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The Careers of Humanities Students in Interwar Australia

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Abstract:

This article uses prosopographical methods to map the broad patterns of the geographical, vocational and social circulation of a cohort of Arts students in the interwar Australia. In doing so it sheds light on the lives of a significant, but largely neglected category of people who carried humanities knowledge and who helped to reproduce it. The article reveals both the breadth of professional work undertaken by this cohort and their international and regional entanglements, showing how individuals with humanities training moved into a wide array of knowledge domains. In the process it identifies sites for further investigation and shows that prosopography might offer a valuable method for historians of humanistic knowledge.

The Careers of Humanities Students in Interwar Australia

Anxiety about the career prospects of those with a humanities training was a major concern for universities, graduates and the Australian press throughout the 1920s and 30s. "The holder of an Arts degree may have covered himself with glory," reported the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1926, yet there is little or no demand for his services outside of teaching, a vocation for which not everyone is suited."[1] In 1922 the University of Sydney had attempted to address these concerns by setting up an Appointments Board which aimed to place graduates with employers, and other universities soon followed this initiative.[2] But in 1931, the Registrar of the University of Queensland was still telling the press that "[g]raduates of the faculty of arts … were perhaps the worse off, in regard to finding suitable employment."[3] While a survey conducted by the University of Melbourne in 1937 found that demand for chemists and engineers was "consistent and good", for Arts graduates, it remained "doubtful and uncertain, with the exception of the public [or civil] service and teaching".[4] The notion that Arts graduates struggle to find employment, is one that echoes down to the present, both in Australia and elsewhere.[5] Yet very little is known about the careers of those who undertook a humanities training in Australia, in the 1920s or since.

Australia does have a vibrant tradition of scholarship on the history and philosophy of science and in it questions of circulation have, in different ways, been fundamental to research on knowledge and culture. The relationship between settler colonial society and the imperial metropole has been a major theme in the history of science.[6] This relationship has also dominated discussion on the state of the nation's cultural life, with commentators and scholars variously lamenting its absence, championing its growth, or denouncing its deference to Europe or the United States.[7] As Australian society has begun to reckon with the violence inflicted on its First Nations people, the richness of indigenous knowledge traditions, their endurance, adaption and ongoing power to connect land and people and culture, have also received recognition, as has their longstanding contribution to and leadership of change within the knowledge institutions that were such a major part of the colonial project.[8] Much of the most energetic historical scholarship of the last several decades has examined the entwined relationship between these western institutions and ways of knowing and colonisation.[9] From anthropological and historical work on forms of knowledge (such as the census or literacy) as modes of rule, to studies that have demonstrated the importance of colonial spaces as sites of intellectual and scientific contestation, knowledge has, as Tony Ballantyne puts it, "become a central problematic in recent work on cross-cultural encounters and the processes of empire building".[10]

Yet a historiography of the humanities has not yet developed in Australia. As in other national contexts, there is a well-established literature that laments decline and announces crisis, but little concerted examination of the kinds of knowledge that might be considered "humanistic", of the ways it has been produced and circulated, or of the kinds of social and economic functions it has played. Beyond disciplinary histories or surveys of the field, formal accounts of the history of "humanistic" knowledge in Australia are few and far between.[11]

Scholars working in the history of science, history of empire, and in historical geography, have in recent years turned to mobility, networks, and the spaces of circulation, as a way of

understanding knowledge production.[12] The history of the material objects such as the book has also emerged as a focus for historians interested in the circulation of humanities knowledge, as have correspondence networks.[13] But the people who make knowledge also move, and states as well as institutions such as universities, professional associations and corporations, structure the ways they do so. This article is not an investigation into the nature of humanities knowledge as such. It does not examine its social forms of authorisation, nor its relationship to the First World War, nor the work it was understood to have done in various professional or political domains, although these are all questions raised by the analysis presented here, and that merit further investigation. Rather, this article is a contribution to better understanding the lives of some of those who might be considered the bearers and makers of humanities knowledge in interwar Australia. Focusing on the careers of university students with a humanities education, it maps the outlines of the vocational and social, as well as geographical dimensions of their circulation. In doing so it lays the foundation for further research that might link these patterns of movement to questions of humanities knowledge and its wider social role.

The article also demonstrates the possibilities of prosopography for the history of the humanities. Prosopography is a method of analysis that seeks to understand the common characteristics of a group of historical actors through consideration of their collective life histories, using a combination of demographic and descriptive data.[14] As a method, its vulnerability to naturalising categories of selection has been rightly critiqued, but it remains a valuable and underutilised approach for scholars interested in questions of knowledge and its circulation because it has the capacity to reveal patterns and connections that are potentially obscured by more fine grained intellectual, institutional or biographical methods, especially when sources are thin. [15] While other studies attend to "great" or specific thinkers and their networks, prosopography can help give insight into the average individual who might otherwise disappear from view, identifying patterns and relationships that might be further investigated through qualitative analysis.[16]

Methodology: tracing the careers of Australian Arts students in the interwar period

Arts degrees were (and continue to be) the main pathway to a humanistic higher education in Australia. As Peter Mandler has pointed out, in British as well as in Australian contexts, "The Humanities" was not a term in wide use before the Second World War.[17] History, English, the Classics, Philosophy and foreign languages were referred to more generally as "Arts". At the time of the First World War, there were six universities across the country, three of which dated to the mid-nineteenth century, and three of which had been founded in the decade after 1900. At the time of the foundation of the older group, the liberal arts dominated the curriculum, but by 1914 the number of Arts students in Australian universities accounted for approximately 36% of the entire student cohort. The Faculties of Medicine and Engineering collectively made up 40% of university students at Sydney and Melbourne, and 28% at Adelaide in 1914. At the newer institutions, where these professional programmes had yet to be fully established, Arts still dominated, with approximately 67% of students enrolled in the degree. They studied a curriculum that extended over three years, and included subjects such as English, Latin, Greek, French and German, Ancient and Modern History, Philosophy and

Logic, and also Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, Geology, Biology and Physiology.[18] These students, also had access to university libraries and museums, sporting clubs, residential colleges and a growing range of student societies.[19]

Yet there are currently no existing datasets that record the lives and careers of these students. While the number of people enrolled in Arts at each university can be identified in official publications, data on their subsequent lives is extremely difficult to find. Some analysis of career trajectories appears in surveys of the Australian public (or civil) service and in faculty or university histories, but these studies are limited in both scope and number and are very dated.[20] The Australian Dictionary of Biography and other biographical databases provide some information, but only on selected prominent individuals. This means that very little is known about Arts graduates as a whole and their employment outcomes.

Historians sometimes turn to prosopography to uncover new lines of inquiry for cohorts of people who are otherwise difficult to trace. Grouping together people who individually might have left scant records enables insight into the broader shape of their lives and experiences. Datasets of such cohorts can be compiled and then analysed with summary statistics. Susanna Fellman, for example, has used prosopography to better understand management and recruitment practices within the business profession over time, as well as push the field towards addressing new questions. While the dataset Fellman used had limitations, it nonetheless allowed her to explore trends that otherwise would have been invisible.[21] Malcolm Allbrook and Melanie Nolan have recently argued that prosopography has "enormous methodological possibilities" that have not yet been realised in Australian history.[22] But putting together prosopographical data sets, while potentially illuminating, can be a laborious and technically challenging task.[23]

Although created for a different purpose, the Expert Nation digital humanities research project, provides one point of departure for questions about the circulation of those with a humanities training in interwar Australia.[24] The main goal of the Expert Nation project was to explore the relationship between university training and war service during the interwar period. It traces the lives and careers of nearly 6000 Australian men and women who served in the First World War studied or worked at an Australian university.[25] Of these, 1069 (or about 20%) had an Arts training and survived the conflict, with the Expert Nation project establishing good career data for 773 individuals. This is the cohort analysed in this article.

The origins of the Expert Nation project mean that this dataset is limited in several ways. All of these 773 individuals are likely to have been able bodied war veterans and nearly all of them are men. They therefore represent a small and unrepresentative fraction of those who studied Arts during the period in question (in 1914, 36% of the total student body was enrolled in Arts). The absence of women (there are only 29 in the entire Arts cohort in the Expert Nation database and 17 for which career data has been found) in particular is a significant limitation, given the large numbers of women who enrolled in Arts c1910-1925 (at the University of Sydney alone there were 2741 across this period). Returned service people were also preferred in employment, especially in government work, which also may skew the results of the data collected. Moreover, approximately 60% of those in the cohort finished their degrees, with most of the rest completing one or two years only, and a much smaller

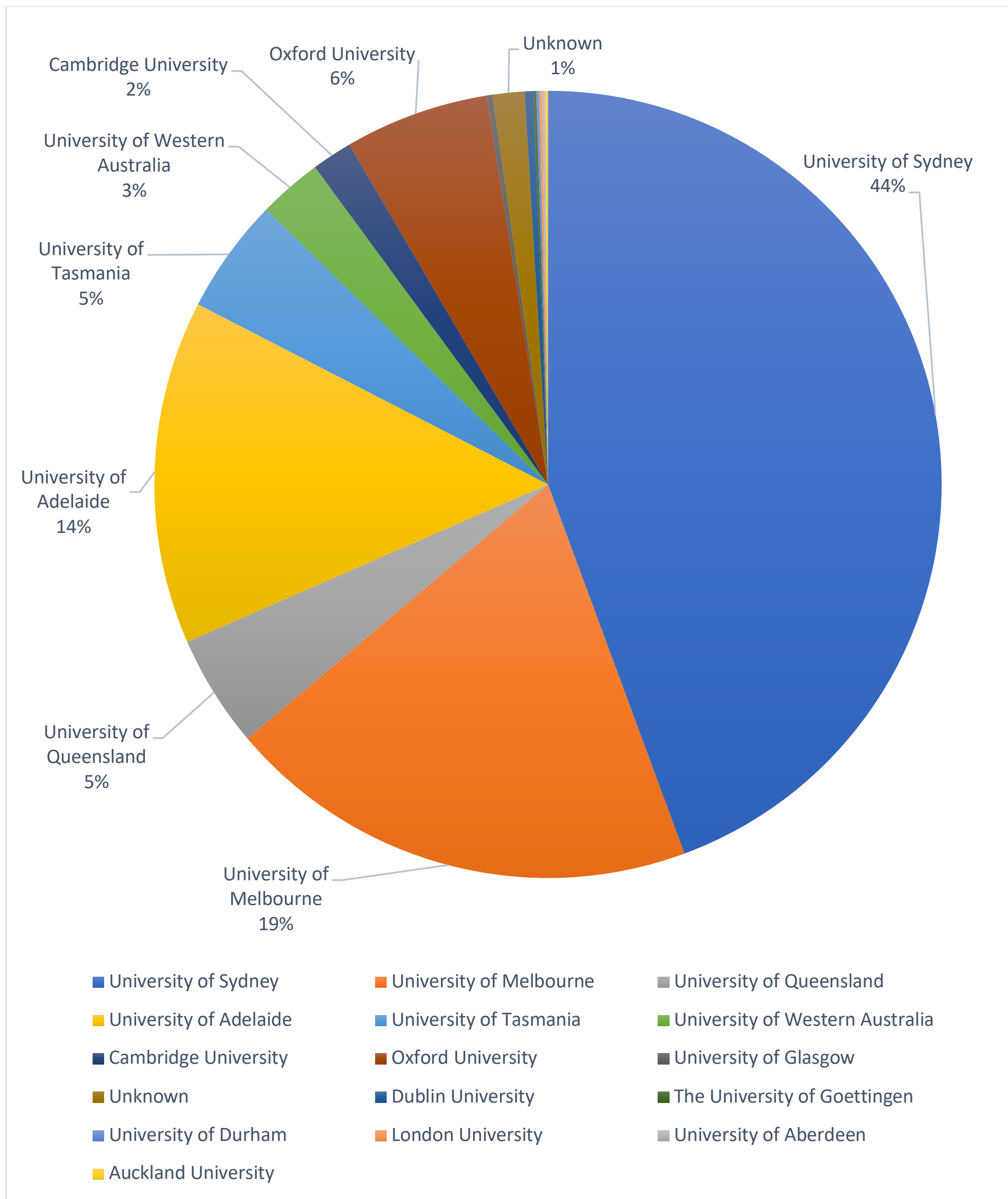
number undertaking graduate study.[26] Finally, the Expert Nation project is still in progress, meaning that the data examined here is a snapshot (as at October 2019) of what might eventually be available. Nevertheless, given so little is otherwise known about the humanities in the interwar period, and given the paucity of other sources, the Expert Nation dataset is the best resource currently in existence for thinking about the careers of Australian humanities students in this period. It is used here to open up new lines of inquiry and demonstrate the value of prosopographical approaches for the history of knowledge.

Of the 1069 individuals in the Expert Nation database with an Arts education who survived the war, 72% have had career data located (N=773). Data collection required scouring a variety of archives deposited across six Australian states, and extracting information from sources such as university calendars and other publications, dictionaries of biography, encyclopaedias, government gazettes, newspapers, obituaries and teacher registration cards, many of which have been made more accessible (and searchable) thanks to digitisation initiatives such as those of the National Library of Australia (https://trove.nla.gov.au). Data on birth, schooling, occupation, professional affiliations, place and death was systematically collected, but the varied nature of student careers means that not all entries have the same amount of career data.[27] Precisely because Arts graduates had no defined route to employment, official professional registers like those used for medicine or law offer only partial value. When it comes to the remaining 28% (N=296) for whom no data was found, it should be noted that Australian Army Repatriation records suggest approximately 6% of soldiers were incapacitated due to injuries. If this figure is applied to the Expert Nation Arts cohort, it means approximately 64 men of those 296 individuals for whom no career data is available were unlikely to have been able to work.[28]

In this article we have used basic summary statistics, in line with common practice in prosopography, to analyse the Expert nation dataset. The data's limitations have, however, precluded more sophisticated analysis.[29] Yet data cannot do everything for the historian. As Susanna Fellman points out, "in good prosopographic studies the database material is generally supplemented with other types of archival material to make the story richer and the interpretations more convincing".[30] In order to draw out the meaning of these larger processes in individual lives, here we provide mini-biographies of representative characters. In different ways their stories given a name and a face to the broad patterns revealed by statistical analysis.

Geographic circulation

Analysis of the careers of the Arts students in this cohort reveal they were geographically highly mobile (see Fig. 1). Approximately 44% of the dataset attended the University of Sydney, and just under 20% the University of Melbourne. The remainder studied at the University of Adelaide (14%), the University of Queensland (5%) the University of Tasmania (5%) and the University of Western Australia (3%). There is also a small contingent of scholars who studied overseas most notably Oxford (6%) and Cambridge (2%). It is important to note that some students had more than one degree, sometimes from different institutions.[31]



<<Fig. 1: Location of tertiary study for "Expert Nation" Arts cohort[32]>>

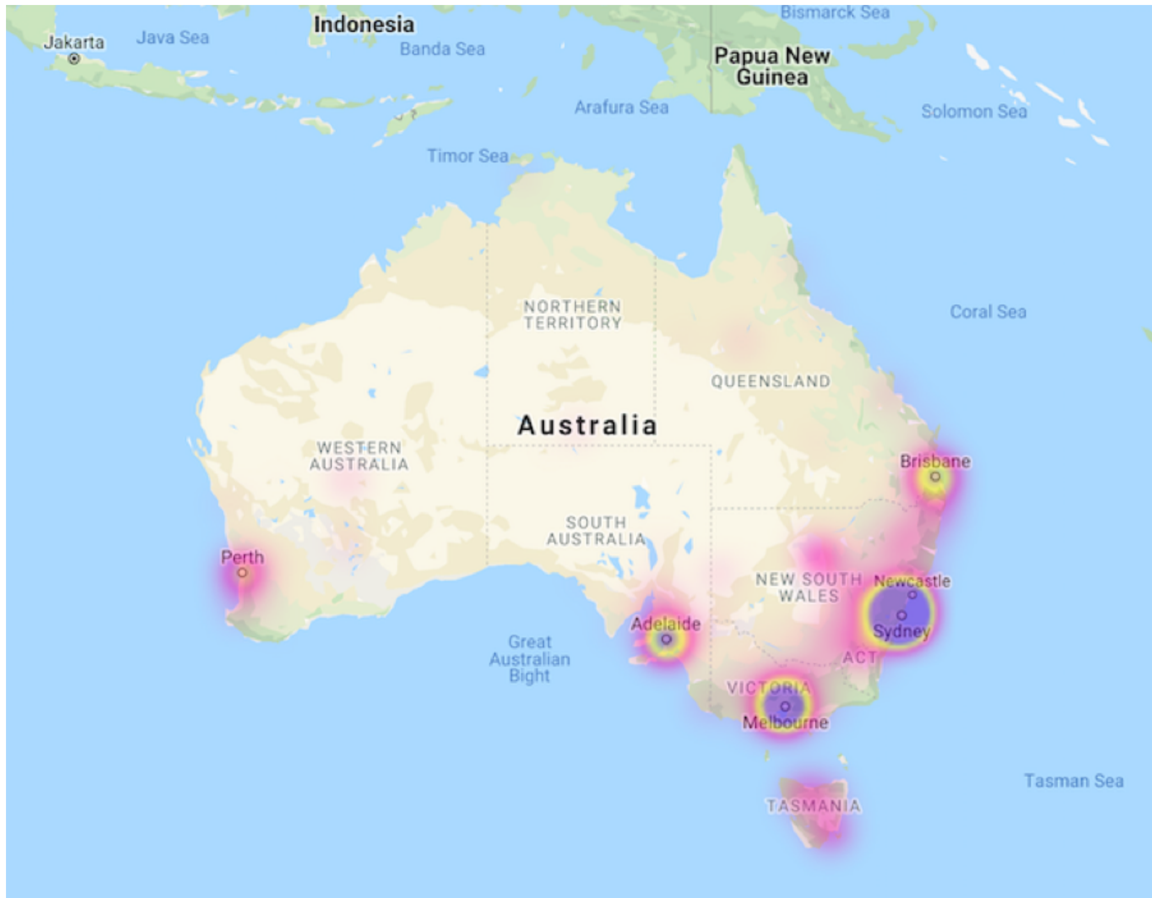
Because of their war service all these students had travelled abroad, but 146 of them (or 19%), went on to further international posts at some point in their career (Fig. 2). The majority of these followed the well-established "British world" networks that linked Australia to the United Kingdom, with some also spending time in Europe.[33] But it appears that the United

States, the South Pacific, and Asia were also emerging as sites of employment for Australia Arts students.

Africa	3
Americas	13
Asia	19
United Kingdom	73
Mainland Europe	12
Middle East	6
South Pacific	13
New Zealand	7
Total	146

<<Fig. 2: Number of Arts cohort with international experience>>

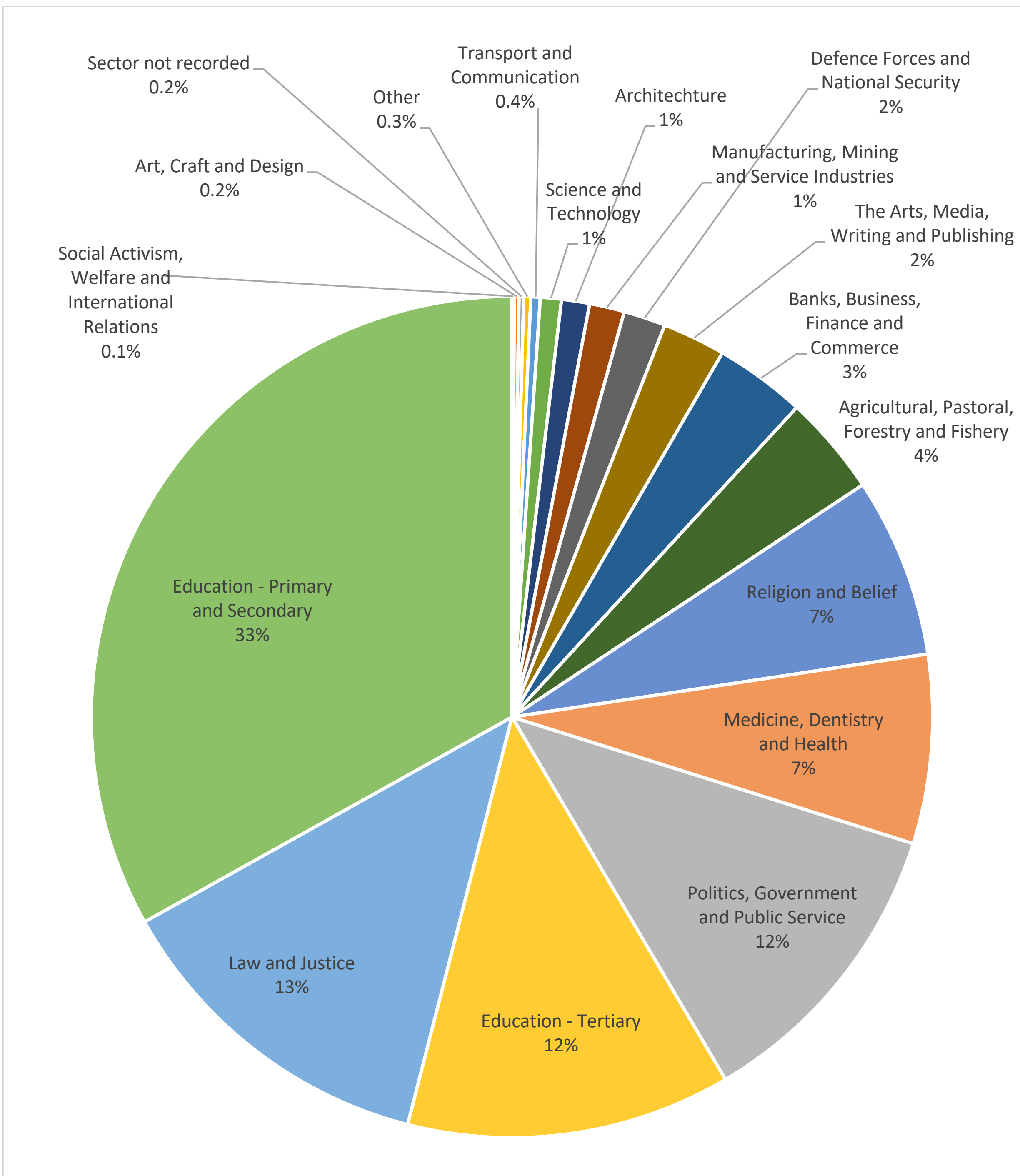
In 1921, 38% of the Australian population lived outside its cities. The available data suggests that an even larger percentage of the Arts students in this cohort spent time in the country.[34] 332 students, or 43% of the cohort (N=773) spent at least part of their career in a rural or regional area (Fig. 3). But only 80 individuals (or 10%) moved interstate for work. When set against the 19% who spent time outside Australia, this indicates that more Arts students may have worked abroad than moved between states, making international and intrastate travel more common among the cohort than movement within the new Australian nation.



<<Fig. 3: Location of domestic professional experience of Arts cohort>>

Vocational circulation

Arts students also circulated throughout the workforce. The large number who pursued careers in education is immediately apparent. 53% became primary or secondary school teachers, and 18% held roles lecturing in universities or for organisations such as the Workers Educational Association. A large number also worked in Law and Justice (19%) and Politics, Government and the Public Service (17%). Some students, such as Ernest Meyer Mitchell, moved between all three of these sectors.[35] Educated at the elite Sydney Grammar School, he graduated with a first-class honours degree in Classics (1896) and in Law (1900). He served as a barrister for several years, while also teaching law at the University of Sydney. In 1917 Mitchell enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), serving in France. After the war he resumed his legal practice working also as a member of the Australian Army Legal Division and teaching again at the University. After taking on several important cases for state and Commonwealth governments, he was elected to the parliament of New South Wales as a member of the Legislative Council, in which capacity he served until his death in 1943.[36]



<< Fig. 4: Employment sectors of Arts cohort throughout their career. NB Individuals could work in more than one sector. >>

As someone who spent time working as an educator, Mitchell was far from alone. 508 of the cohort (N=773) worked in primary, secondary or tertiary education. Since 1880 the education system had expanded enormously on the back of what were known as the "free, compulsory

and secular Acts" which made attending school compulsory for all children up to the age of twelve. With these Acts came an increase in the population of school students and a need for more teachers.[37] The need for teachers was also pushed by soldier settlement schemes that placed returned soldiers and their families in newly expanding rural areas. University training was becoming increasingly essential for those seeking a career in this expanding education system and Arts was one of the four major degrees in which they regularly enrolled.[38] The historian, Bruce Smith has gone so far as to argue that in the case of Australia, "the saviour of humanities was to be teacher training".[39]

The expanding state and Commonwealth public services also played a major role in hiring returned servicemen, in part thanks to a series of moves to require preferential employment. In Tasmania in 1917 the Public Service Act was amended to ensure that no "male person other than a returned soldier" would be appointed to a new position.[40] Two years later New South Wales followed suit, with the Returned Soldiers and Sailors Employment Act.[41] Then in 1922, the Commonwealth Public Service Act was introduced, giving preference to returned soldiers; increasing the number of departments requiring university training; and leading to the creation of the Public Service Board which encouraged 'co-operation' between Australian universities in the recruitment and training of public servants.[42] This had the result of increasing the number of public servants studying Arts, Science and Commerce.[43]

Teaching and government service were identified by contemporaries as career pathways for Arts graduates. But analysis of the dataset reveals there were by no means the only options available. 10% of the cohort worked the fields of Medicine, Dentistry and Health (N=81); 6% in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (N=43); and 5% in Banking, Finance and Commerce (N=39). Together they represent more than 20% of the total cohort (N=773). James Oscar Heinrich was one of them. Born in 1889 to a German Catholic family in Queensland, he finished his Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney in 1912 and went on to complete a second degree in Agricultural Science two years later. In 1915 he was working as an instructor at the Hawkesbury Agricultural College. With his nationality questioned in the context of growing war time distrust at those with German names, Heinrich enlisted to serve in the war, fighting as a lieutenant in the 23rd Machine Gun Company.[44] In 1918 he became a Captain with the Education Service, organising agricultural education for members of the 3rd Division AIF while they awaited repatriation. On his return to Australia he changed his name to surname to Henrick and rose to the position of senior lecturer at the Hawkesbury College. By 1929 he had moved to Tasmania to be District Agricultural Organiser for the state government in Hobart and Instructor for the Department of Agriculture where he went on to work as a Plant pathologist.

Social circulation

The careers of people like Henrick, point to the circulation of the Arts cohort in a third sense: 32% had a career in two or more sectors (N=247). Education in particular was a pathway into other forms of employment, particularly for those entering university from the lower middle classes. While there had long been bursaries and exhibitions at the University of Sydney, they covered fees only and did not come with a stipend so were of little use to those who lacked

the funds to support themselves. Teachers' scholarships opened the door to higher education to those of limited means, but they came with a condition: for every year of scholarship support, the student in question needed to serve a minimum three years as a teacher in NSW.[45]

For other students, the war itself was a pathway to university. Approximately 26% of the Arts cohort (N=773) gained a degree after 1919.[46] Although this figure includes those who interrupted their studies in order to serve, it also suggests that some men enrolled only after their war service. James Bristock Brigden was one. In the 1920s and 30s he worked as an economist, lecturer, senior public administrator and international diplomat at the United Nations (UN) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). But, having began life as a cabin-boy, in 1915 he was working as a journalist in Victoria when he enlisted as private in the AIF.[47] He sustained severe wounds on the Western Front, and it was during his convalescence in England that Brigden was fortunate to meet the British economist, Edwin Cannan, and obtain the Kitchener Memorial scholarship, which enabled him to complete an accelerated Bachelor of Arts at the University of Oxford.[48] Focusing on the philosophy of law and economics, Brigden returned to Australia to very different career prospects. He was not alone. As many as 500 Australian servicemen entered a UK university in 1919 thanks to the AIF's Education Scheme.[49] Others still benefitted from the fee remittance granted by Australian universities to soldiers upon their return.[50]

If the war opened career opportunities for men like Brigden, it frequently imposed additional obstacles on women who by 1914 had moved into higher education in high numbers. Having achieved the franchise at the turn of the century, by the time of the war's outbreak, women students made up 20% of all graduates at Australian universities, and 35% of Arts graduates.[51] Yet the number of women in the Expert Nation database is limited by the restrictions imposed on their ability to undertake war service. Some determined individuals managed to evade the controls of the Australian government and found a way to join their fellow graduates on active service. Of the Arts cohort examined here, only 2% (N=17) were women, making this dataset far from representative.

Yet these seventeen women were remarkable individuals. Several were medical graduates who had also studied Arts and they travelled to the United Kingdom on their own initiative and at their own expense, joining the Women's Medical Unit of the Royal Army Medical Corps, or the Red Cross, or the Scottish Women's Hospitals which supported medical units in Corsica, Frances, Romania, Russia, Salonika and Serbia. Others, such as the inimitable Trixie Whitehead, were already in the UK, and found work as translators or in intelligence roles. On their return to Australia, however, these resourceful women did not always find that their expertise and experience was recognised. After a brilliant career first as a researcher at the Lister Institute in London and then as a doctor on the European and Middle Eastern fronts, Elsie Dalyell, (who had completed one year of an Arts degree at the University of Sydney before transferring to Medicine) discovered she had limited career options in Australia. Yet, as Julia Horne has argued, despite the obstacles she faced, Dalyell remained committed to using her university-cultivated expertise to building the post-war nation and securing for women a place in it. [52]

Conclusion

The lives and careers of university students have not been a significant focus in the history of humanistic knowledge.[53] Scholars working within historical geography have done the most to think about how mapping the movement of academics can lend insights into the mobility of knowledge, and studies of individuals and their networks abound.[54] But the history of education, broadly construed, has too often been siloed from the work of historians interested in questions of scientific and humanistic knowledge. Knowledge, however, is not a free-floating entity. It requires material as well as social production. And if it travels in books and letters and objects and people, it does so because infrastructural systems and actors and social forms of authorisation permit it to do so. These same systems and actors and forms of authorisation transform and remake the knowledge they circulate. This article has not sought to examine those forms of authorisation nor the systems of selection that regulated and channelled mobility in interwar Australia. What it has done is begin to map the circulation of Arts students: a significant, but largely neglected category of people who carried humanities knowledge and who helped to reproduce it.

Using the dataset created by the Expert Nation project this article has cast light on the broad patterns of geographical, vocational and social circulation of some of those who received a humanistic training in interwar Australia. It has identified Arts students as both internationally and regionally mobile, linking Australia to the world, and its cities to its country towns. It has shown that although education, law, government and public service work dominated Arts students' careers, a large proportion also worked in a variety of other sectors including medicine, agriculture and business. It has also uncovered the movement of many individuals across employment sectors, highlighting both the war and teacher education as vehicles for social mobility. In doing so this article shows that the bearers of humanistic knowledge were circulating throughout interwar Australian society in a variety of hitherto hidden ways. It has offered up a host of potential individual case studies and identified a series of sites of knowledge reproduction (such as the country town school) that are ripe for further investigation. In the process, the study has shown that prosopography – with its focus on geographical, vocational and social circulation – offers a fruitful method by which to investigate a group of people who might otherwise be overlooked as the history of the humanities develops as a field. Attending to their lives and careers is important because it helps historicise and demythologise the circulation of a domain of knowledge whose once glorious reign is frequently overstated, and whose imminent decline is too often pre-emptively announced.

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[3] FINDING JOBS (1931, November 29). *Sunday Mail (Brisbane, Qld.: 1926 - 1954)*, p. 2. Retrieved May 21, 2020, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article97918854

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[26] Of these,1042 studied for an undergraduate arts degree. Of these individuals, we have recorded in the database that 652 were awarded an arts degree and 65 did not complete their BA. It is unknown whether 331 of these individuals completed their undergraduate degree in arts after the war. Eleven individuals went on to complete doctoral studies.

[27] Depending on the information found the date was either a one-off specific date, or a range of dates, e.g. 4 May 1923-1 Sept. 1927 The database was designed to extract quantitative information to ensure that the data was collected systematically.

[28] Based on figures from the Australian War Memorial and the Report of the Repatriation Commission, 1926. See, Australian War Memorial, *First World War, 1914-1918*,

https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war, last accessed 28 November 2019; Report of the Repatriation Commission/Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Act, 1924/1925, PP no. 14 of 1926, (Melbourne: Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921), 47.

[29] On statistical methods employed in prosopography, see Koenraad Verboven & Myriam Carlier & Jan Dumolyn, 'A short manual to the art of prosopography', in: Keats-Rohan K.S.B. (ed.), Prosopography Approaches and Applications. A Handbook, Oxford, Unit for Prosopographical Research (Linacre College, 2007), p. 44; Andrej Svorenčík, 'Prosopography: The missing link in the history of economics', in *A Contemporary Historiography of Economic*s, p. 110.

[30] Susanna Fellman (2014) 'Prosopographic studies of business leaders for understanding industrial and corporate change', *Business History*, 56:1, 5-21, DOI:10.1080/00076791.2013.818419. Quote on p. 7.

[31] The other overseas institutions attended by individuals in the arts cohort were University of Dublin, 3 students, University of Glasgow, 2 students, University of Goettingen, 1 student, Durham University, 1 student, University of London, 1 student, University of Aberdeen, 1 student, and University of Auckland, 1 student.

[32] The dataset on which these graphs are based is available for download at https://data.research.uts.edu.au/publication/6221c22032ad530bf8dcbec242158091/

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