

Douglas, Kate and Kelly McWilliam. "We Don't Need No Education: Adolescence and the School in Contemporary Australian Teen TV." Eds. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson. *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*. London: BFI, 2004.

### **'We Don't Need No Education':**

#### **Adolescents and the School in Contemporary Australian Teen TV**

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#### 1. Introduction: Teens, TV, and the School in Australia

Television remains the number one leisure pursuit of Australian teenagers (Turner and Cunningham 3), yet teenagers occupy a number of complicated, sometimes contradictory, spaces on contemporary Australian television. Non-fictional teen representations range from the routinely apocalyptic (such as the 'street kids' and 'drug addicts' of news media), to the conventionally 'beautiful' (on reality programmes such as Search for a Supermodel and Popstars). Alongside these images are a variety of fictional teen images dominated by soap operas such as Home and Away and Neighbours, which have successfully targeted teen and young adult demographics for a number of years <sup>1</sup>. Since the mid-1990s, there has also been a (relatively unsuccessful) shift <sup>2</sup> in Australia towards 'quality teen television drama'—programmes fundamentally for and about youth (Moseley 42).

In this chapter we focus on Heartbreak High, arguably the most significant Australian 'quality teen television drama' of the 1990s<sup>3</sup>. We explore how the programme's diegesis negotiates and maps identities for contemporary Australian teenagers. More specifically, we examine constructions of teenage identities in contemporary Australian 'quality teen television drama' (hereafter referred to as 'teen TV') via representations of 'the school' and 'post-school' options within the programme. We investigate how Heartbreak High has responded to (whether by conforming to, or exceeding) the available cultural spaces for narrating adolescent experiences, but also to the broader social relationship between adolescents and schools. How does this programme represent the accord and tension between teens and schools? Do these representations offer diverse or uniform outcomes for their teen characters in relation to educational and post-school options, and what are the implications for Australian teen identities more broadly? We overview Heartbreak High and its reception, but also make comparative references to other Australian programmes that feature teens prominently.

The school has traditionally occupied a marginal space in Australian television programmes that feature central teen characters. (This is intriguing, given that school is compulsory for Australian teens, up to the age of 15 or 16, depending on state law). In soaps such as Neighbours and Home and Away, the school is usually an extension of the local fictional community, but is rarely the central narrative site. The introduction of Heartbreak High in 1994, a programme set in a school that featured culturally diverse teen characters, was widely celebrated as an exciting, original premise (see Gibson, Lopez, Mitchell, Williams, Woods). Its school setting and culturally diverse teen characters promised to separate Heartbreak High from previous teen images—such as the

surfers, larrikins, and romance-obsessed girls—which dominated representations of fictional TV teens.

## 2. Heartbreak High

Heartbreak High was a spin-off from a play and, later, successful Australian film titled The Heartbreak Kid (1993). In its reemergence as a teen TV programme, Heartbreak High retained a number of its characters (and actors) from the film, including popular lead actor Alex Dimitriades. Heartbreak High first aired on Channel 10<sup>4</sup> Australia amid a flurry of media interest, most of it celebratory. As Sue Williams notes, it was promoted as 'the ultimate drama for schoolkids: tough, gritty, and an accurate reflection at last of young, vibrant, multicultural Australia' (12). From its inception, Heartbreak High had more in common with overseas teen TV predecessors such as Degrassi (Junior) High and Grange Hill than it did with the predominant representations of teens on Australian soaps. Heartbreak High focuses on contemporary teen issues, directly relevant to its target audience, and was underscored with a chic soundtrack (Williams 1995b 12).

Unfortunately, Heartbreak High struggled for ratings on Channel 10, a commercial station, which had ironically only recently refocused its programming on capturing the youth market (Stockbridge 191-4). Timeslot shuffling during 1994 and 1995 saw it lose its audience, until being eventually dropped by Channel 10 (Mitchell 12).<sup>5</sup> At one point, Heartbreak High was being produced only for overseas markets, until the ABC—a non-commercial public broadcaster—picked up the rights to the show in

1996 and began screening the series in January 1997 (Mitchell 12). Heartbreak High was an international success: its 210 episodes, over 7 seasons, were sold to 70 countries including Britain, France, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, and South Africa (Gibson, Woods 1999a 41). Most commentators <sup>6</sup> agreed that there were significant changes between Heartbreak High's various seasons: the first 2 seasons (on Channel 10, in 45-minute format) being the most diverse and innovative, and later seasons (on ABC, in 25-minute format) seeing Heartbreak High more closely resembling a Home and Away-like soap opera (an issue we explore later).

When it began Heartbreak High was considered groundbreaking because, as Mark Gibson argues, it broke 'with the established formula for successful Australian audio-visual exports'. Unlike previous Australian cultural products, particularly soaps, that depicted Australia's innocence, harmony, and (usually) cultural homogeneity, Heartbreak High represented Australian multiculturalism through its urban state high school setting (Gibson). As Gibson suggests, it became the first Australian television programme to have multiculturalism as a central theme. Elizabeth Lopez writes that Heartbreak High emerged at a time when Australian television's 'anglo-centric casting' had been heavily criticised on many levels: '[a]ccording to one British commentator, our soaps might as well have been cast by Hitler. Schoolgrounds where more than half the students have a parent not born in Australia or the United Kingdom have been a fact of life for years' (1). Heartbreak High, at least to some extent, can be read as a reaction to soaps such as Neighbours in which, as Alan McKee suggests 'Australia is white, middle-class and terribly, terribly young.' (248). In the first season, more than half of Heartbreak High's key characters were non-Anglo—the two male leads Nick Poulous (Alex Dimitriades)

and Con Bordino (Salvatore Coco) were Greek and Italian respectively. This can largely be understood in terms of contemporaneous shifts in government policies. For instance, Pieter Aquilia notes that '[t]he producers' casting of Dimitriades in The Heartbreak Kid and Heartbreak High in the early 1990s coincided with a push by Actors' Equity and the Office of Multicultural Affairs to redress the under- and misrepresentation of non Anglo-Australian character roles' (105). School staff in the first and second seasons were also culturally diverse, and included a Lebanese (counsellor Yola Fatoush, played by Doris Younane), an African-American (English teacher Ronnie Brooks, played by Deni Gordon), and an Aboriginal teacher (Media Studies teacher Vic Morris, played by Ernie Dingo).

Heartbreak High is set in a fictional Sydney state high school, where students wear casual street-wear rather than school uniforms. All of the standard markers of 'rebellious youth' are evident: music in the corridors, student-teacher conflicts, a bully senior teacher, detention, graffiti, and, more seriously, drug abuse, racism, violence, homophobia, and poverty. In the early seasons, the classroom is a consistent backdrop for the exploration of adolescent personal and social problems. For example, in a season 1 episode, domineering teacher Southgate is leading a classroom science discussion. The discussion topic is overpopulation, but quickly becomes the catalyst for a discussion of contraception and women's rights, and eventually the dramatic unveiling of student Rose Malouf's pregnancy. While other students spontaneously call out their answers with Southgate enforcing controls by asking for a quiet and ordered discussion, Rose is set apart as a hard-working, sensible student by raising her hand before speaking, and in her measured, thoughtful responses:

Rose: This is all sounding pretty cold-blooded, sir.

Southgate: Yes, well, we are being objective.

Rose: You're talking about planets and species. Isn't this about whether a woman wants to have a child?

Southgate: Yes! Good! One of the questions we should ask is whether selfish, personal decisions matter more than the good of the planet.

Rose: You can't force people not to have children.

Southgate: Let's look at the economic data...

Rose: I don't think anything is more important than the rights of the mother.

Southgate: That doesn't sound very scientific, Rose.

Rose: Well that's the way I feel, sir – no one has a better right than I do.

Southgate: I thought I made it perfectly clear that we were talking objectively.

Rose: I'm going to have a baby. And I'm real sorry if I'm a threat to the planet.

(27-7-94)

Later in the same episode, the school corridors and staff room become sites for the discussion of Rose's pregnancy, among students and staff respectively. And, despite executive producer Ben Gannon's suggestion that the programme is not didactic<sup>7</sup>, these various discussions work to represent a range of different positions on the broader issue of teenaged pregnancy. For example, students Katerina and Rivers debate whose fault it is when a teenaged girl becomes pregnant:

Katerina: Poor Rose.

Rivers: Come on, if a girl gets herself knocked up she's to blame.

Katerina: Come off it—that's exactly the response I'd expect from someone like you.

Similarly, in a school office, Mr Malouf (Rose's father) attempts to consider Rose's options with her:

Rose to her father: (yelling) You can't make me have an abortion.

Mr Malouf: Is this my smart, clever daughter talking – smart enough to get herself a good education, a future... and now?!

Rose: I'm not ashamed.

Mr Malouf: This isn't something that happens to us.

In the early seasons in particular, Heartbreak High also covers a range of relatively daring topics, including racism and homophobia (experienced by both students and teachers), inter-race teenage romances, sexualities, drug abuse, self-supporting teens, students who financially support their families, and school-related issues (such as selective versus state schools<sup>8</sup>).

Almost all of the adolescent characters in these early series of Heartbreak High are sexually active, which allows the programme to cover such issues as condom-vending machines in high schools, the socialisation of sexuality, and teenage pregnancy. Viewers

witness a discussion between school counsellor Yola and an unnamed young female student, who tells Yola she thinks she might have a sexually transmitted disease.

Yola: And why weren't you using protection?

Student: I don't know.

Yola: (sternly) What do you mean you don't know? Did he force you?

Student: No, it's my fault.

Yola: No, no, there were two of you involved. I can't believe you had unprotected sex. I mean, that's pretty irresponsible don't you think? (10-8-94)

In the next scene Yola confronts acting principal Southgate in the staff room on this issue:

Yola: You and I have to have a talk. We need to do some serious talking to these kids about safe sex.

Southgate: They already have sex education.

Yola: It's not getting through.

Southgate (annoyed): Good god, the government spends millions bombarding them with these messages.

Christina: It's not sinking in.

Southgate: If they're too dumb to not have got the message by now then they shouldn't be doing it in the first place.

...

Southgate: Are you going to teach them abstinence as well because that's the only guaranteed method against STDs and pregnancies? But then again that's not as trendy as letting them bonk on regardless.

As in the earlier episode where Rose announced her pregnancy, this dialogue (and two later examples from the same episode where students debate the issue, and where the 'Parents and Friends Association' has a meeting over the issue) represents a range of ideological positions on the eventual issue of condom-vending machines in high schools. The show's penultimate conclusion shows a victory for both the younger, more liberal teachers (Yola, Christina) and the students (represented by class captains Nick and Rose, who organised a student petition), when the 'Parents and Friends Association' reluctantly agrees to supply the requested machines. This locates the school as a site for socially relevant debate, where active students can affect change. The issue is both problematised—when the episode concludes with Southgate dismissing the decision on the basis of new government regulations that do not allow condom-vending machines in schools—and potentially resolved—when teachers Yola and Christina arrange for the machines to be fitted in a local cafe near the school, which is popular with Hartley High students and staff.

These (and similar) issues are foregrounded in Heartbreak High (though always in the context of particular teen experiences and/or relationships), which breaks noticeably with the conventions of soaps such as Neighbours and Home and Away, where similar issues are backgrounded (if approached at all), and are not treated in equivalent detail or realism. Though love plots are common to Heartbreak High, they are balanced with the

more 'serious' content 'to give [teenaged viewers] . . . romance, boyfriends, girlfriends, breaking up, getting back together', for as Gannon argues, 'that's what teenagers are obsessed by, as well as other things' (qtd in Mitchell 12).

Gibson argues that as a result of its slickly paced rhythm and editing, Heartbreak High resembles a polished American-produced drama, while its subject-matter seems reminiscent of gritty British-produced drama series. Heartbreak High is characterised by its realist style—though the students are commonly attractive, they are not conventionally so by Australian television norms. Unlike American teen programmes such as Dawson's Creek, Heartbreak High's teens are often inarticulate, even aggressive, and frequently use colloquial, sometimes racist, language. For example, Peter Rivers in the first season of Heartbreak High refers to an Asian classmate as a 'slope' and to his white Anglo classmates as 'Aussies'. These factors—combined with Heartbreak High's almost exclusive focus on youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds—promote the show as representative of, and relevant to, 'average' Australian teens.

This is reinforced through Heartbreak High's setting in Hartley High, a state school. This is consistent with both the majority of schools represented on Australian TV, and what the majority of Australian teens attend more generally. After all, approximately 75% of Australian high school students attend state high schools (Welch 132). This construction of the 'average' school populated with 'everyday' teens, however, is complicated by depictions of state high schools as fundamentally limited. For instance, in Heartbreak High students commonly criticise the socio-educational shortcomings of Hartley High, and are represented as having to leave state schools in favour of 'good schools' (that is, selective or private schools). Criticisms of 'the school' reflect one way

these programmes effectively engage with contemporary social concerns regarding access and equity issues in education, such as state versus private school debates, or the relevance of contemporary education more generally. Consider the example of Jack Tran, whose good grades motivate his move to a selective school. However, selective schools are also implied as pretentious (and consequently 'un-Australian'). For example, when Rose and Jack argue, Rose tells Jack to "Go to hell ... go back to your selective school", which is seemingly a serious indictment of his difference. Here the school is an explicit marker of belonging (and, more broadly, teen identity): where the state school is a marker of 'average' or 'everyday' normality, private or selective schools are a marker of unacceptable difference.

The 'everydayness' of these state schools and teens also draws on popular myths and stereotypes of the ideal Australian<sup>9</sup>—they are almost always honest (and have their honesty tested), hard working (though often mischievous 'larrikins'), unassuming, irreverent, and, most importantly, unpretentious. The use of Australian ideals in characterising both Hartley High and its students, serves a number of purposes. First, it displaces other markers of differences, and locates Heartbreak High teens—particularly non-Anglo teens—as 'real Aussies'. Second, these 'ideal Australian' values function to frame potentially rebellious or anti-social student behaviour within the context of broader values and institutions. For instance, when Rose chooses to have her baby rather than abort it, it is framed not as irresponsible naivety (the surrounding episodes stress how much Rose has thought about, and understands the reality of, her decision), but rather as an example of her responsibility and morality. Rose chooses to have her baby to 'make right' her experience of not knowing her own mother. She tells Jack that all she needs is

her father's support: 'If I have my family there, I can go back to school, get an education, get a career'. Jon Lewis argues, with reference to teen films, that '[b]y and large, the teen film presides over the eventual discovery of viable and often traditional forms of authority . . . the restoration of the adult culture informed rather than radicalised by youth' (3). This is apparent with Rose's decision: Rose's act reflects a desire for paternal authority (as she takes on her absent mother's role), but is also an inscription of dominant institutions (family, school, work). Here Rose's transgression from conventional teen girlhood represents her shift into a conventional adulthood, marked by 'appropriate' institutional dominance.

On Heartbreak High, such representations allow the programme to endorse its characters—including apparent transgressions, such as Rose's pregnancy—as good, 'everyday' citizens worthy of teen viewing. This foregrounds the school as a site of appropriate Australian citizenship, but equally, paradoxically, draws attention to the fact that education is not considered a necessary part of adult citizenship on Australian TV. That is, education does not typically figure in post-school teen TV identities. This highlights an interesting difference between Australian and American teen TV, given that most central American teen TV characters in recent years have made the transition from high school to university. Consider the example of Dawson's Creek, where all but Pacey have gone to university (similar examples exist on Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Beverly Hills 90210). What might this suggest about Australian teen TV examples and their relation to Australian teens?

### 3. School, Post-School—Teen TV and Adolescent Containment

Contemporary Australian youth-marketed programmes have a conspicuously ambivalent relationship with post-school education. In the early series of Heartbreak High students rarely express the desire to go to university. Students are more likely to pursue creative pursuits—for example, many plotlines in the early series are devoted to Jodi's plans to be a singer and Con's entrepreneurial exploits. Another common strategy is that students 'fail' their Higher School Certificate<sup>10</sup> or gain lower results than expected—in these instances students 'repeat' Year 12, as Katerina and her boyfriend Charlie do (as do at least 6 other popular characters in later seasons). This allows the programme to conveniently retain characters and their romance plotline/s, as has been the dilemma in American teen TV programmes such as Beverly Hills 90210 and Dawson's Creek. Producers of these programmes had to decide how to retain their popular cast and still allow them to 'grow up'. In Heartbreak High students commonly find school incompatible with their 'real world' concerns (such as travel, gaining employment and income, or raising a family).

A relationship could be drawn between the lower socio-economic state school environment of Hartley High and the lack of a transition between school and university. As Elizabeth Lopez argues, '[t]he kids are working class – from broken or struggling homes – and are sceptical of the promises of formal education' (1). The theme of educational inequality present in the first 2 seasons of Heartbreak High mirrored the wider social concerns circulating in and around Australian education systems at the time. Nevertheless, considering the extent to which the programme challenged so many other

limitations placed on youth from ethnic and lower socio-economic backgrounds, it is curious that access to tertiary education is not also challenged.

Furthermore, as Heartbreak High made its transition from its evening 45-minute format (Channel 10) to its afternoon 25-minute format (ABC), the school became decreasingly important as a site for the exploration of teen issues—with family homes, the beach, and cafés becoming recurring features. Critics suggested that Heartbreak High 'sold out' to commercial interests, and consequently lost its two strengths: its commitment to multiculturalism, and realist explorations of the school and education (Lyons 12, Williams 1997 12). According to Williams,

scripts were changed, the confrontational aspects of the show were toned down in favour of more concentration on relationships, the violence was cut, the racism was phased out, but it still didn't rate well. [Valerie] Hardy [Channel 10's head of drama] believes perhaps kids weren't ready for the ethnicity of a show that, in stark contrast with soaps like Neighbours and Home and Away, included a Greek, an Italian, a Salvadorean, a Vietnamese and a Lebanese among its core cast (1997 12).

Aquila notes that 'Heartbreak High's poor ratings were blamed on the series being too multicultural for young audiences. The producers killed off Dimitriades' character in a boxing match, and his family was relocated to Greece in favour of a new Anglo-Australian cast' (105).

The marginalisation of the classroom in favour of more generic/non-specific locations results in an obvious under-representation of the school, both in comparison to the frequency of scenes in other community institutions, but also in comparison to the amount of time 'real' teens spend at school. That is, while school scenes are shown infrequently (certainly not everyday), 'real' teens spend approximately 30% of each weekday at school. This under-representation of the school can be partly explained in terms of the restrictions and conventions of television, but this does not adequately explain it. Schools are effectively marginalised as less important and/or less interesting than other settings or activities, or only function as interim spaces between others spaces of 'living' (family, work, social spaces).

Williams suggests that Heartbreak High was altered because it was 'too edgy' (1995a 28), citing Australia academic Sue Howard whose study of teens' reactions to Heartbreak High revealed that they objected to its confronting realism (1997 12). In other words, the school setting was perhaps too realistic, but also, ironically, too alien—viewers were more familiar with the community and family-based settings of Australian soaps, which commonly depict students as early school leavers who are more focused on marriage and family than diverse career options. It is significant to note that these depictions of 'everyday' teens in Australian soaps and teen TV diverge from actual education statistics in Australia. In the 1990s, approximately 77% of Australian youth finished Year 12 (Lamb 1). Adrian Harvey-Beavis and Lyn Robinson note the increased community acceptance of school completion, where completing year 12 has become the new norm. Their studies suggest that the majority of Australian students want to finish school and want to go to university (13). Predictably, students attending private schools,

as well as students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have higher retention rates. There are also an increasing number of Australian school-leavers proceeding to both TAFE and university.

However, these teens form a minority in teen TV. One possible explanation for this is that Heartbreak High may have been consciously rebelling against 'real' Australian educational norms. That said, this is not a convincing explanation given that this trend is consistent not only across the 7 Heartbreak High series, but also across other representations of teens on TV (particularly on soaps such as Neighbours and Home and Away). Another possibility is that there are very few narrative spaces available for post-school teens, outside of working or family-centred possibilities. That is, the status of post-school teens as 'not-quite-adults' is fundamentally ambiguous and narratively problematic: these teens are no longer at school, but not yet marked by conventional adult institutions such as employment and marriage (the two most common narrative possibilities for late teens and early adults on fictional television).

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that within this context of cultural ambivalence about school and post-school options for teens, a number of Australian programmes have centred on vocational options for teens—or school-aged youth in career-related environments—such as Raw FM (ABC 1997-1998), which focuses on a youth radio station; Sweat (Channel 10 1997-1998), which centres on a sporting academy; and Head Start (ABC 2001)<sup>11</sup>, which follows the aspirations of young entrepreneurs funded by the 'Head Start' programme. These teen TV shows devise 'options' for teens and young adults, which though enhancing the diversity of teen TV representations, further supplements the move away from formal education for teens on TV. Each of these shows

depicts teens' relationships with various institutions (radio station, sporting academy, and bank). Indeed, the success of their teen characters often depends on how they negotiate an identity in terms of the relevant institution. Consequently, these programmes offer teens models of citizenship outside of student/school relationships (and outside of formal education more broadly). Collectively then, these programmes may begin to challenge the containment of teen identities in 'the school', which was such a feature of the early seasons of Heartbreak High.

#### 4. Conclusion

Though Australian youth were likely to be simultaneously gaining their fix of American and possibly British teen identities elsewhere, the Australian teen TV programme Heartbreak High, and other examples discussed in this paper, are significant sites of fictional contestation of Australian school-based teen identities. These depictions have added to the broad range of cultural sites where teen issues are considered and charted, and identities challenged. Heartbreak High—the primary Australian teen TV programme to air in Australia in the 1990s—has engaged with the issue of what it means to be a teenager and to have to go to school. The realist representations have meant that this programme has, perhaps unavoidably as well as actively, engaged with some of the key issues affecting contemporary Australian schooling—for example, access to education, student empowerment, and as discussed in this chapter, retention rates and post-school options.

These television representations have been active in challenging stereotypical or uniform depictions of adolescents. Throughout the 1990s there has been a range of students represented in Heartbreak High: teenagers with varying desires and goals. Heartbreak High was clearly reactionary for its centralising of both adolescent characters and the school, its depictions of a multicultural school, and its open dialogue on sexually active teens, racism, and homophobia. Heartbreak High was also significant for its insistence on representing the impact cultural background and social class have on students' educational outcomes.

However, much of the ground that has been gained by this programme in terms of its empowered constructions of teen identities is problematised by its narrow and uncomplicated representations of teens within school and post-school activities.

Heartbreak High, like Australian soaps, has consistently evaded the complex tensions between adolescent and student identities, opting instead for uniform representations of, for example, early school leavers, school 'failures', low-skilled employment seekers, and a minority of teen tertiary entrants. These trends are especially notable when considered within the context of actual school retention rates and tertiary participation in Australia.

We have sought to explain these representations firstly, and perhaps most simply, as they function as symptoms of television formats. However, such an explanation proves ideologically unsatisfying for those interested in interrogating the discursive influences of cultural representations of teenagers. Instead, in this chapter, we have looked for explanations for these depictions within constructions of (appropriate) adolescence, its containment within citizenship (based around family, community, and employment rather than education), and the appropriation of teenage characters into apposite adulthood. The

ambivalence towards education reflected in this teen TV programme reflects a broader ambivalence towards the teens depicted in these programmes, and towards teens across Australia as illustrated in various media.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, one of Australia's most popular soap operas, Neighbours, both targets and rates most successfully with the 16-24 demographic (Stockbridge 196).

<sup>2</sup> 'Relatively unsuccessful' shift because Australian 'quality teen television drama' continues to rate relatively poorly, with quality teen TV programmes such as Raw FM struggling to find audiences.

<sup>3</sup> We consider Heartbreak High the most significant Australian example for a number of reasons. It was, for instance, one of the earliest examples of 'quality teen television drama' in Australia when it first aired in 1994. It is also one of the most popular, having aired on and off for approximately four years (considerably longer than other examples). It also received considerable media attention, some of which we discuss later in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> As Lisa Mitchell notes, Channel 10, was, at this time broadcasting Beverly Hills 90210 (12).

<sup>5</sup> According to executive producer Ben Gannon, the only reason that Channel 10 continued to broadcast the programme was 'clearly to satisfy the drama quota requirements' (Mitchell 12).

<sup>6</sup> See Aquilia, Lyons, Mitchell, and Williams.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell 12.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this paper, we use 'state school' as a shorthand for 'state high school'.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of stereotypes of 'Australianness' see, for example, Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper's Australian Film, 1900-1977, and Russel Ward's The Australian Legend.

<sup>10</sup> This is the final qualification in New South Wales, Australia, external exams known as the HSC, which define the post-secondary courses students may be able to study at TAFE or university.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Australia's answer to the U.K.'s Press Gang.