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Investigating the role of gender, social class and curriculum in the first-in-family higher education experience

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ABSTRACT
In all levels of schooling there exist disparities in terms of class and gender. The research presented in this article contributes to the study of how gender, class and curriculum influence the aspirations of students who are the first-in-family to attend university. Drawing on a study of 48 students over a three-year period, we are interested in the gendering and classing of the first-in-family experience according to their chosen area of study, as a proxy for their future aspirations. In making connections between their journeys and international research on class, gender and inequality, the article highlights how curriculum offerings in lower socio-economic contexts often have implications for how non-traditional student populations negotiate higher education.

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Subject choice; curriculum; gender; social class; first-in-family; aspirations

Introduction

Despite recent gains, students who are the first-in-family (or first generation) to attend university remain severely underrepresented in Australian higher education and research continues to demonstrate the ways in which this equity group often experiences significant struggles during the transition into university (Stahl & McDonald, 2022; Wainwright & Watts, 2021). We define first-in-family as students who are first in their immediate family to attend university (see O'Shea et al., 2017). As an equity group, many first-in-family students in Australia come from disadvantaged schools where curriculum offerings remain limited (Roberts et al., 2019; Teese, 2007), and where career counselling is largely non-existent (Austin et al., 2020). In this article, we are interested in exploring the nexus of social class, gender, and curriculum and how these factors contribute to the first-in-family experience. The classed and gendered nature of the curriculum offering remains largely unexplored in the first-in-family literature and, as a result, we also know little about what the possible implications may be for the aspirations of first-in-family students or their success at the higher education level.

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In Australia today, subjects remain segregated by gender at the national level (Berger et al., 2020; O'Shea & Stone, 2014), including across ethnic groups (see Sikora & Biddle, 2015). This article draws on longitudinal data from a study of 48 first-in-family students over a three-year period as they made the transition from secondary school into Australian universities. Longitudinal research allowed for greater analytical depth as we were able to observe participants in the *process of becoming* as their aspirations were negotiated, adjusted and realised. We acknowledge that social class and gender influence the formation of identities in relation to secondary school curriculum and culture (Francis, 2002); furthermore, discourses of class and gender also contribute to how identities are performed in relation to both the university space and the students' chosen areas of study (Stahl & McDonald, 2022).

Research continues to highlight the salience of gender and class in informing aspirations. For example, drawing on the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) (a nation-wide longitudinal study) which documented the transition to post-school education, Fullarton and Ainley (2000) found a strong correlation between student subject choices in the senior secondary years and access to higher education. They highlight how students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and from non-English speaking backgrounds were more likely to attend higher education. Furthermore, Fullarton and Ainley's (2000) analysis revealed that the socio-economic background of girls played a role in the likelihood that they would enrol in the humanities and social sciences in their final year of school but played less of a role for boys. In contrast, the socioeconomic background of boys was a strong indicator for whether they would enrol in Tech studies with boys from working-class families more likely to engage with these kinds of subjects. Socioeconomic background was not a strong indicator for whether girls would enrol in Tech studies. In more recent scholarship by Homel and Ryan (2014), the researchers controlled for various variables from the LSAY data in an effort to isolate what variable was particularly informative for adolescent aspirations. Their analysis emphasised that, regardless of gender and social class, aspirations play a significant role in education attainment. With this in mind, we are interested in exploring the classed and gendered nature of the curriculum and what this means for students from non-traditional backgrounds pursuing higher education in Australia today.

We have witnessed significant societal shifts in the nature of gender and, to a lesser extent, social class. Gender relations over the past several decades have affected traditional rites of passage like marriage and employment. As Arnot and Mac an Ghaill (2006, p. 1) "most significantly, in these analyses, gender has a central dynamic location in making sense of wider social and cultural transformation within conditions of late modernity". Some scholars argue that neoliberalism has compelled the historic conventions of femininity and masculinity to be reinscribed in new ways (see Adkins, 2002; Kenway & Kelly, 2000) where historic and gender-based inequalities exist alongside evidence of changing expectations (Adkins, 1999, 2000). In surveying the twentieth century, Reay et al. (2005) highlight how there has been "a strong class differential among both men and women in which social class effects have neither been alleviated nor accentuated by gender" (p. 4). Though they acknowledge that social class remains difficult to define, there exist many intra-class differences and, we would argue, intra-gender differences. Given these assertions, we see the transition from secondary school to university for first-in-family students as an important entry point for exploring how gender and class influence aspirations and subject selection.

Our research has implications for schools as they attempt to "raise aspirations" for disadvantaged young people (Stahl, 2017), as well as for the broader widening participation agenda of Australian universities (Southgate et al., 2014). Reay et al. (2005), writing in the United Kingdom, note how the working-class experience is shaped by "a propensity to accept exclusion or exclude oneself rather than attempt to achieve what is already denied" as identities are "the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individual's earlier life experiences" (p. 24). The aspirations of the participants in the *First-in-Family Project* are arguably indicative of the generational impacts of social and economic disadvantage in tension with increased expectations from schools and families to pursue university. In critically considering the formation of aspirations in relation to gender and class – as evidenced by the participants' chosen subject choices and semi-structured interviews – the research presented complements and extends research which documents how socio-economic status continues to exert a substantial influence on student aspirations (Austin et al., 2020; Berger et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2015a, 2015b).

The article is organised in three main parts. First, drawing on international research, we provide a brief overview of the role gender and class has played in subject choice where we consider both wider societal factors influencing subject choice in higher education as well as the various patterns even within the chosen area of study. The research outlined in this section frames and informs our approach to the data. At the conclusion of this section, we narrow our focus drawing on research conducted in Australia mainly from the seminal work of Teese (2000/2013; 2007) and more recent work by Roberts et al. (2019). Second, we recount the methodology of the three-year study and present the broad research findings from the 48 participants before narrowing our analysis to focus on how aspirations were influenced by class and gender. Third, the article concludes with a focus on what the data may mean in light of broader issues of social justice and how it may inform both institutional practices as well as the agenda regarding widening participation.

The role of gender and class in subject choice

Bowman and Filar (2018) write that historically the university "used to be the purview of privileged young men and – eventually – some privileged young women" (p. 28) while, in contrast, historically the experience of women in higher education has been framed by "gendered subject segregation, sexist practices and curricula" (Leathwood, 2006, p. 169). This history of gender inequalities in higher education contributes in varying degrees to the present climate of higher education where we have seen several strategic schemes focused on advancing gender equity. While these schemes are commendable, and there have been significant gains experienced by women as a result, there are notable limits especially in terms of entry into the labour market. According to Chesters (2020) " … education no longer provides a pathway to gender equality. Young women are now more likely than their male peers to graduate from university but are less likely to be employed full-time" (p. 61). Adding another layer of complexity, while there have been advances in gender equity internationally, with more women attending university than ever before, the "social class differences in access have remained far more intractable" (Reay et al., 2005, p. 1).

In terms of deciphering the various socialisation processes which influence gender identities and subject choice, especially at the secondary level, the two which have

received the most attention are the family and forms of schooling. Research continues to draw attention to how long-established patterns of gender- and occupational-based employability within family life contribute to the formation of aspirations (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). With regard to schooling, Arnot (2002) suggests education systems reproduce and reinforce class and gender norms where school subjects are categorised as either “masculine” or “feminine”. In studying the construction of learner identities and gendered subjectivities, Paechter (2007) argues that educational institutions are important sites of local communities of practice in terms of the (re)construction of gendered identities. For example, the way that primary schools often group children involves “understandings about who is supposed to be in which configuration and who is not” (Paechter, 2007, p. 77). Furthermore, some forms of femininity and masculinity are privileged within school sites through hegemonic norms of successful girls and boys (Francis, 2002; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Paechter & Clark, 2016) and this often requires boys and girls to actively moderate performances of femininities and masculinities in schools, informing their student identities.

Highlighting the role of social class and curriculum, Archer et al. (2003) documented how different curricula in British schools directed working-class students toward vocational education and students from middle-class backgrounds toward academic pathways. Furthermore, masculinity scholars studying higher education in the United States have argued that men are inclined to focus more on “achievement and success” which may influence “a variety of campus choices, including selection of academic major, willingness to participate in service, and differential attitudes toward coursework across the curriculum depending upon perceptions of transferability toward future goals” (Bowman & Filar, 2018, p. 3). Expanding on this point, Bowman and Filar (2018) highlight the nexus of gender and class, drawing attention to how working-class men can often see “higher education as a ‘softer’ option than pursuing a career or vocational preparation” (p. 27).

Research on gender, class and subject choice shows there are clear patterns even within various areas of study. In the United Kingdom, for example, traditional nurturing or caring professions like childcare remain dominated by women while men consistently pursue careers in STEM (Science, Maths, Engineering, Technology) and skilled trades (Bradley et al., 2022; Leathwood, 2006). Similarly, O’Shea and Stone (2014) highlight how although more women are attending university in Australia than ever before, there is evidence of gender disparity with an overrepresentation of women in degrees leading to the traditionally feminine “caring professions” such as nursing and teaching. Returning to the United Kingdom, Archer et al. (2016) underscore how young women often encounter issues with identity in relation to the study of science and how this is particularly pronounced in terms of their participation in physics and engineering. They illustrate in one case-study how working-class girlhood sits uncomfortably with a “dominant discursive tension between femininity and an ‘authentic’ physics identity” (Archer et al., 2016, p. 4) where they highlight “an internalisation of the principles of the cultural arbitrary of physics (‘physics is masculine’; ‘physics is hard’; ‘boys are better at hard subjects like physics’)” (p. 10). How students negotiate the gendered norms attached to subject choice, specifically in the area of STEM education, is echoed by other scholars where Gonsalves (2014) highlights an inherent tension between femininity and physics (see also Danielsson & Lundin, 2014). The perception of science as a masculine subject

internationally (Archer et al., 2016; Danielsson, 2012; Gonsalves et al., 2016) appears to have implications for how girls may come to see themselves as science students or scientists (see Archer et al., 2020; Calabrese Barton et al., 2008; Carlone et al., 2015).

A gendered and classed curriculum in Australia

Highlighting the role of social class and inequality, research has continued to document the unequal resources in Australian schools which has resulted in narrowed curriculum opportunities for the majority of low-income populated schools (Kenway, 2013), which, in turn, influences student aspirations (Gore et al., 2015a). Students from first-in-family backgrounds in Australia often attend schools which may have limited subject offerings or who may struggle to recruit teachers who have the necessary discipline expertise (Conger et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2019; Teese, 2007). Furthermore, while career counselling in Australian schools is generally limited, it can be especially limited or under-funded within low-socio-economic schooling environments (Austin et al., 2020) which has significant implications for students' aspirations and post-school trajectories (see Stahl & McDonald, 2021). Research internationally has highlighted how schools play a role in the narrowing of post-school options where students can be given little advice around prerequisites for entrance into their preferred degree programmes – or may be guided toward particular universities often at the expense of others (see Bradley et al., 2022). Therefore, while the rhetoric may be about expanding the aspirations of disadvantaged young people, the actual reality is that the classed nature of the school curriculum and access to career counselling in Australia often work to narrow what may be possible for students from non-traditional backgrounds who are intending to pursue higher education. The study of aspirations remains an important topic, especially when we consider previous research which suggests that Australian teenagers with ambitious occupational plans are often able to translate these aspirations into university completion (Homel & Ryan, 2014; Sikora & Saha, 2011).

Teese's (2000/2013) large-scale research in the state of Victoria, Australia, showed that the hierarchies across curriculum subjects were strongly influenced by socio-economic factors and though the replication of these conditions varies among locations, it produces similar social outcomes in terms of class and gender disparities. As Teese (2007) writes:

> The curriculum is used to differentially construct gender, but at the same time it is used to express and differentiate social class through the medium of academic position and performance. There is no separate channel or medium through which gender can be constructed independently of the fashioning of social class differences through the academic materials furnished by school. Consequently, any relative gender differences in access or achievement have to be seen in terms of the way the curriculum operates as a social system which creates gender identities only to the extent that it creates social inequalities. (p. 10)

In observing the nexus of gender, social class and curriculum, Teese (2007) highlights that gender performatives are lowered and gender relations more equitable in high status subjects, "ensuring that both boys and girls share in the benefits of an educated lifestyle and on a more equal footing than happens among young working-class people" (p. 10). So, for students from more privileged backgrounds, it is more often acceptable for girls to access male-dominated subjects like maths and sciences. Teese (2007) contends that girls who are both high achievers and from privileged backgrounds were allowed the

"competitive advantages over all boys, including boys of their own class, as well as all other girls" (p. 11). However, while girls from more privileged backgrounds have made progress into male-dominated subject areas, in the field of employment there has been less progress with research suggesting a loss of earnings (Friedman, 2015) as well as social status (Yavorsky & Dill, 2020).

Extending the work of Teese, more recent research by Roberts et al. (2019) produced similar findings drawing on all secondary students in the Australian state of New South Wales who qualified for the Higher School Certificate at the end of the 2017 school year ($n = 73{,}371$). These findings demonstrate how the curriculum remains hierarchised which, in turn, restricts access to a wider breadth of knowledge for those students attending disadvantaged schools. In terms of gender, girls were under-represented in physics, IT, engineering and construction while subjects where girls were in the majority were textiles and design, dance and family studies, Aboriginal studies and modern foreign languages.

Research from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children annual statistical report reflects the gendered nature of the Australian labour market, reporting that the majority of young women aspired to five main professional areas: education professionals, legal or social professionals, beauty therapists, nursing, veterinary work and arts and media. Boys of the same demographic showed preferences for jobs in engineering and transport, Information Technology (IT), technical or trade work and sports related industries. Furthermore, findings from The Australian Institute for Family Studies highlight how during adolescence, boys and girls often display gendered occupational aspirations, tending towards "gender traditional" occupations (Baxter, 2017) where it was also found that at the same age, boys were more likely than girls to confidently know the occupation they want to pursue. This "attitude" is shown to have intersectional links to socio-economic status (SES) as adolescents from lower socio-economic families were more certain in terms of their career paths than their higher socio-economic equivalents though students from higher socio-economic families tended to have higher occupational aspirations (see also Gemici et al., 2014). For children of lower SES families, the top occupations included construction, engineering and transport for boys, and personal service, nursing and health and welfare support care for girls. Additionally, recent research by Scholes and McDonald (2022) found that gender and social class were influential factors informing career aspirations with children in the early years of primary school.

Returning to the gender and classed nature of Australian higher education, universities today are dominated by women. According to Larkins (2020), women account for 58% of the domestic student intake where the highest concentrations are in the subject areas associated with: society and culture, health, management and commerce. In contrast, males dominate only two fields: IT and engineering. While the traditional gender disparity in students seeking higher education has lessened, and in Australia reversed toward dominance by women, the chosen subject areas remain gendered as women generally study careers considered caring or nurturing such as nursing and teaching (O'Shea & Stone, 2014; O'Shea et al., 2017). Furthermore, in critiquing student representation in Australian higher education, Ramsey (2015) asserts that current data projections fail to recognise a more nuanced picture where "total numbers of male and female students overlook the differences in socio-economic, disciplinary and institutional patterns, with large numbers of males more privileged on each of these dimensions" though not males from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Research on the aspirations of first-in-family

students in Australia highlights the existence of gendered patterns, suggesting that while social change is present, it remains slow (Southgate et al., 2014).

The focus in this paper is on the aspirations of young people who are first-in-family and the ways in which their chosen area of study, as a proxy for their future aspirations, is both gendered and classed. Our investigation acknowledges that ATAR,[1] as well as a myriad of familial, social and economic factors, influence potential university participation in Australia (Harvey, 2014; Patfield et al., 2021; Tranter, 2012), and there is clear evidence in research from The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education that low-SES students are disadvantaged when applying for university as the process is dependent on school guidance and resources (Cardak et al., 2015). In fact, it is estimated that school attributes such as school type and student population are responsible for almost 20% of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) variation between students (see Gemici et al., 2013). This is important because while students may aspire highly, their ATAR may, in fact, allow them to enter university but restrict them from their intended area of study, requiring a significant adjustment of their aspirations.

Methodology

The *First-in-Family Project* focused on the identity processes of 48 first-in-family students as they transitioned from high school into Australian university study. The cohort draws from historically poverty-stricken regions of the southern and northern suburbs of one Australian city which has three major co-educational universities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) defines low-socioeconomic students as coming from the bottom 25% of the national ranking. Most participants attended schools where the majority of the students would not attend university in their post-compulsory schooling years. Working closely with school leaders to identify potential first-in-family students, we recruited participants toward the end of their time at secondary school. All the participants resided within a one-hour commute of a prestigious "Group of 8/Sandstone"[2] university and a half hour to universities that are considered less prestigious. Furthermore, all participants presented as cisgender and used either he/him or she/her pronouns. We met with participants over a three-year period in which we were able to observe how they negotiated the transition into university, including how they chose their areas of study. Keeping in mind wider trends regarding the classed and gendered nature of curriculum, we ask to what extent are the aspirations of first-in-family students gendered and classed as reflected in their chosen area of study?

Analysis procedures

A professional transcription company was used, and we listened through the interview audio files several times and checked them against transcripts to ensure accuracy. Re-listening to the recording and reading the transcripts facilitated a deeper interpretation of the data. Transcripts were uploaded to and analysed through NVivo. To allow for inductive and deductive analyses, and transitions between the two, we applied a modified grounded theory approach. This method allowed us to focus on the particular themes of our research relating to gender, social class and social mobility. Through weekly

meetings we refined the coding scheme while searching for more patterns to deepen the analysis. Drawing on a segment of data from the larger study, this paper focuses specifically on questions we asked the participants regarding their aspirational trajectories and the careers and employment of their main caregivers (Table 1).

In order to highlight patterns in the data, participant aspirations immediately following their post-compulsory education – as well as how these aspirations changed during the subsequent two years – were documented on an Excel spreadsheet. Participants were grouped according to how their aspirations are broadly viewed as feminine or masculine. Our analysis was informed by the consideration of patterns of male and female employment (Arnot, 2002; Friedman, 2015; Yavorsky & Dill, 2020). We recognise the binary nature of these categorisations which we believe warrants problematising; we use these categories here to highlight how careers remain socially stratified. While some careers were easily categorised according to gender, the research team deliberated regarding how some of the aspirations were assigned to a category. For example, while we broadly categorised a Bachelor of Education as feminine, after some discussion, we made the decision to categorise one participant's education degree with a major in Design and Technology as masculine due to the strong association of the discipline with masculinity as well as its connection to careers such as building, carpentry and engineering.

The main occupations of the participants' caregivers were combined with the student data. Caregivers included either one or two parents, stepparents or aunts and uncles. We also categorised the careers and employment of caregivers according to conceptions of gendered professions. An important area of deliberation was about whether unemployment could be viewed as masculine or feminine, and whether unemployment could, or should, be categorised according to gender. Our discussions focused on how unpaid domestic labour in the home has largely been the domain of girls and women (Arnot, 2002) and how motherhood and domesticity – or being a stay-at-home-mother – remain legitimate choices for women (Orgad, 2016). In contrast, there is still a longstanding societal expectation regarding men as the traditional "breadwinner" (Hearn, 2018; Tolson, 1977) where failure to fulfil this role can lead to significant issues with identity. To solve this dilemma, we went back to the interview data and focussed on how the participants had described their caregivers' unemployment. Where participants described a parent as a stay-at-home-mum/dad, we changed the occupation of the caregiver to reflect this description and categorised this as feminine. If a parent was described as unemployed, we kept this wording and

Table 1. Interview questions.

Interview 1	Can you tell me about your family? Who do you live with? – What do your family members do? Tell me about your plans for next year. – What degree do you hope to do? – What university do you plan to attend?
Subsequent Interviews	Can you tell me about what has happened since we last spoke? – Have your plans for your degree changed?

did not ascribe a gender category. Finally, in considering the class background of participants and their families, we assigned general employment categories such as professionals, caring work, trades or labourers to the career and employment choices of participants and their parents. Sheppard and Biddle's (2017) research represents the only recent large-scale documentation of social class in Australia accounting for distributions of cultural, social and economic capital among respondents in order to identify the six class types.[3]

Findings

Table 2 captures the subject choices of the cohort presenting a snapshot of the pathways the cohort aspired to at the beginning of the study. As universities endeavour to widen participation, we are first interested in how many were able to make university work for them. Within the cohort, nine participants withdrew, seven never attended and two deferred from university. While many of the participants were faced with the pressure to do better than their parents, many also contended with being academically underprepared, and experiencing prolonged feelings of isolation and unease within the higher education space, etc. (see Stahl & McDonald, 2022). This is important to remember because sometimes the aspirations of the participants remained quite fragile and required the right support structures with research indicating a high probability of dropping out (Harvey et al., 2017; O'Shea et al., 2017).

Analysis of gender (Table 2)

A significant trend in the data for both male and female participants was aspiring to forms of employment which are considered the "caring professions" – specifically nursing, teaching, etc. Nine boys and ten girls aspired to caring professions, representing 35% of the aspirational trajectories for boys and 45% for girls. One of the reasons that care work is often "female dominated" is that "care work is more consistent with gender stereotypes about appropriate labour for women" where "employment in these occupations is often seen as an extension of their work at home" (Chesters & Baxter, 2011, p. 56). Furthermore, this finding complements previous research by O'Shea et al. (2017) which highlights a trend of mature age first-in-family students in Australia toward the "helping" professions, such as teaching or nursing, and how these aspirations reflect more altruistic dispositions within their cohort. Though, they note that such degrees also tend to have an over-representation of women, "consistent with gendered views about women being well suited to 'caring' roles, but it was not exclusively women who expressed these ideals" (O'Shea et al., 2017, p. 82). While not a feature of our data, other research in the United Kingdom has highlighted how young women also consider the compatibility of careers with motherhood, although this tended to happen in the later university years (Bradley et al., 2022). Furthermore, while modern nursing stemmed from the creation of "respectable" professions for middle-class girls, there is a long history of working-class women at the frontlines of patient care (Smith & Mackintosh, 2007) as well as of the powerful positions held by unionised, working-class men in mental health nursing in particular (Prebble & Bryder, 2008). In considering the prevalence of the male participants' aspirations toward the caring professions in our study, this may

represent a recontextualising (Arnot, 2002) of gendered roles of labour associated with care – or as McDowell (2015) advocates for – the beginning of a de-gendering in the way we consider care-based occupations such as nursing.

Although Table 2 reflects strong associations between gender and career choice for our participants, Table 3 demonstrates that their choices are less reflective of gender patterns and norms than their parents, suggesting some movement away from normative class and gender pathways. This move away from normative pathways is particularly

Table 2. Higher education subject choices.

	Participant	Post-compulsory aspirations
Boys – Masculine aspirations (65.4%)	Theo	Bachelor of Information Technology (Games & Entertainment Design)
	Adam	Bachelor of Science*
	Tobias	Bachelor of Human Movement
	Isaac	Bachelor of Sport Science & Sports Psychology
	Logan	Bachelor of Science (Ecology & Evolutionary Biology)*
	Oliver	Bachelor of in Human Movement & Teaching (Secondary)*
	Avery	Bachelor of Business*
	Fred	Bachelor of Exercise & Sport Science
	Jeremiah	Bachelor of Software Engineering
	Jacob	Bachelor of Law
	Samuel	Bachelor of Software Engineering
	Dominic	Bachelor of Civil Engineering
	Vithu	Bachelor of Education (Design & Technology)
	Mal	Bachelor of Mechanical & Mechatronic Engineering
	Elim	Bachelor of Business (Entrepreneurship & Innovation)
	Vuong	Bachelor of Mathematical Sciences (Pure Maths)*
	Johnny	Bachelor of Journalism
Boys – Feminine aspirations (30%)	Mason	Bachelor of Education (R-7)
	Haafiz	Bachelor of Theatre
	Charlie	Bachelor of Education
	Tommy	Bachelor of Psychology
	Leo	Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood & Special Education)
	Archie	Bachelor of Fine Arts
	Hoang	Bachelor of Nutrition or Psychology
	Khuyen	Foundation Studies in Health Sciences (Psychology)
	Maadai	Foundation Studies (Health Sciences)
Girls – Masculine aspirations (36.3%)	Kate	Bachelor of Chemical Engineering*
	Oriana	Bachelor of Space Science & Astrophysics*
	Christina	Bachelor of Laboratory Medicine
	Tabitha	Bachelor of Health & Medical Science – medicine pathway*
	Yael	Bachelor of Journalism
	Serena	Bachelor of Exercise Science
	Bella	Bachelor of Criminal Psychology
	Selita	Bachelor of Science & Chemical engineering*
Girls – Feminine aspirations (63.6%)	Aisha	Bachelor of Tourism
	Ella	Bachelor of Education (R-7)
	Kelsey	Bachelor of Tourism
	Chloe	Bachelor of Music*
	Gabbi	Bachelor of Occupational therapy
	Kirsten	Bachelor of Social work
	Holly	Bachelor of Nursing
	Stella	Bachelor of Speech Pathology
	Agnes	Bachelor of Arts – art gallery or museum curator pathway*
	Corinne	Bachelor of Nursing
	Tia	Bachelor of Animal Behaviour
	Rosie	Bachelor of Nursing
	Nafisa	Bachelor of Nursing
	Kendall	Bachelor of Education (Secondary)/Bachelor of Arts

*Notes participants who aspired to study degrees at Group of 8 universities.

Table 3. Gender comparisons between participants and parents.

Employment/ Aspirations*	Male participants (*n* = 26)	Male parents/ caregivers (*n* = 41)	Female participants (*n* = 22)	Female parents/caregivers (*n* = 47)
Masculine	17 (65.4%)	35 (85%)	8 (36.3%)	8 (17%)
Feminine	8 (30%)	3 (7.3%)	14 (63.6%)	34 (72.3%)

*Aspirations and employment at first interviews.

marked for the male participants where 30% aspired to feminine careers in contrast to the 7.3% of fathers in feminine employment. There was no overlap between the boys who aspired to traditionally feminine careers and the fathers in employment that would be considered feminine.

Analysis of social class

Social theorists interested in class disadvantage continue to document how first-in-family students struggle to access higher education and often have low retention rates. Students from non-traditional backgrounds may find the social acclimatisation to university confronting, especially those who enrol in more elite forms of higher education (see Reay, 1998; Stahl & McDonald, 2023). What is clear from our data is that very few first-in-family students find their way to elite universities, with the critical mass ending up in institutions with lesser prestige (Stahl & McDonald, 2022; see also Bunn et al., 2022). Similar to research in the United Kingdom, while we are seeing more "working class and ethnic minority students are entering university, for the most part they are entering different universities to their middle-class counterparts" (Reay et al., 2005, p. 9). In our study, six girls (27%) and 5 boys (19%) aspired to and attended elite universities, representing 22% of the total cohort. Furthermore, there was little evidence within our research that many of the participants aspiring to elite universities were doing so in the pursuit of particular types of cultural capital associated with middle-class and elite spaces, but rather their decisions were made in reference to their desired programme of study, duration of commute, etc. Furthermore, throughout the data there are few examples of participants aspiring to elite forms of employment and, as a result, we have few examples of what Southgate et al. (2017) call "extreme social mobility". This aligns with Chesters' (2015) findings which suggest that Australian young people are more likely to graduate from an elite university if at least one parent has a university degree; similarly, high-status degrees such as medicine and law are associated with parental university qualifications. These findings also highlight how while there have been efforts to widen participation, Australian universities remain socially stratified (Bunn et al., 2022).

Revisiting our findings regarding the strong identification with first-in-family students and the "caring professions" (see also O'Shea & Stone, 2014; Thomas & Hovdhaugen, 2023), and viewing this trend through a social class lens, arguably these aspirations could be reflective of selfless working-class solidarist values (Reay et al., 2005) and the importance of "giving back" (see Bradley et al., 2022; Reay, 2003). The attraction to caring-work by first-in-family participants could also be due to the familiarity with these professions and the idea that these are "employable" professions whereas we see

very few of our participants aspiring to careers more aligned with competitive fields such as business or law. Chesters and Baxter (2011) highlight how previous research on widening participation has focused on how the reasons for "entering particular occupations may be related to the desire to care for others or the desire to have a job generally regarded as being useful to society, such as jobs in the health and education sectors" (Chesters & Baxter, 2011, p. 56). Researching how aspirations interact with socioeconomic status in reference to occupational certainty and prestige, research by Gore et al. (2015a) indicates that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds often have stronger financial motivation where their employment aspirations are influenced by a desire for financial security.

Generational class structures

A significant part of the research on students who are first-in-family highlights how their journeys are ones of becoming socially mobile. With this in mind, we are interested in how young people are "predisposed towards particular jobs and the local labour market in which they are located through the practices of their family" (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011, p. 115). Becoming first-in-family is a process which can bring the habitus into tension as students' acquired aspirations may often be in tension with their primary habitus. Whilst children are inculcated through a familial habitus (Patfield et al., 2021), their aspirations for their own future are not simply a reproduction of generational employment histories. They express "choice biographies" (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) though these are clearly the choices made available to them. Table 4 demonstrates how the participants' aspirations differed from the forms of employment of their parents which suggests that our participants are able reconfigure identities rather than reproduce parental choices. Being able to imagine a different future – which in many cases takes place with the help of parents (see McDonald, 2021; Stahl & McDonald, 2021) – often offers clearer pathways toward social mobility.

Tables 2 and 4 highlight how the participants all aspired to employment which was categorised as either professional (60%) or caring (40%), with the caring aspirations mostly in the areas of health or teaching. These aspirations are not unexpected, given the expectation that university qualifications would lead to professional careers or highly qualified care work. In contrast, the participants' parents were not highly represented in the professions (8%); instead, they were more likely to be employed in

Table 4. Forms of work comparisons between participants and parents.

Forms of Work	Male participants *(n = 26)*	Female participants *(n = 22)*	Participants total *(n = 48)*	Male parents/ caregivers *(n = 41)*	Female parents/ caregivers *(n = 47)*	Parents/ caregivers total *(n = 88)*
Professional	17 (65%)	12 (54%)	29 (60%)	5 (12%)	2 (4%)	7 (8%)
Caring	9 (35%)	10 (45%)	19 (40%)	3 (7%)	12 (25%)	15 (17%)
Administrative				4 (9.7%)	9 (19%)	13 (15%)
Trades				13 (31.7%)	1 (2%)	14 (16%)
Service & Retail				3 (7%)	8 (17%)	11 (13%)
Labourers				11 (26.8%)	3 (6%)	14 (16%)
Unpaid domestic labour					9 (19%)	9 (10%)

trade work, administration or as labourers. There was a significant percentage of the parents employed in caring professions (17%), although in contrast to their children, these were in areas which do not need university qualifications such as teacher aides and aged care. It is important to note here that some of the careers that the participants aspired to, such as nursing and teaching, were once careers that did not have university qualifications attached to them in Australia. Chesters (2020) refers to the credentialing of these career pathways as "credential inflation" and she argues that it "results in a higher proportion of jobs requiring university-level qualifications which in turn results in job seekers requiring higher levels of education and or training" (p. 53). Yet, while these career pathways have been subsumed into the largely middle-class institution of higher education (Bunn et al., 2020), the professions themselves remain largely undervalued and underpaid, highlighting how class boundaries are maintained around career choice.

Discussion and concluding thoughts

To date, there is limited research investigating the longitudinal shift in aspirations during the transition from school to university and how the nexus of gender, class and curriculum contribute to the first-in-family university student experience. The gendering and classing of school curriculums in schools serving students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds remains under-researched, as well as its influence on the aspirations of those students who seek to enter higher education. We note how gendered subjectivities – which influence aspirations – are inculcated in the family and the school (see McLeod & Yates, 2006; Paechter, 2007) and how the process of transition to university can often expose young people to forms of femininities and masculinities different from what was privileged within their largely working-class secondary school sites. This transition process may result in our participants actively mediating constructions of femininities and masculinities which may have implications for the formation and maintenance of their aspirations.

We conclude with attention to social justice. As universities in Australia continue to expand their accessibility, the primary and secondary education sectors appear to be moving in the opposite direction where we are seeing increased inequality between schools (see Kenway, 2013). Disadvantaged schools in Australia often struggle with inadequate resourcing which impacts on retaining staff, the curriculum on offer and the school culture (Cardak et al., 2015) – all contributing to the formation of student aspirations. This exists concurrently with the impetus in disadvantaged secondary schools to raise aspirations and get as many students into higher education as possible (Stahl, 2022).

In terms of how our research informs both institutional practices, as well as the broader widening participation agenda, it seems that the picture is more complicated than simply "raising aspirations". Given how nearly half the cohort (42%) changed their trajectories after our first interviews, we suggest more can be done in the career counselling space which remains under-resourced (see Austin et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is important that degree structures remain flexible and sensitive to the needs of students acclimatising in their first years, especially those from first-in-family backgrounds. On a final note, the data presented in this article provides a snapshot of the subject choice of the participants

and what institution they attended (Table 2) accounting for gender comparisons between participants and parents (Table 3). Underpinning research on first-in-family students is the extent to which they become socially mobile, and we do not yet have a full picture of whether they gained their desired employment and how gender and class may influence their transitions to the labour market.

Notes

1. Australian Tertiary Admission Rank is calculated by the Australian state's university admissions centre and provides a score between 0 and 99.95 which denotes a student's ranking relative to their peers upon completion of their secondary education.
2. Australia's oldest universities, which are associated with prestige, are referred to as the Group of 8, or more informally, "sandstone universities" due to being primarily constructed of sandstone.
3. Sheppard and Biddle's (2017) six different categories are: "precariat", "ageing workers", "new workers", "mobile middle", "emerging affluent", and "established affluent". While we assume that first-in-family suggests a certain degree of disadvantage and most participants attended schools classified as low socioeconomic, there were some gradations in terms of class background.

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