**What does VET bring to higher education that is distinctive?**

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**Abstract:**

Australian higher education is in a state of flux. One sign of this flux is the entry of new providers, including those with a track record in VET. Are these providers offering similar qualifications to universities or do they bring something new and distinctive? This paper draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction to argue that the entry of qualifications by new providers trouble some of the boundaries between the VET and higher education fields. VET provider degrees emerge as a new point of distinction in the higher education field, offering benefits that resonate with changes in the market for degrees. VET provider degrees potentially alter the structure of the higher education field, disturbing the established order and changing the rules of the game. Basil Bernstein’s concept of ‘message systems’ is drawn on to nuance the theory of distinction in the context of the Australian tertiary landscape. Attention is thus drawn to messages associated with teaching, curriculum and assessment in VET providers that help us to examine the action of these providers in reconfiguring distinction. The analysis presented here hints at a redefinition of what makes a degree distinctive.

**Key words:**

Vocational education and training, higher education, Bourdieu, Bernstein, distinction, taste, message systems, knowledge codes

**Introduction**

Australian higher education, like higher education sectors in many other countries, is subject to intense policy debate and continual transformation as a field. A prominent example of the latter is the influx of new providers. For some time, universities were regarded as synonymous with higher education, and debate and reform concerned the relationships among universities, the way they operated and what they offered (Trow, 2005). In contemporary higher education – in Australia and in other countries – the traditional order has given way to a more diverse landscape in which non-university higher education providers vie with established institutions to stake their claims and attract market share. Converted progressively into a market through waves of neoliberal reform, the higher education sector in Australia has become porous and structured according to dynamics of supply and demand. Accompanying this fundamental transformation of the higher education field is policy debate that increasingly views knowledge in economic terms. It is accepted that we live in a global knowledge economy and that a competitive nation is one that must leverage knowledge production and innovation to succeed (Marginson, 2010). In such an environment, creating knowledge and knowledge workers becomes imperative and education systems are an obvious site for such activity. Australian higher education policy is therefore oriented to the economic value of the higher education sector. A corollary of this policy focus is that at the individual student level, vocational outcomes are becoming a more explicit concern. In consequence, the effectiveness of the system and its policies can be measured in part by the extent to which highly skilled workers are produced and employed.

It is into this milieu that education providers with a track record in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector are entering in what may be a significant transformation of higher education in Australia. In this paper this transformation is analysed using Bourdieu’s theory of ‘distinction’ and Bernstein’s notion of ‘message systems’. The argument is advanced that a new form of distinction is taking shape in higher education that challenges the traditional university-dominated structure of the field. Messages about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment associated with the new entrants serves as ingredients for a new taste in degrees, oriented to a non-traditional representation of higher knowledge. If this analysis is coherent, it may be that a redefinition of what makes a degree distinctive is at hand. In the following discussion, the entrance of new providers into higher education is described. Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) theory of distinction is then briefly introduced and the special way we use it explained. The empirical challenge of researching the dual modes of distinction that are highlighted by this analysis is then considered and Bernstein’s (1975) concept of ‘message systems’ is presented as a research framework. Bernstein’s own suggestions about a new educational knowledge code are elaborated as a possible object in a new taste for degrees.

**VET providers in higher education**

Education providers operating in higher education with a track record in VET include both public and private organisations. In 2013, there were 10 large public providers accredited to offer bachelor degrees and 32 private, smaller providers that fit into this category (Gale, Hodge, Parker, Rawolle, Charlton, Rodd, Skourdoumbis & Molla, 2013). The number of non-university providers of higher education is much higher than these figures indicate (Department of Education and Training, 2015), but many of these have had no presence in the VET field. In this paper the focus is on the public providers, or institutes of ‘Technical and Further Education’ (TAFEs), that have well-established track records and ongoing presence in the VET sector and whose number operating in higher education has grown to 11 (TDA, 2016). The rationale for this focus is that not only are TAFE institutes emblematic of the VET field (indeed, they were once as synonymous with the VET sector as universities were once with higher education), they are large organisations with, as a set, a relatively high number of higher education students and extensive range of undergraduate degree offerings. In addition, they share a policy platform articulated and promoted by their representative organisation, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA). They possess a common history of development and dealing with challenges such as reforms that opened the VET sector to private providers. Focusing on public VET institutions that have entered higher education therefore facilitates analysis of changes in the field, especially in relation to the policy and market positioning of new entrants. This is an analytic strategy that excludes extensive activity in higher education by private providers that also have historical links with the VET sector.

TAFE institutes started to lobby for permission to offer undergraduate degrees – the “bread and butter” of university provision – in the late 1990s. The South Australian Hansard of 11 February, 1997, reports a debate about the benefits of TAFE offering degrees (Gale et al. 2013). It was argued that such degrees would address specific industry skill needs, a demand that existing university-based provision could not satisfy. However, this push did not succeed at that stage. In Victoria a few years later a group of TAFEs lobbied the state government for permission to offer degrees. Once again, specialised industry skill needs were among the reasons cited for the movement. In the Victorian context the lobbying bore fruit. In 2002 the Victorian government released a policy statement which among other things announced that,

TAFE Institutes will be able to seek approval to deliver degrees under the same processes that currently apply to any other providers approved to deliver higher education courses under the Tertiary Education Act 1993. *It would be expected that these degrees would be strongly vocational in focus and show clear linkages to the Training Package competencies in the relevant industry sector.* (Kosky 2002, p. 9, italics added)

Victorian TAFEs developed and offered degrees shortly after, with North Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT) taking enrolments into its initial higher education offerings in 2004. Box Hill, Holmesglen and William Angliss Institutes accepted their first bachelor degree enrolments in the following years. Following these developments in Victoria, TAFEs in the states of South Australia, ACT, NSW and Queensland were also permitted to offer degrees by their respective state accrediting authorities (Gale et al., 2013).

By 2013, there were 10 TAFE providers of higher education (some individual institutes, some state systems). Examples of their degrees include:

TAFE SA (South Australia):

* Associate Degree of Electronic Engineering
* Bachelor of Dance Performance
* Bachelor of Visual Arts and Design

Polytechnic West (WA):

* Associate Degree in Aviation (Aeronautics)
* Associate Degree in Aviation (Maintenance Engineering)
* Associate Degree in Aviation (Operations Management)

TAFE NSW (New South Wales) Higher Education:

* Bachelor of 3D Art and Animation
* Bachelor of Applied Finance (Financial Planning)
* Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and Care (Birth-5)

(Source: Gale et al. 2013)

What is clear from these examples is that TAFE degrees have a strong vocational focus. They name jobs, roles and specialisations, and they send a message that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment will be appropriate to equip students who have vocational aspirations with the higher-level skills and knowledge to do the work in question. University based degrees certainly include qualifications with vocational-sounding titles, but provision prominently includes non-vocational degrees, such as Bachelor of Arts qualifications.

These developments need to be kept in perspective. According to the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training (DET, 2015), there were some 1,025,670 domestic students (equivalent full-time) in Australian higher education in 2014. Enrolments into non-university providers, including TAFEs, represented a small proportion of students as the following diagram shows:

Figure 1: Domestic students Equivalent Full-Time Student Load (EFTSL) by provider type and metro/regional, 2014



(Source: DET, 2015, p. 6).

However, a key issue to note in making such comparisons is the significant disincentive that prospective students face when considering a TAFE degree. In almost every case, Commonwealth subsidies in the form of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) cannot be accessed students electing to study in one of these degrees. The outcome is that TAFE degrees are more expensive than their university counterparts. For example, in 2013 a Bachelor of Music degree at Monash University over three years incurs student fees of $18,000, while a Bachelor of Music degree at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE over three years attracts student fees of $36,000 (Gale et al. 2013). The contrast is heightened when loan schemes available to students are taken into account. Students choosing a university degree and accessing a CSP will repay their already subsidised fees through an income-contingent loan arrangement that attracts no interest. Students choosing to study a degree at TAFE will not get access to a similar scheme. Understandably, TAFEs and students are actively lobbying the government to extend the relatively generous scheme to TAFE degrees. It is possible, then, if CSPs become available to TAFEs and their students that there will be further growth in the number of students choosing TAFE degrees. But even the numbers that are already enrolling into TAFE degrees, despite the current disincentives, suggest that these degrees are attractive to some students.

Part of the argument of this paper is that existing student demand for TAFE degrees (especially in the face of a powerful financial disincentive) hints at a possible transformation in the meaning of higher education. In the next section we present a theoretical framework that helps us to analyse the proposition that what is regarded as valuable about higher education may be changing.

**Drawing on Bourdieu: VET, higher education and Distinction**

The emergence of TAFE degrees raises the question of how to understand their potential and potential impact on higher education. Here we use ‘distinction’ to explore these changes, and the application that Bourdieu (1979/1984) made of this concept. In common language, ‘distinction’ points to things that might be compared to one another, distinguished from one another, and the qualities that can be used to discern difference (Macquarrie Dictionary, 2016). A distinction might be made, for example, between kinds of teacher education degrees, between VET or higher education institutions, or between the graduates of certificates, diplomas or degree courses. ‘Distinction’ also carries with it more than just difference, but also an evaluation of worth, an ordering of quality made for itself or in preparation for other decisions or actions, such as selections between choices of degrees to choose, or policy options to take with regard to improving access to higher education (Macquarrie Dictionary, 2016). Distinction raises questions about what is to be compared, how it is to be found, who is going to evaluate (e.g. governments, employers, families, prospective students) and for what purpose (to commit or allow access to funding, or to select between potential higher education options).

Bourdieu’s use of distinction is more restrictive in scope, and contextualises the judgments made by people to specific cultural contexts, called *cultural fields*. Distinction emerged in Bourdieu’s sociological work on the cultural judgment of taste (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). His research with colleagues showed patterns in what people from particular social groups thought were worthy objects for art, or selections of meals for guests, or leisure activities or sports (amongst a wide variety of interests). He used *distinction* as a way to explain the pattern of differences between different social groups in their preferences. Distinction was an overarching pattern or *logic* of practice, a concept developed as a product of wide-ranging empirical work, which helped to explain patterns in the consumption of cultural goods in a variety of fields of cultural production. Bourdieu’s core insight was that the judgement of taste – traditionally seen as a cultivatable, disinterested and potentially universal and necessary judgement that eschewed social divides -- was in fact *socially* structured and distributed among groups in the form of shared dispositions or *habitus*. People are not born with taste but are socialised into tastes for different kinds of cultural things. It was distinction that helped to explain differences in the taste that people had for different cultural things.

Bourdieu (1979/1984) had a critical agenda in mind with the distinction research. ‘Taste’ for high culture, in the minds of French policy makers and the broader public, was taken as marker of a refined perception or understanding giving people access to realities and truths. The goods of humankind required a cultivated taste to be fully appreciated, an assumption that justified allocation of public resources to the high culture industry. However, it was only certain social groups that were enriched – materially, socially and spiritually – by these policies. For Bourdieu, this inequitable situation was bolstered by powerful, well established theoretical and cultural assumptions about the nature of taste. This theoretically coherent position was represented by the aesthetic theory of the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that aesthetic judgements were intrinsically ‘disinterested’ (pure of motives of gain or reputation), were ‘universal’ (every reasonable person would see that same thing as beautiful) and ‘necessary’ (worthy objects would always be appreciated as such). However, for Bourdieu, an investigation of the mapping of social groupings and aesthetic judgement revealed that these judgements did not conform to the Enlightenment understanding of the nature and meaning of the beautiful. Bourdieu argued that far from expressing a disinterested perception of higher truths, taste functioned in an inherently ‘interested’ fashion that served to differentiate and position social groups. Taste turns out to be a ‘competence’ developed within privileged groups for identifying proper art and thus signalling one’s position in the social order. As Bourdieu illustrates,

When faced with legitimate [proper, true] works of art, people most lacking the specific competence apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos, the very ones that structure their everyday perception of everyday existence....The result is a systematic ‘reduction’ of things of art to the things of life...which is barbarism par excellence from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic. (1979/1984, p. 44)

Located in fields of cultural production, Bourdieu did not initially use ‘distinction’ as a way to talk about the field of education (or higher education). Instead, Bourdieu drew on the concept of ‘reproduction’ to explain the way education institutions function (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977/1991). According to the theory of reproduction, schools, universities and other education institutions together act as a selecting device whose ultimate product is a neatly divided student cohort, legitimated by qualifications, whose post education destinations also happened to follow along well established cultural and social divisions in society. Reproduction was the overall cohesive force that held together practices of education that makes it an effective social ordering system.

We argue that what has changed since Bourdieu’s initial sociological work on education in the 1960s and 1970s is the slow turning of education into a range of overlapping markets through successive and cumulative waves of policy, initiating fundamental and cascading changes through the fields of education. The move of students between education sectors now demands and is accompanied by cultural choices, which requires the activation of taste, initially of parents then students for different educational options. Progression through contemporary educational careers involves making tasteful choices at multiple points. Distinction, originally developed as a way to explain preferences of consumption in cultural fields, might in the current world of education be viewed as a mechanism for understanding changes in the fields of education, and particularly in relation to changes about the pathways of students from school education to vocational or higher education.

Opposed to Bourdieu’s fundamental intuition that such taste is socially acquired, governments have accepted a more Kantian, absolute position about TAFE degrees, and suggested that the taste that some people develop for such degrees is natural and the right judgment for people aspiring to specific vocations.[[1]](#footnote-1) The taste associated with choosing TAFE degrees is then distinctive and right in relation to vocational alignment. The potential consequence of the widening of VET institutions offerings to include degrees is that instead of bringing new students, it may in fact draw students away from VET qualifications located in the VET field into the higher education field. In contrast, the higher education field maintained its autonomy initially, and upheld an academic, professional and research led approach to its qualifications, weighting these priorities evenly alongside vocational requirements. Successive governments have chipped away at aspects of this autonomy, and of the necessity of particular academic and research priorities in preparation for some vocations.[[2]](#footnote-2) This raised an unsettling question about the alignment between some university degrees and their links to vocations and industry. The periodic governmental intervention into university degree courses suggested that the link between some universities and vocations was an ongoing policy problem, particularly in light of the Government’s commitment to ‘work ready’ university graduates. The offerings of VET institutions and universities are marked by this difference in the form of reproduction by which they are guided. The different form of reproduction offered by VET degrees may indeed offer a point of distinction for TAFE institutes in the widening of access to higher education fields by successive governments.

To summarise, the shaping of higher education into markets necessitated the development of taste for academic qualifications offered by different universities, and was accompanied by the emergence of distinction within the higher education field. Likewise, the parallel shaping of VET into markets was also accompanied by the development of taste for vocational qualifications, and accompanied by the emergence of distinction within the VET field. The argument here is that the parallel pathways of higher education and VET fields have produced two different modes of distinction. Widening of the higher education field to include TAFE degrees then introduces two fundamentally divergent accounts of what is distinctive and tasteful in choices of higher education offerings, what we call here two ‘modes’ of distinction. VET degrees are aligned to a particular vocational taste and palette shaped by a vocational mode of distinction not encountered in the higher education field. Both modes of distinction offer models of reproduction, but the mechanisms of this reproduction differ widely. There have been separate schemes of judgement applied to the value of these mechanisms of reproduction, and different tastes. In the acceptance of TAFE degrees in higher education, governments have assumed that such degrees fill a void in degree offerings, and that students whose taste aligns with such offerings will be then drawn to degrees where they would not necessarily have seen a viable choice. This argument assumes, however, that there is a static and distinct taste in students towards higher education qualifications. However, drawing on the insights of Bourdieu, in bringing VET degrees into the higher education field, the nature of the field, and all those choosing degrees, will be altered. Distinct modes of distinction will now offer different potential structures to the field of higher education. That, in effect, the new tastes being satisfied by TAFE degrees might also become tasteful for a much wider range of students. The distinctiveness of TAFE degrees, and their potential accessibility if CSP are available, may act to change the whole higher education field. The question then is how messages about TAFE degrees may come to signify taste to students considering entering the field. The core argument that this leads to is that the emergence of degrees by TAFEs raise significant questions about how distinctive they are to students. How might this distinctiveness be conveyed to students? While Bourdieu’s arguments provide a broad language to understand the relationship between the distinction offered by TAFE degrees in the field of higher education, these insights might usefully be supplemented by other concepts, such as those offered by Bernstein.

**The challenge of researching new forms of distinction in higher education**

Bringing Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of distinction to bear on the question of preferences for types of higher education institution and higher education qualification strikes an apparent difficulty in the dissimilarity between higher education and art. Bourdieu’s theory requires artefacts that can be effectively analysed in terms of *representations and objects*. It was explained above that his own analysis of education focused rather on its role in the reproduction of social structures. But in an era of marketised education, the fluidity of preferences invites a different theoretical framework, one that acknowledges a dimension of ‘taste’ for understanding decisions to invest in education. We turn to the work of Bernstein (1975) for the tools to approach higher education as a field in which the analysis in terms of taste can gain traction. In his sociology, Bernstein dealt with reproduction, but he envisaged a situation in which the ‘signalling’ function of education was an important factor in teasing out its role in reproduction. Bernstein drew on the conceptual tools of communications theory and his sociology of education often employs the language of ‘transmissions’, ‘messages’, ‘signs’ and ‘symbols’ giving rise to what Atkinson (1985) described as the ‘semiological’ nature of Bernstein’s approach. Bernstein’s research thus creates a conceptual space for dealing with education in terms of representations (a central idea in Bourdieu’s theory of distinction). In this section we review Bernstein’s theory of educational ‘message systems’ and explain how such an approach allows us to examine higher education preferences in terms of distinction and potentially reach an understanding of a field structured by dual modes of distinction.

For Bernstein, education is as much a social ordering device as a way of selecting, giving and measuring knowledge and skills. Indeed, as Bernstein argues, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment can be regarded as ‘message systems’. The ‘message’ here is not the knowledge and skills themselves but rather authoritative signals about what knowledge is important, how different types of knowledge relate to each other, and so on. As Bernstein puts it,

Curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation [assessment] defines what counts as a valid realisation of this knowledge on the part of the taught. (1975, p. 85)

This definition highlights the special sense of these terms for Bernstein and why they do as much representing of some underlying order as they stand for themselves. The social significance of Bernstein’s theory of message systems is that the messages are about and for the distribution of success and failure in education which works for some social groups and against others. Bernstein’s message systems shape the experience of learners and thus structure consciousness.

To grasp the way curriculum, pedagogy and assessment emit social messages, Bernstein introduced two special concepts, ‘classification’ and ‘framing’. Classification concerns the extent to which different subjects or areas of knowledge are separated or ‘insulated’ from each other. Bernstein observed that in some educational contexts, subjects are strictly separated and in others more blending occurs. In primary schooling to this day, learners experience some integration of knowledge such as when a project draws on geographical, artistic and historical forms of knowledge. In this situation Bernstein would say the classification is ‘weak’ or that some blurring of the boundaries is allowed to occur. On the other hand, in settings like secondary school, subjects are often kept separate. In this case ‘strong’ classification is at work. Framing, on the other hand, relates to teaching and learning, and refers to

the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organisation, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship. (1975, p. 89)

Here again, ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ forms can be observed. So-called ‘student-centred learning’ can involve negotiation between teachers and students over what, when and how content is taught. In this case, framing is considered ‘weak’. In situations where content and its sequence, mode of delivery, pacing, etc., are strictly determined, strong framing is observed.

Although Bernstein generally eschewed big-picture sociology (preferring to get the basic, micro units of description right before attempting high level speculation (1975, p. 2)), the significance of his theory of message systems for our research question can be suggested. Going back to the specific context of Bernstein’s micro-analyses of educational message systems, he indicates implications for social order and identity. His analysis of classification and framing revealed the functioning of two ‘educational knowledge codes’. The dominant one of these he termed ‘collection code’ which captures the phenomenon of strongly classified curriculum such that subjects or forms of knowledge are kept separate and appear as a collection of separate studies. For Bernstein, the collection code has specific implications for the maintenance of social order and the construction of social identities:

Where knowledge is regulated by collection codes, social order arises out of the hierarchical nature of authority relationships, out of the systematic ordering of the differentiated knowledge in time and space, out of an explicit, usually predictable, examining procedure. Order internal to the individual is created through the formation of specific identities. (1975, p. 106)

In British schooling in the 1970s, the analysis of class reproduction is thus facilitated by discerning the codes represented by curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices and how they are represented. In addition to the collection code, Bernstein described an emerging ‘integrated code’. Here, classification and/or framing are weak. In the British context, A. S. Neill’s Summerhill School stands out as an example of an education transmitting the integrated code. For Bernstein, this relatively new development, foregrounded by analysis using the concepts of classification and framing, produces a different order and identities. Bernstein did not offer a comprehensive analysis of this code. Rather, he suggests that the order created by this new type of code ‘may well be problematic’ (1975, p. 107). Indeed, it could be argued that one of the challenges for a sociology of education was making sense of the emergence of the integrated code type, and how it played out for social classes. The new code certainly represents opportunities for social groups to gain advantages they would not necessarily expect under the collected code.

For the purposes of understanding the macro level question of the entrance of new institutions and degrees into higher education that appear to be eliciting responses suggesting an alternative mode of distinction, Bernstein’s analysis of message systems offers data collection and analysis tools. Speculating on the significance of the new educational knowledge code beyond the level of primary school, he suggests that ‘the growing differentiation of knowledge at higher levels of thought, together with the integration of previously discrete areas, may set up requirements for a form of socialization appropriate to these changes in the structure of knowledge’ (1975, p. 110). For us, this suggestion draws attention to the role of the new institutions and degrees within the field of the production and reproduction of knowledge at higher levels.

The new options represented by TAFEs and their degrees may offer such a form of socialisation and thus an avenue to legitimate participation in the construction of and sharing in the benefits of the new forms of knowledge. This question can be conceptualised in terms of understanding the messages emitted about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment by TAFEs and their degrees. These messages do not need to be actively communicated by marketing departments to be effective. Rather, policy makers, employers, families and prospective students can refer to their experience of the VET sector for relevant models of the message systems. Analyses of VET sector qualifications using Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing argue that the competency-based curriculum model that underpins provision in the entire sector, and has done so for about 25 years, is characterised by weak framing (Robertson, 2009, Wheelahan, 2010). A form of the integrated knowledge code is indicated here that may be associated with curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in TAFE degrees. At the same time, marketing strategies that stress the vocational outcomes of TAFE degrees and the comparability of the status of these qualifications with university degrees reinforce prior experience of VET in the minds of decision makers interested in making a distinctive choice.

In contrast, perceptions of a traditional university education (potentially nurtured by TAFE degree marketing), can suggest the collection code. If university education is associated with rigid subject divisions, alienating lecture hall delivery to masses of students, and high-stakes examination-style assessment then a traditional educational knowledge code is implied. As Bernstein (1975) suggests, this code is distinct from that of the emerging integrated knowledge code. Traditional higher education curriculum, pedagogy and assessment may represent a tradition that may be perceived to be at odds with shifts in higher knowledge. Potentially, the established mode of distinction can be safely disregarded if its authority base is undermined by shifts in work and the economy commensurate with new knowledge structures.

Bernstein (1975) also suggests that changes in the division of labour are bringing with them a ‘new concept of skill’ (p. 110). The implication here is that a more flexible knowledge base is required, one that is not so tightly bounded by traditional work roles and identities. It would follow that if higher skills are seen to be required for rewarding jobs then again, a higher education associated with the integrated code will be preferable and it would appear that TAFE degrees represent this type of code. Bernstein makes a third point about the implications of the integrated code above primary schooling levels, and that is that the ‘less rigid social structure of the integrated code makes it a potential code for egalitarian education’ (1975, p. 110). If a type of higher education provider and its degrees can be associated with the integration code then it would be a more natural choice for social groups who may have seen themselves as barred from higher education. It is possible that universities are moving to protect themselves in this environment by setting up or partnering with colleges that provide pathways into university degrees.

**Conclusion**

We argue that Bernstein’s (1975) theory of message systems can contribute to a framework for researching and understanding dual modes of distinction within the field of higher education. The theory does not supplant Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) analysis of distinction with respect to our question because Bernstein’s analysis is of the experience of students and teachers immersed in an institution of education. We are asking about the preferences of students, families, employers and policy makers who are regarding the higher education field as a play of representations of competing goods. They are on the periphery of higher education weighing up what is of most value. The ‘message’ part of the message systems is especially important here. As representations, they inform judgements with regard to previously cultivated knowledge of a valuable object. We have shown that Bernstein’s theory traces how associations are formed between messages about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and underlying codes. The policy environment and the desires of students and families are attuned to the attractions of the integrated code. Bernstein indicates some of these attractions: the structure of higher (and valuable) knowledge is changing, the nature of the job market is changing, and the integrated code promises an egalitarian education. TAFE degrees appear to emit messages that are congruent with this form of taste. In contrast, traditional higher education may symbolise the traditional social order maintained through the collected code. The emergence of a new code introduces a substantially new ordering system that has implications for higher education as well as the schooling sector. Our next step is to empirically investigate the message systems of new and traditional higher education providers to determine whether a new mode of distinction is regulating preferences in higher education.

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1. This raises an interesting question in examples where the same named degree course is offered at universities and TAFEs, such as early childhood. This appears to lead to a contradiction in Government support of degree offerings by both universities and TAFEs, unless this is seen as a practical test of this taste. In this reading, the offering might be seen as a test of the rightness of fit between taste and the institutions offering the same degrees. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example the successive reviews of teacher education, which have periodically intervened in the offerings of degree courses and shaped requirements for teacher education to a reduced list of three emphases. These interventions act as an external reorientation of academic and research priorities. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)