing them toward university study: firstly, a certain communicative proximity was a precondition for the exercise of parental expectation and its reception by these 5 participants; secondly, parental expectation was experienced by these 5 participants as demanding direct entry into university; and thirdly, these experiences of parental expectation and demand for direct entry into university was also experienced as strongly tied to a specific course of study predetermined by the parent(s).
5. Analysis

On the basis of the participant experiences expressed during the 4 focus group interactions and elaborated upon in the 5 interviews conducted, it appears that the three particular moments identified above are shared by all of the 5 student participants who appeared to show little interest in or motivation towards the courses they had formally listed as preferences in their university applications.

More specifically, it can be hypothesised that there is an internalisation of these moments as a common structure of experience from their respective situations of high parental expectations in each of the 5 student participants interviewed. This structure, it is inferred by contrast to the broad claims made about the positive correlation between parental expectations and student attainment, may well suggest more negative effects.

Formally speaking, the structure of experience shared by these student participants may be understood to be a combination of the following moments at three levels:

1. On the first level, there is a relationship of proximity between parent/s (P) and a particular student participant (FGx), which can be represented as $P \rightarrow FGx$.

2. On this basis, the next level involves the injunction by $P \rightarrow FGx$ to gain direct entry into university ($U$). If this injunction is not met, the consequence is that $FGx$ expects to experience a negative sanction from P, which may be expressed variously as disappointment, anger and/or some form of disapproval whether experienced as explicit or implied ($P-$).

3. However, even if the meeting of the injunction to achieve $U$ at the second level is met, this is not understood by $FGx$ to necessarily confer positive reward. Rather, the $P \rightarrow FGx$ relationship carries a further expectation that $FGx$ will do a specific course of study ($I$) through $U$, which may variously be medicine, accounting or law to the exclusion of other courses on offer like dance, music, etc (2/3/4...n). Only if this injunction at the third level is met will a positive reward ($P+$) in the form of parental satisfaction, happiness and/or approval be conferred. Because the achievement of $U$ is
experienced by $FGx$ to be so closely tied with (I), the consequence of not fulfilling the injunction at the third level is taken to be the same as not achieving $U$ (i.e. $P-$). Figuratively, this structure of experience may thus be represented as in Figure 1 below:

![Figure 1: The structure of experience for student participants with high parental expectations of direct university entry ($U$) and undertaking a specific course of study predetermined by the parent (I). The achievement of both is taken to bring parental approval ($P+$) while the failure to achieve both is taken to bring parental disapproval ($P-$).](image)

From this basic map of the students’ structure of experience, it is evident that the range of possibilities available for ensuring the $P$$\rightarrow$$FGx$ relationship eventuates in a $P+$ outcome through higher education is extremely limited. In addition, if the consequences of doing $2/3/4...n$ are understood by students to be equivalent not achieving $U$ within the context of parental expectations, then the familial incentive for both enrolling and continuing at university for these non-I course preferences may be drastically decreased insofar as the result is the same felt negativity ($P-$).

If the preceding account of the $FGx$ structure of experience is accurate, then the disincentive to pursue higher education in this situation can be seen to correlate with the decreasing likelihood of entry into and/or persistence with course of study $I$.

At the extreme, if course of study $I$ becomes near impossible – whether owing to extrinsic factors such as extremely high entrance requirements versus actually achieved school results or intrinsic factors such as specific interests and abilities – then students may experience what is known as a ‘double bind’ in the context of the $P$$\rightarrow$$FGx$ relationship. Most simply put, this is “a situation in which no matter what a person does, he [sic] ‘can't win.’” (Bateson et al, 1956, p. 251)
This means that in the absence of course of study 1 as a possibility, any post-school option whether taken at the second or third levels are taken to result in the same negative result in relation to parental expectations (P-). In other words, parental expectations may now be understood as having, on a whole, a negative effect on the students’ experiences for the purposes of recruitment and retention at university for the attainment of degrees from courses 2/3/4...n. The structure of experience for FGx in such a situation can thus be represented as:

![Diagram](image-url)

*Figure 2: The structure of experience for student participants with high parental expectations of direct university entry (U) and undertaking a specific course of study predetermined by the parent (1). In the absence of entry into parentally predetermined course of study at university (1), the choice of undertaking higher education or not undertaking higher education is taken to bring the same result of parental disapproval (P-).*
6. Limitations

This report neither claims a universal applicability for these findings that is applicable to all low SES populations, nor an immutable causal relation between parental and student aspirations, whether positive or negative. The variation and size of the samples do not permit such a conclusion. On the contrary, what it seeks to highlight is the ambiguity of raised parental expectations as a means of increasing low SES students’ aspirations and attainment toward higher education within a particular instance.
7. Conclusions

This report has sought to question the objective of “raising aspirations” amongst low SES families that is currently in widespread use by Australian governmental agencies and universities. It has done so by pointing to possible deleterious effects of high parental expectations on low SES students.

Through experiential data collected in 4 focus groups and 5 follow-up interviews conducted with students categorised as low SES at a school in Mount Druitt, Western Sydney, this report discerned some negative effects amongst students who have experienced high expectations from their respective parent(s). The structure of experience for these students consists of three common moments:

1. A relationship of communicative proximity between individual students and their parent(s);

2. The perceived expectation on the part of the students that their parents expect the former to attain direct entry into university; and

3. The perception that parent(s) have strictly specified a course of study as being the most suitable or desirable. Undergirding these expectations is the perceived threat of negative sanctions from parents if the second and third conditions are unmet by the students.

Within such a situation, it can be inferred that there will be a disincentive to pursue higher education that correlates with the decreasing likelihood of entry into and/or persistence with course of study specified by their parents. For in the absence of fulfilling the parental expectations both of direct university entry and a predetermined course, the familial incentive for both enrolling and continuing at university for other course preferences may be drastically
decreased insofar as the end result is perceived to be the same negative sanctions as if the student had not sought university entrance at all.
8. Recommendations

Do the possibilities of disincentives and the double bind thus negate the notion of raising aspiration amongst parents and students to attainment through higher education *in toto*? While the particular situation expressed by the low SES student participants in this study encountered do highlight some critical instances where such an emphasis may lead to deleterious experiences, it is not *necessarily* the case that high parental expectations are bad *per se*. Insofar as aspiration may translate into different *degrees* and *modes* of parental expectations on students in the $P\rightarrow FG^*$ relationship, then, it is argued that the possibilities of disincentives and the double bind described above may be eased at the first level if expectations are more attuned to the manifest interests, motivations and achievements of students both within and beyond school.

In order to achieve this, there is a need for policy discourse and program design to further specify the ways raised aspirations should be expressed in cognisance of familial, socioeconomic and cultural contexts. In the case of low SES families with historically low levels of educational attainment, some research exists suggesting that high degrees of expectation coupled with a lack of familiarity with the requirements of higher education – both in terms of admission requirements and institutional structures – may have a negative effect on eventual educational attainment (e.g. Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilson & Colvin, 2011). In addition, certain cultural identifications may also narrow the modes through which aspirations are expressed, for example the bias toward science-related careers amongst some Chinese families (Li, 2001). As Reay, Davies, David and Ball (2001), Reay (2006) and Crosnoe, Mistry and Elder (2004) have argued, class, race and gender intersect in such circumstances to significantly affect the efficacy of parents as mediators of higher education aspirations.

One way such that negative outcomes may be attenuated, as indeed is acknowledged by the SSNP (2010, p. 15), is greater parental involvement in students’ schooling at all phases and not only at the matriculating phase. Of course, the question remains on the different types of parental involvement put forward (i.e. whether they are pedagogically substantive and how they are articulated with individual school structures), as well as issues of access for parents.
for whom greater involvement may be inhibited owing to single-parent status, work commitments, disabilities, heavy burdens as primary carers and/or a range of other social and cultural barriers.

Another way of attenuating negative outcomes, as Fan and Williams (2010) have posited, is to encourage parental involvement that is associated with enhanced intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic pressures or threats. The former tends to increase motivation (also Goldnick, Ryan & Deci, 1991), academic engagement (also Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992) and self-efficacy while simultaneously decreasing performance anxiety and attrition rates (Barnard, 2004; Tan & Goldberg, 2009).

Finally, at the policy and institutional levels, greater emphasis needs to be placed on effective and efficient articulations between non-university post-school options such as Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the university sector (Curtis, 2009; Aird, Miller, van Megen & Buys, 2010). This may well have the effect of reducing the high stakes nature of the predominant mode of university entry via high school matriculation rankings (i.e. the ATAR), which apart from reflecting social patterns of advantage and disadvantage at a societal level (see Marks, McMillan & Hillman, 2001; Teese & Polesel, 2003), also appear to valorise direct entry into universities in the expectations of some parents and thus increase the likelihood of disincentive and double bind situations in low SES students’ structures of experience.
9. References


