ETHNIC AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ACCOUNTING STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR FUTURE WORK ENVIRONMENT: AN AUSTRALIAN STUDY
Louise Kloot, Victoria University, Denis Vinen, Swinburne University
Correspondence: Denis Vinen, School of Business, Swinburne University of Technology, P.O. Box 218, Hawthorn Vic 3122, Australia Telephone 61 3 9214 8474 Facsimile 61 3 9819 2117 E-Mail: dvinen@swin.edu.au

ABSTRACT
Two major aims of the Australian accounting bodies is to attract accounting graduates into accounting careers and to retain their current members. The accounting bodies have recently undertaken a number of studies to gain an insight into why members leave the profession. Building on these and other studies, this paper reports on research conducted in two universities which was designed to understand issues from a students' perspective as to why accounting students may not proceed to an accounting career. It examines the impact of gender, ethnic background, industry based learning/co-operative education (IBL), career information sources and secondary schooling, on career choices.

INTRODUCTION
Accounting students spend three to four years as undergraduates, and on graduation spend a further two years obtaining post-graduate professional accounting qualifications to become fully qualified accountants. However, not all graduates continue on to gain professional qualifications and there are many who leave the accounting profession altogether. There is now concern that those who do not complete further accounting studies, together with those who leave accounting for another vocation, are a valuable loss to the profession; given that tertiary education and professional certification is expensive and time consuming.

The Australian professional bodies have articulated the need to attract more accounting graduates into the profession and to retain them. The Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants (ASCPA) is concerned that the profession should become more inclusive. The Institute of Chartered Accountants (ICAA) has also identified similar issues as being of importance to its members. In response to the problem of graduates not progressing into an accounting career, the Institute, via its Careers and Marketing Committee, is attempting to attract more accounting graduates into careers as chartered accountants.

Factors which impact on both men's and women's participation rates in the profession may start with the decision to study accounting. These factors include gender and national culture. Information (or the lack of it) about the accounting profession which is gained during university studies may be another factor which affects the participation of both men and women in the profession at the end of their studies [3] [5].

This study was designed to investigate factors such as gender and ethnic background which may impact on accounting students’ career choices. It was also designed to investigate the extent and sources of knowledge that undergraduates have of the accounting profession, and the impact that knowledge (or lack of it) may have on career choice. If gender, ethnicity and information about the accounting profession affect undergraduate career choice, this may have implications for the professional accounting bodies, the universities and the manner in which information is imparted to students.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH
Previous research has identified differences between graduating accounting students’ and working practitioners’ perceptions of the accounting work environment [3] and in perceptions between students and accounting professors [5]. The DeZoort study also indicated that students rely on accounting professors’ influence for career planning and for information about public accounting. The Accounting Education and Change Commission (AECC) has taken the position that accounting professors should provide work environment information to their students [1]. In fact the AECC has expressed concern that as the early employment experience of public accountants falls short of their expectations, it may be discouraging young professionals from dedicating themselves to accounting as a career. This emphasis is timely as there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that accounting students have inaccurate perceptions of the accounting work environment.

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Questions
The DeZoort study [5] indicated that accounting students rely heavily on accounting professors to provide information about accounting careers. Accounting staff in Australian universities typically provide such information by organising information sessions addressed by representatives of the professional accounting bodies. In addition, these bodies request that selected accounting staff members become campus representatives for the bodies, to channel information from the bodies to students. This
research is designed to investigate the use made by students of such information, and the influence it may have on their career aspirations. In addition, following the work of Hunton [7] and Steadman [9] this study investigated gender and ethnic differences in the use and influence of these information sessions.

Questionnaire
The questionnaire was undertaken at two universities in the Melbourne area. Both draw students from a wide geographic area, with wide variations in ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Both universities draw students with medium to medium-high TER university entrance qualifications, although university two has a higher TER requirement than university one.

The questionnaire was administered to third year accounting students. Only students undertaking an accounting major were enrolled in these subjects. The survey was administered late in the students' final semester of study. At this time, many students would already have obtained jobs with accounting and industry firms which would commence in the following year.

The questions were based on those asked by DeZoort [5], and Hunton [7]. Additional questions were based on areas identified in small group discussions as being of concern to students. The questionnaire was administered by academics other than the researchers, to ensure that participation was voluntary. A total of 238 useable responses were collected.

RESULTS
Demographic information
Although this study was designed to examine the impact of gender and ethnic background of accounting students on career choice, the issues of further study, information sources, gender and ethnic demographics all provided interesting information which is discussed as follows.

Gender
The proportion of female students (55%) studying an accounting major exceeds male students (45%) in both universities in this study. This is consistent with the pattern of university enrolments in Victoria, with results obtained in a previous study at these universities [8], and with the pattern of new membership of the ASCPA. In 1992, 49% of new members of the ASCPA were female, whereas in 1996, 62% of new ASCPA admissions were female. Consistent with this is the trend found in membership changes at the ICAA. The ICAA’s total membership grew by 20% from 1994 to 1998 but female membership grew by 51% over the same period. Females now represent 20% of total membership. Other research studies have also shown an increase in the proportion of females pursuing an accounting degree and career [4] [7].

Ethnic Background
The type of language (English, European, Asian) which was first spoken by students is used as a proxy for ethnic background. The results show different patterns at the two universities. University one has a higher proportion of students with a European background than does university two. This may be related to the mission of university one, which aims to provide higher education opportunities for students in a disadvantaged geographical area which includes recent European migrants. Although it draws students from all areas of Melbourne and rural Victoria, there is a higher concentration of students from the local area. In contrast, university two draws its local students from all areas without focussing on one specific area.

The high proportion of students from Asian backgrounds reflects both the change in Australia’s migration pattern and the importance of fee-paying Asian students to Australia’s universities. University one has a high proportion of recent South-East Asian migrants in its population, and draws students from a Vietnamese background in its local area. University two has a high proportion of fee-paying international students (24% of university two’s enrolment is from international students), largely from Malaysia and Indonesia.

These demographic patterns have implications for the accounting profession as the professional bodies strive to become inclusive. Currently, there are few partners in the “Big 5” firms with Asian or European names. This could be expected to change as more Australian graduates from non-English speaking backgrounds enter the lower levels of the profession.

Ethnic Background and Gender
One of the most interesting patterns in this research is ethnic background considered by gender. There is a significant difference in the proportions of males and females between the three ethnic groups. Students of English speaking backgrounds are equally distributed between males and females. However, European speaking students are predominantly male, and Asian speaking female students outnumber male students by nearly three to one. These results cannot be explained by the variables in this study, nor by migration patterns. Analysis of the different gender patterns in
different ethnic groups would make an interesting subject for further research.

Secondary School Attended
There are gender differences evident in the type of secondary school attended. A higher proportion of males compared to females attended non-government (Catholic and independent) schools. Females were twice as likely to have attended government schools compared to non-government schools, whilst males had an almost equal chance of attending either type. It is difficult to interpret these results. They may indicate that parents are unwilling to spend as much on females' education as they spend on males' education. Alternatively, they may indicate that females achieve at a higher level than males in government schools, and thus are more likely to achieve the TER scores necessary for tertiary entrance.

Both genders exhibit a higher proportion of students from non-government schools than is the case in the general population. In Victoria, approximately twenty five percent of secondary students attend non-government schools, whereas approximately forty percent of university students in this study attended non-government schools. This suggests that students with a non-government secondary school background are over represented in the university population, and this is true for both universities.

Career Destinations
Overall, students who wished to work in chartered accounting outnumbered those who wished to work in public accounting by approximately 2.5 to 1. Prior research conducted at these universities asked students to nominate their ultimate career aspirations; for example as a partner in a chartered firm or a partner in a public accounting firm [8]. This research has asked students to nominate the accounting field; for example chartered accounting or public accounting.

The results for chartered accounting/partner are markedly different between the two studies. Far fewer students nominated “partner” as their ultimate goal than who nominated the chartered accounting field, which is consistent with the results obtained by Dennis [4]. This may simply indicate that students do not aspire to the “top” of the profession. It may also be a response to a lack of knowledge about what a “partner” in a chartered firm really means in practice. It may be that it is necessary to have some form of work experience in a chartered accounting firm to appreciate what being a partner entails. It may also be a reflection of the small number of female partners, giving rise to a perception among female students that there is little point in aspiring to partnership level.

Results of full career intention distribution by gender, university and secondary school, show differences between universities and between secondary school attended. The most important differences between universities are that students from university two are more likely to intend working in chartered accounting and less likely to intend working in public accounting.

Students with a non-government secondary school background are much more likely to intend working in chartered accounting than students with a government school background, and far less likely to intend working in the government sector. This may be explained in socio-economic terms as the non-government school students are more likely to have professional parents and access to career information in general. Also the higher school fees may in general reflect families of higher economic status.

Future Professional Qualifications
In light of the career destinations, the future professional qualifications of respondents was unusual. Overall, 67% of students were aiming for CPA status, and only 20% for ACA status, which is inconsistent with the stated future career paths. A possible explanation for this is that despite the efforts of accounting teaching staff and the provision of information sessions by the professional accounting bodies, students still lack knowledge about the appropriate qualifications required for the different career paths.

The results indicated that students lack knowledge about the required qualifications for different branches of the profession, and are consistent with the results of the DeZoort study [5] which suggests accounting students have inaccurate perceptions of the accounting work environment. The normal path for graduates intending to enter chartered accounting is the completion of the ICAA’s professional year so as to gain the ACA qualification. However, whilst 41% of students intended to become chartered accountants, only 43% of them were intending to gain ACA status, with 55% of the prospective chartered accountants intending to obtain the CPA designation, and 2% suggesting they would gain ‘other’ qualifications.

Industry Based Learning (Co-Op)
In both the universities studied, industry based learning/co-operative education (IBL) is widely believed by both students and staff to be most beneficial to students in a number of ways. In particular, IBL provides information about the actual work environment and accounting careers to those students who participate. However not all eligible
students participate in IBL. Some choose not to; whereas for others, the competition for IBL placements in both universities, with fewer places available than students applying for placements, results in them being unable to undertake work experience.

Overall, only 20% of students had IBL experience. There was a marginal difference between universities, with 22% of university one and 17% of university two students undertaking IBL. There is a similar difference between genders, with more females than males obtaining IBL placements. However, there is a marked difference between ethnic groups. Students of English speaking background are almost twice as likely as those from European or Asian backgrounds to have obtained IBL positions. The reasons for this difference are unclear.

CONCLUSIONS
Consistent with the current enrollment trends in Victorian universities, there is a gender imbalance amongst undergraduate accounting students in that there are more females than males enrolled. A probable result of this is that as the current mix of students graduate and join the profession, the total proportion of female members of the professional bodies will rise. This does not however guarantee that females will rise to senior positions in the future. Longitudinal studies which follow the careers of current undergraduates would be useful to analyse career trends in the future.

One-third of the students in this study came from ethnic backgrounds. Thus an issue which requires further research is the gender imbalance in both directions among groups of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The high proportion of Asian females compared with Asian males is of concern. If the low proportion of Asian males is due to an image problem, or perceived discrimination in the workplace, then the professional bodies and universities must address this to overcome such perceptions. The current imbalance would be unhealthy for the profession if it is sustained.

Despite the efforts of university accounting staff to inform students by arranging information sessions for both new and graduating students, students appear to lack knowledge about the accounting profession, career paths open to them, and qualifications required to achieve different career goals. Research into how students would best gain information about the profession would assist accounting staff to provide the right forums for students. IBL does appear to assist students in gaining knowledge about the profession. However, the degree of information imparted is not consistent and depends on university, gender and ethnicity. Further research into how IBL informs students would be most useful.

The imbalance between English speaking and other backgrounds in obtaining IBL placements is of concern. Reasons for the under-representation of students from other backgrounds need to be established, and if necessary, addressed. Focus groups which explore the issues with students eligible for IBL would be a good starting point for such research.

REFERENCES