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AUTHOR Lloyd, Doug; Turale, Sue

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the issues relating to students' lived experiences and responses associated with poverty. The authors argue that poverty is a limited and limiting concept. Instead, they focus on developing an understanding of the nature of "needy" students' lived experiences, the impact of these on their well being and on success in several domains, and the strategies students may employ in coping with and overcoming need-related problems. This will be particularly useful for post-compulsory secondary students and those in further and higher education. The paper builds a theoretical analysis of stress and coping. It shows how a longitudinal study of the nature of needy students' problems and experiences, the responses that are employed in seeking to manage these problems, and the outcomes that result over time will yield important new understandings for students, schools, universities, and policy makers. The framework allows an analysis of the influence of "place" (rural, regional, or urban) to identify context-specific differences in need, problems arising from need, coping strategies, and longer-term outcomes. (Contains 20 references.) (Author)

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New Conceptions of Student Neediness and Directions for Better Responses

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by

Doug Lloyd
Sue Turale

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New Conceptions of Student Neediness and Directions for Better Responses

Doug Lloyd and Sue Turale

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Abstract

This paper is about the issues relating to students' lived experiences and responses associated with poverty. We show that poverty is a limited and limiting concept. Instead we focus on developing an understanding of the nature of "needy" students' lived experiences, the impact of these on their wellbeing and on success in several domains, and the strategies students may employ in coping with and overcoming need-related problems. It will be particularly useful for post-compulsory secondary students and those in further and higher education. The paper builds a theoretical analysis of stress and coping. It shows how a longitudinal study of the nature of needy students' problems and experiences, the responses that are employed in seeking to manage these problems, and the outcomes that result over time will yield important new understandings for students, schools, universities and policy makers. The framework allows an analysis of the influence of 'place' (rural, regional or urban) to identify context-specific differences in need, problems arising from need, coping strategies, and longer-term outcomes.

The results from a use of the new framework will allow for improved assessment of the impact of neediness on a student's academic status and wellbeing, and better student and institutional responses. It will also allow state and national policy makers to facilitate improved national capability and return on school and tertiary education expenditure. The research will also indicate the extent to which 'place' issues need to be taken into consideration in assessing and alleviating the effects of neediness.

1 Background

An undetermined number of students in the tertiary education sector face a daily struggle living on or below the poverty line. This student poverty may be confined to a specific period of university study as a temporary period of financial hardship, or a continuation of endemic family poverty, while students are primarily studying for

tertiary qualifications. There is good evidence from regular Graduate Careers Council of Australia Graduate Destination Surveys to suggest that university study leads graduates into more secure and better-remunerated employment than that experienced by those without degrees (see for example GCCA 1998).

Some student poverty is derived from or associated with a student's family and social background and may have a major, deleterious effect on their future financial prospects. Social scientists have long recognised that education is closely linked to an individual's life choices. A number of recent studies reflect the continued lack of participation in higher education of students in this category, as measured by the Low SES category in DETYA data on students (see for example Western et al, 1998). It is not clear to what extent poverty, alone or in combination with another characteristic prevents a person's participation in tertiary education, or if so, how.

Students facing difficult financial circumstances may commence tertiary study and subsequently discontinue, citing financial reasons (see for example Silver and Silver 1997, Illing 2000), but the extent of this effect nationally in Australia is unknown. We assume that this group includes capable people who would make improved contributions to communities and the nation if they completed their study programs and entered their intended employment. Therefore, improving the academic success and health status of poverty affected students will contribute to the social and economic development of the nation, and help Australian society to be more socially just and ethical.

Not only are we relatively unaware of the extent that poverty prevents entry to, or causes discontinuation of tertiary study, but also little is known about why some university students cope effectively, despite extreme poverty, whereas others under comparable circumstances do not. The literature is not very informative about how students experience poverty, and the more generalised nature of student poverty in Australia, such as the effects on an institution and its staff.

Some recent work has begun to address these issues (Birrell and Dobson 1997; Silver and Silver 1997; Turale, 1998; Newton and Turale 2000). The literature is less informative about how poverty effects students' health and academic success,

students' coping strategies, while battling financially, or of the longer term consequences of poverty on students' post-university lives.

A recent large study by La Trobe University (2000) over six of its Victorian campuses reported that 46% of the 792 respondents received some AUSTUDY/Youth allowance. Almost half of all students said their health was affected by financial hardship. Over a third felt that their financial situation was negatively affecting their academic performance and approximately a third could not afford heating. This appears to be the first broad Australian study giving empirical weight to the instance of poverty among tertiary students.

The La Trobe study pays some attention to the nature and effects of poverty on regional students. Rural students (in later years) were identified as a cluster most disadvantaged by financial hardship. Some earlier research on rural and regional students' financial status and support (Sheed and Lloyd, 1990) and associated AUSTUDY inequities identifies particular forms and levels of poverty experienced by rural students.

Newton and Turale (2000) described two studies at the University of Ballarat that demonstrated the effects of poverty in a number of key areas of student life. Turale's 1998 study of tertiary education students is the only qualitative one thus far that provides in-depth insights into the daily poverty experiences of university students.

Anecdotal evidence from equity officers and student support staff in Australian universities regarding the struggle experienced by impoverished students has prompted a recent national survey of student finances supported by the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee and the National Union of Students. This survey focuses on financial and economic factors and will provide valuable base line data for further action (Devlin, 2000).

Benson (1999) studied the effect of poverty on university students' perceptions and levels of academic success. She found no correlation between the source and level of finance and success. She also reports that students in the sample believe they have not performed at their best most often for reasons related to effort or motivation, time

management, inability to access books and materials, and personal and family commitment, in that order.

Morris and Blaskett (1992) tracked the patterns of poverty and the budgets of 32 homeless youths over a six-month period. This study pertained to secondary students and was also based largely on financial data, but is important because it builds on insight on the patterns of life of the young in poverty to provide some insights into coping strategies.

Studies of poverty into the Australian general population have become more detailed since the early 1970's. Henderson, Harcourt and Harper (1970) developed indicators of financial status and associated poverty lines. These minimal benchmark lines are financial measures. Receiving an income below them is acknowledgement as living in serious financial or economic hardship (Edgar, Earle and Fopp 1993, p. 232). Saunders et al. (1998) developed another quantitative measure for determining poverty, the budget standard that describes another way of measuring poverty and setting the lowest acceptable standard of living. In this approach, consumption of goods and services determines the standard. It is adjusted for different types of households and is intended to reflect normative and behavioural factors. The content of a "basket of goods" is modified by behavioural standards, and is concerned with things such as counts of calorific and nutrition needs. It allows for the incorporation of a relativistic notion of culturally acceptable standards.

We believe such measures, and the financial or material approaches used in the studies reported above, portray only one facet of a perspective on this human phenomenon. For people generally, and tertiary students in particular, they fail to capture the holistic impact of poverty on the lives of people, and give little indication of how individuals or systems may provide or use coping mechanisms or ameliorative strategies. This stems from the underlying definitions of poverty that tend to focus on collecting a 'snapshot' of financial or material status at a particular point in time. For the example of tertiary students, they do not take into account student's perception of their ability to survive during economic hardship, or of the likely temporal nature of their situation. These approaches therefore provide limited insights into what a student's broader responses to impoverished circumstances might be, and

subsequently on what might be their state of wellbeing and academic achievement in those circumstances.

We believe an alternative approach to the definition of poverty indicators and responses can derive from the addition of a human or social capital dimension. The World Bank has researched the relationship between social capital and poverty in a range of settings (for example see Collier, 1998). In Australia, a number of community organisations are exploring measures of social capital in order to evaluate the impact of the resources and services they provide (see for example Bullen and Onyx, 1999). We mean social capital to be:

> the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, quoted in Bullen and Onyx, 1999)

Human capital, in contrast is described in terms of the assets of an individual and is often measured in terms of the level of education and training a person possesses. The presence of increased human capital often results in increased social capital, for example, educated people are more likely to enter networks and make connections. The reverse may also be true. Thus an increase in a community's social capital may result in increased human capital of individuals. (Woolcock, 2000; Schuller, 2000). Providing optimal conditions and life skills for educational success is important as research suggests that parents from higher socio-economic groups are better able to equip their children with 'cultural capital', that is, with a range of abilities, knowledge and attitudes that enhance academic success. (Gilding 1997)

The aspects of social capital that are explored throughout the literature include: participation in networks; reciprocity; trust; social norms; the common (accrued resources in a community that are used for the common good); and proactivity (Bullen and Onyx, 1999). We believe these provide an important set of issues that can contribute to an explanation of the effects of, and responses to poverty in a population. We believe however, that alone they are insufficient.

Research from the social capital perspective suggests there is a need to understand social dimensions in predicting a range of economic and wellbeing outcomes for individuals and communities, from economic growth to educational outcomes. (See for example Temple, 2000; Bullen and Onyx, 1999).

2 *A New Approach to Poverty Indicators and Responses for Tertiary Students*

We use Diagram 1 to describe the structure and operation of this new approach. It is a model that represents several new or re-arranged elements in approaches to *poverty*, better termed '*neediness*', and responses to it. Parts of the model are the interactions and iterations between the elements. The elements are:

2.1 The tensions, pressures or stressors that lead to, and escalate the neediness experience, some of which are fixed in a student's present experiences (static or 'snapshot') and some of which change in anticipated ways over time (dynamic). These may relate to any one or more of a number of areas related to neediness, typically identified in studies to date as financial or material issues. They may also be factors related to the student's personal, social or cultural environment which impinge directly or indirectly on an otherwise financial neediness issue;

2.2 A student's financial, material, personal and social capital, and the location and other contextual factors they experience. These are the revised *neediness (or success) indicators.* They usually include more than financial and material issues;

2.3 The status of a student in need, including their own perceived state of health and wellbeing, academic status and neediness circumstances;

2.4 Institutional policies and support structures which can assist a student in needy or impoverished circumstances, to a variable extent;

2.5 Analysis of, and proposed response to the neediness indicators and elements; and

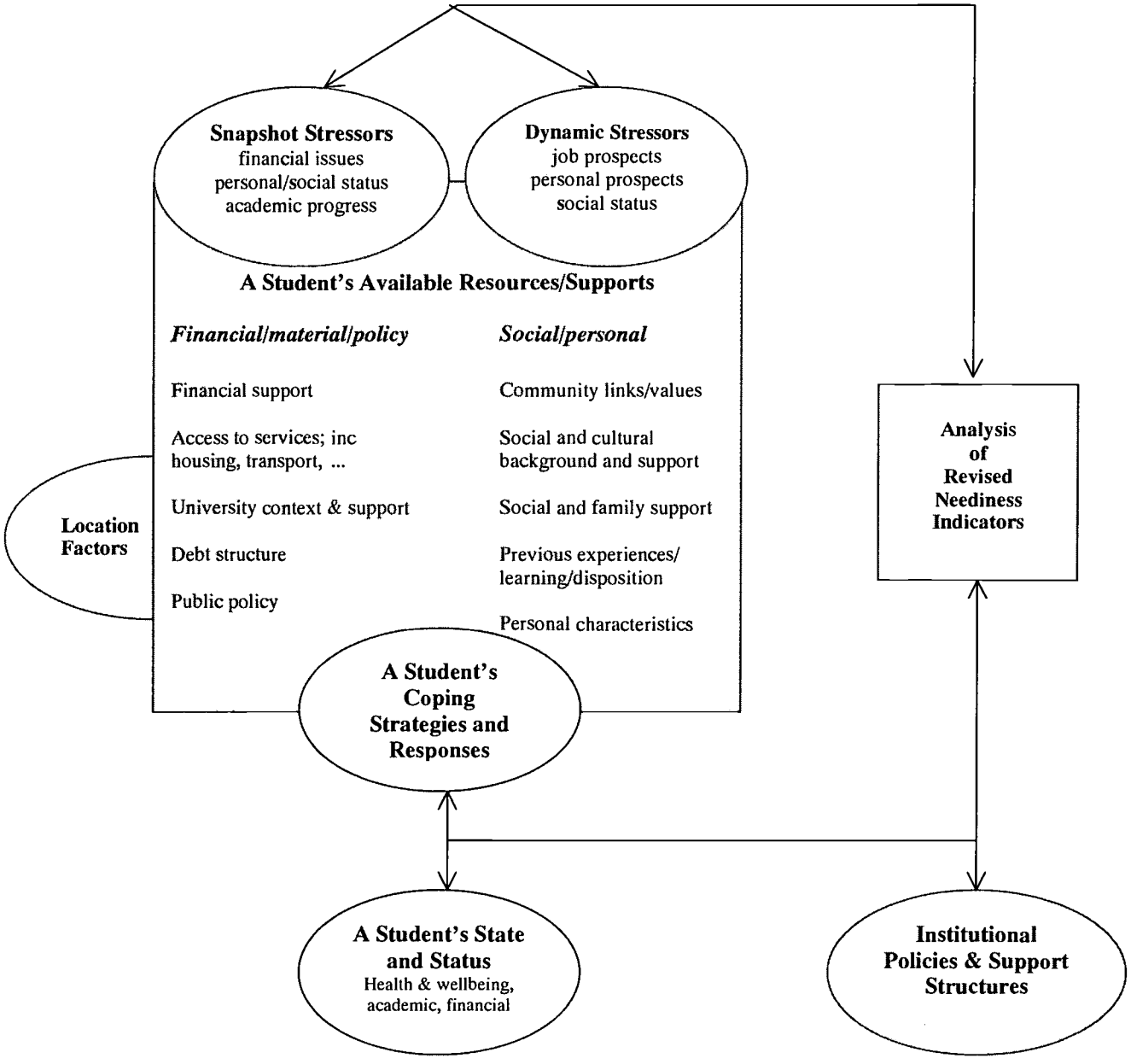
2.6 The student's actual response to neediness in their context, including coping mechanisms.

Diagram 1

A Model Representing Tertiary Student Neediness

How to understand better why students fail, survive or thrive when faced with neediness or poverty

Revised Neediness (or Success) Indicators: indicators of the way and extent to which a student calls on 'supports' in an appropriately balanced manner; and the extent to which institutional and social support mechanisms are available and support a student.



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The interplay between these elements provides a framework for facilitating an understanding of the factors that indicate whether students experiencing neediness will survive, thrive or fail at university, and how the student's and institution's responses may facilitate more successful outcomes.

This model provides a way that a student and institution can undertake an analysis of a new and more comprehensive set of neediness (or success) indicators. It also shows how they subsequently jointly or alone can develop strategies as part of a more effective response to the student's neediness or other impediments to success and wellbeing.

4 How would the Model be Used?

Each student's stressors, state of impoverishment and response to it are not solely determined by their financial and material situation. We separate consideration of these issues into a process that would involve cooperatively

describing the student's state of poverty or neediness and related stressors,
describing and discussing their ability to succeed and maintain well being and key factors in the process,
describing and analysing their response to the stressors, neediness and poverty experiences, and
identifying mechanisms to provide improved responses to their state of neediness.

A student's state of neediness and ultimately their ability to succeed at tertiary study is better described or determined by a consideration of financial, material, personal, cultural and social capital issues, represented in the rectangular box in the diagram. It is our contention that some of these factors are immediately under the student's influence or that of their institution. These are the focus of our proposals here. Other factors, such as a government's policy framework are not, and so are excluded from consideration here.

The student, working with a professional adviser would make an assessment of their status against the neediness (or success) indicators using a combination of available

measures, such as those available through 'hassles' scales, and others developed for the purpose. We expect to find that students who do not cope well have not yet had the opportunity to develop one or more of the important neediness (or success) indicators identified in the diagram. We also expect that students who undertake the discussions we propose will gain new insights into the importance of a range of personal, social, cultural and institutional issues. Subsequent personal or collaborative action to acquire the appropriate balance in their neediness or success indicators should lead to improved success and wellbeing.

When using this model we assume that participants would consider:

- the actual or potential transient nature of the student's impoverishment or neediness. An example would include the prospect of near-future employment and a regular, significantly enhanced income;

- the impact on a student's response of all the significant elements in their neediness indicators, including financial, material, location, personal, cultural and social capital. These will vary with each student and some may have a potentially crippling effect on the student's state of, and responses to impoverishment. Examples would be:
  - the extent to which a student's personal networks exists and are used in such activity as discussion and/or study groups;
  - location factors, as these may have a strong influence on students originating from rural and isolated locations, as indicated further below;
  - the social culture of the student's work group and their prevailing attitude to professional and academic achievement. This shows that the institution and its sub-groups also play a key role in determining the student's response and success; and

- the ethos, policies, support structures and understandings demonstrated by the student's institution, that bear on the student's responses. An example would include the extent to which the institution makes explicit reference to a model such as this in discussions with a needy student, and works cooperatively at an

individual or group level to minimise the adverse effects and maximise positive strategies and outcomes.

'Location Factors' is an example of one of a number of issues that would require consideration for a complete analysis of each student's neediness indicators. Such factors in the case of a student from a rural or isolated home location would include more likely occurrence of:

- family backgrounds with little experience in tertiary education;
- the need for relocation to a distant campus and to incur accommodation expenses;
- loss of income in the home location and consequent lower likelihood of assistance;
- greater distances and costs associated with return home; and
- limited number of peers or members of a supporting social or cultural group.

The analysis of the indicators and responses is likely to lead to new understandings about location-related neediness and how it might be ameliorated or managed.

5 What Might Change as a Student, Institution or Government Response?

We conclude that the Model represented by the diagram is a new approach to neediness indicators and responses to neediness, at least for tertiary students. We believe that the Model warrants exploration as a tool that will enhance each tertiary student's professional and academic achievements and personal and social wellbeing.

We now provide some examples of how a student's and/or institution's and/or government's response might change as a result of using the Model.

In response to the experience of students from rural secondary colleges with limited formal curriculum options, one could establish a network of 'champions against limited perceptions'. This group could self-support and be supported by the institution in academic or professional discussions about each member's previous formal curriculum limitations and concomitant extra-curriculum enrichment. The student(s) could then work with staff to enrich the tertiary curriculum in ways that take into account and build on the students' previous experiences.

In response to students from rural and isolated locations experiencing low levels of attachment to their temporary accommodation, an institution-based 'learning champions' network could be established. This group could develop a network of peers, institution staff and professionals from relevant workplaces. It would be designed to enrich professional experiences and provide mentoring, further orientation to professional practice and colleagueship longitudinally through the program and into the student's independent professional practice. This could act as a surrogate for relative 'detachment' from domestic networks.

In response to student's concerns and possibly strong aversion to accumulating debt, form a 'debt support group'. This would comprise students facing perceptions of daunting debt, recent graduates who have 'survived' or 'thrived' through their poverty experiences as a student, and financial counsellors. It could provide a forum for discussions aimed to increase understandings about debt, finding individual responses to minimising its effects, reducing anxiety about it and sharing experiences about debt, including positive post-employment experiences.

An institution might provide additional financial support as a response to a student's unsustainable level of financial or material resources. The student might agree to undertake additional activity to strengthen their personal, social or cultural support base as part of the agreement to provide additional financial support. This would apply when it is agreed between the student and a 'neediness adviser' in the institution that such activity would contribute to improvements in the student's chances of academic success, and when such a measure is supported by evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention.

These are tentative examples designed to show that new responses, or ones that are new to a particular student or group, may be derived from the Model. Others are available from analyses of different elements of the Model.

We believe it is clear that the Model provides substantial additional benefits. It provides more informative interpretations of neediness and gives indications of how interested parties can develop positive responses to it. We also believe that the model

would apply equally well in secondary colleges where students' experiences are often and increasingly similar with respect to neediness.

6 Does the Approach have Social and Economic Significance?

We anticipate the outcomes will be of immediate benefit for students, university support systems and policy makers. These will be in the form of:

- better coping strategies and improved academic performances for students. This is very important in Australia. We believe we must find ways to improve our approaches to developing self esteem and success of our youth, particularly in view of national levels of youth suicide;
- effective strategies to support needy students and reduce discontinuation rates for universities and financial loss for students and their families. This may include better targeting financial support for students or providing financial support in the context of wider support measures; and
- improved system-level policies and practices for the higher education system and DETYA.

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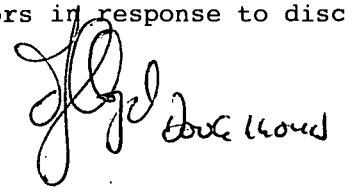
Signature: 

Printed Name: Doug Lloyd

Position: Executive Director

Organization: Northern Territory General Practice Education

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