



Widening Participation at QUT

Rationale 2012 - 2014



Rationale

Background

After the 2008 Bradley Review of Australian higher education, a target for the proportion of undergraduate students from low socioeconomic (low SES) backgrounds was set at 20%, to be achieved by 2020.

Subsequent funding through the *Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program* (HEPPP) has made it possible for QUT to expand its Widening Participation activities. This paper outlines the rationale for the expanded activities listed in the *Widening Participation QUT Activities - Comprehensive Description*.

The Nature of the Challenge

People from low SES backgrounds are significantly under-represented in higher education while those from high SES backgrounds are significantly over-represented. A 2008 review of higher education participation (CSHE) reported that people from low SES backgrounds were only one-third as likely to attend university as their counterparts from high SES backgrounds. While both groups, by definition¹, comprise 25% of the population, the low SES make up only 15% of Australia's university students while the high SES comprise 37%. This under-representation is even more marked in universities (particularly GO8 universities) and courses (particularly medicine, law and architecture) with the most competitive entry requirements and at post-graduate level where low SES students account for less than 9% of the total. This imbalance has been apparent for many years - the proportion of people from low SES backgrounds at university has remained virtually unchanged for 20 years despite an overall expansion in higher education participation. Reasons for this difference in representation are outlined below.

There is a strong relationship between social background and school achievement - students from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower achievement levels than their high SES counterparts. The OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which compares educational standards among 15-year-olds shows a correlation between social background and student performance across the OECD. Despite the commonly held view that equal opportunity exists in Australia, the impact of student background on educational attainment is stronger in Australia than in other OECD countries² (Gonski et al., 2011; McGaw, 2007). This gap in educational attainment starts early - lower academic achievement is clearly evident among low SES students by Year 3 - and the gap widens as students move through upper primary and secondary school (Gale et al., 2010). Students from low SES backgrounds are also less likely to complete secondary school than their more advantaged peers (Gale et al., 2010). The remainder of this section provides explanations for the participation and achievement gap between low and high SES groups.

Analysis of the PISA data indicates that 70% of the Australian performance variation between schools can be accounted for by differences in the social background of their students. An individual's social capital (the effect of family, social and community networks), which has been linked to educational achievement and career opportunities, varies depending on social background. People from advantaged backgrounds are more likely to have networks that comprise well educated, professional people who: (1) know how to successfully negotiate the education system; (2) act as career role models; and (3) provide access to job opportunities.

¹ The SEIFA (Socio-economic Indexes for Areas) Education and Occupation Index is used to divide post-codes into quartiles: low SES (bottom 25%); lower mid (25-49%); upper mid (50-74%); high (top 25%).

² While there was a slight improvement in Australia's equity performance in 2009 compared with 2000 this was because fewer high SES students were performing at the highest level not because low SES students' performance had improved.

Another factor contributing to this variation in educational achievement is that the education system is biased towards the middle-class. People from different social backgrounds have different world-views (including attitudes towards education and motivations towards tertiary study), assumptions and rules of behaviour. As schools (and universities) operate according to middle-class norms, students from low SES backgrounds are less likely to understand the hidden 'rules' that underlie success. This disadvantage is compounded by the nature of educational attainment tests, including the achievement rankings used for university admissions, which are biased towards the more advantaged. Analysis of student tertiary performance according to school background, discussed below, confirms that tertiary entrance rank scores do not reflect the ability of low SES students.

Poor educational attainment and low tertiary participation among people living in low SES areas is caused by the effects of poverty, suggesting that poverty's antecedents must also be addressed if educational levels are to be improved. The 2007 report: *Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia* by Tony Vinson outlines a combination of intergenerational poverty indicators that are consistently evident in disadvantaged areas. These indicators (which include low income; early school leaving; long-term unemployment; limited computer/Internet access; ill health; high crime rates; and child maltreatment) are linked with lack of access to higher level education. Vinson reported that these factors had a compounding effect which results in the level of disadvantage in these communities being even greater than the sum of their parts. While Vinson considers that redressing educational disadvantage is key to breaking the cycle of poverty he argues that to do this successfully sustained, place-based interventions which comprehensively target all the factors that cause intergenerational poverty are needed to tackle the self-perpetuating effects of cumulative disadvantage.

To conclude, it is evident that the low participation in higher education of people from low SES backgrounds is an intransigent problem with this group facing deeply entrenched barriers to higher education participation. The compounding effects of poverty which lead to low achievement (as well as many other undesirable outcomes) present a fundamental barrier. As a consequence, fewer low SES students complete school and gain the qualifications needed to gain access to university by traditional routes. Less positive attitudes towards education, lack of aspiration towards higher education and financial considerations also form significant barriers to higher education participation.

Widening Participation – What Works?

Increasing the proportion of low SES undergraduate students represents a huge challenge which calls for long-term, sustained efforts on a number of fronts. This section outlines approaches and intervention strategies which have proved to be effective.

There are five conditions (5A's) which must **all** be met before school leaver and adult students enter higher education. This implies that, to be effective, Widening Participation programs need to address these all at once:

- **Awareness** – an understanding of the available opportunities and how to access them
- **Aspiration** – the desire to attend university
- **Affordability** – sufficient money to support student life
- **Achievement** – the educational attainment level to gain entry to university

- **Access** – admissions policies that open the door to low SES students, and absence of distance³ and time restrictions

Nine characteristics of successful programs were identified by Trevor Gale, founding director of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, in a 2010 review of Australian university outreach programs which aimed to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged students:

- **Collaboration** – across the sectors: schools, tertiary institutions, non-government organisations, families and communities.
- **Early, long-term and sustained** – early interventions starting with primary school children and continuing through the middle years and senior schooling.
- **People-rich** - ongoing relationship development (for example, tertiary students with similar life histories acting as mentors) rather than one-off events.
- **Cohort-based** – working with whole classes, rather than selected students, or even larger cohorts of students in a region to change peer culture at the same time as supporting individuals.
- **Communication and information** – providing high quality, engaging materials (including digital and online) about university life and how to get there.
- **Familiarisation/site experiences** – visits to university campuses to inspire, familiarise, debunk myths, and awaken the desire to attend.
- **Recognition of difference** – recognising and valuing the assets (such as linguistic diversity and cultural knowledge) in low SES communities rather than viewing low SES groups in terms of perceived educational gaps or deficits.
- **Enhanced academic curriculum** – supporting high-quality and rigorous student learning driven by quality teaching.
- **Financial supports and/or incentives** – providing financial assistance to alleviate financial barriers to participation along with other supports.

While responses to the low educational attainment imposed by poverty ideally involve comprehensive long-term interventions, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) provides insights into key factors which interrupt the persistent correlation between low socio-economic status and poor educational attainment. Their research has found that Year 9 students who have positive attitudes towards school; are engaged in extra-curricular activities; and have career goals are likely to complete Year 12 regardless of their socio-economic background (ACER, 2010; Thomson & Hillman, 2010). These findings suggest key intervention strategies that QUT can use to engender positive outcomes within the relatively short time-span of the HEPPP program.

While OP results and other tertiary entrance ranking systems are good indicators of current academic *preparedness* for higher education, they are not strong indicators of *capability*. Studies at one Victorian university have found that students from non-selective Government schools achieve more highly than students from Independent schools with the same entry scores (Dobson & Skuja, 2005). As a disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend Government schools (Gonski, et al., 2011), this suggests that low SES students with OP's lower than the course cut-off who gain access

³ Distance refers to geographical factors that act as a barrier to participation. Socioeconomic and/or cultural factors regarding the value placed on higher education; family expectations; and peer pressure can also 'distance' students from higher education (Gale et al., 2010).

through equity schemes will succeed at university provided their results are not too far from the cut-offs. At QUT low SES students admitted under the Q-STEP scheme - which offers a bonus of up to three OP scores – pass their courses and stay at university at similar rates to other students. This supports a case for low SES students being admitted to university courses if their achievement levels are close to the entry requirements. However, students from low SES backgrounds whose school achievement levels lag well behind the standard acceptance levels and those who have not had an opportunity to develop the necessary academic skills need bridging or preparation programs prior to tertiary study and support once they enter university. This is of particular importance in the context of the 20% Widening Participation target which is likely to involve higher education being made available to students who do not have the requisite academic literacy skills.

Widening Participation differs from competitive marketing and recruitment. Recruitment activities aim to sell the benefits of a particular institution to people who are actively considering tertiary study. In contrast, Widening Participation activities seek to build aspiration, motivation and interest and overcome barriers amongst those who have traditionally not considered university study and are not currently thinking about it, in a climate of little unmet demand for higher education. Rather than promoting a specific university, these activities aim to stimulate interest in higher education in general. Thus, Widening Participation goes beyond information provision and marketing to include capacity building and developing ‘cultures of possibility’ (Gale & Sellar, 2009).

Appropriate Strategies for School Students

Moving from being uninterested in tertiary study to being actively interested is, by nature, a journey and not a single revelatory experience. Building aspiration is arguably the most challenging aspect as it involves individuals going through a personal change process which encompasses issues of identity and imagination; not just information. For this reason QUT’s Widening Participation activities involve a series of experiences which:

- Start in primary school and continue through to Year 12;
- Feature tertiary students from disadvantaged backgrounds talking about their personal life journey;
- Provide developmentally appropriate activities (both school-based and on-campus) which include multiple personal contacts with QUT staff, students & activities;
- Combine to form a scaffolded program of nested activities; and
- Represent a long-term and sustained approach.

Appropriate Strategies for Adult Learners

While all potential low SES students need to have five conditions met (the 5A’s: awareness; aspirations; affordability; achievement; and access) before they undertake tertiary studies, two aspects are particularly critical for adult learners. First, mature-age students whose last experience of study may have been many years previously, often left school early and need access to bridging or preparatory programs. These programs, which usually include an academic literacy component, assist adult students to gain required content knowledge, provide skills related to ‘learning how to learn’, assist them to understand the (unfamiliar) requirements of tertiary education and build confidence. Second, as adult students tend to have more complex life circumstances and are likely to have family commitments and dependants it is critical that affordability barriers are addressed.

QUT's Approach to Widening Participation

QUT's approach to Widening Participation, outlined in more detail below, addresses all five conditions (the 5A's: awareness, aspirations, affordability, achievement, and access) which must be met for a student to enter higher education and all nine characteristics of successful outreach programs. It also aims to encourage students to have the key factors to success identified by ACER (positive attitudes towards school and career goal setting) and is based on the premise that tertiary entrance ranks may not reflect the capabilities of low SES students. In addition, it is recognised that certain student cohorts, notably Indigenous students, benefit from targeted, culturally appropriate activities.

To encourage low SES learners to move from the current low higher education participation rate to more equitable participation rates, QUT has developed a Widening Participation strategy with two broad components and a number of associated activities:

1. Outreach initiatives aimed at stimulating demand for tertiary study among both low SES school leavers and adults. These include:
 - a. Learning-based partnerships - in-school and on-campus activities with students from 33 low SES schools in Brisbane's Northern Corridor. These partnership activities include in-school Discipline-related workshops, Encouragement Awards, camps, campus visits, and an academic skills course;
 - b. Adult entry pathways including improved VET–university credit transfer arrangements, preparatory and bridging courses and subsidised STAT test preparation;
 - c. Career development activities; and
 - d. Indigenous-specific outreach as undertaken by the Oodgeroo Unit.
2. Support for both adult and school leaver low SES students to complete their university studies:
 - a. Increased staffing for key support services (learning support, financial assistance etc.);
 - b. Strong focus on low SES students within university-wide student success and retention initiatives which includes first year experience activities; and
 - c. Equity Scholarships.

In addition, QUT's Widening Participation strategy incorporates alternative admissions pathways for low SES students and growth in both course offerings and support services at the Caboolture campus situated in the low SES Northern Corridor. Indigenous-aware approaches are blended into the strategy as appropriate.

While encompassing outreach and student retention, QUT's Widening Participation activities primarily focus on stimulating demand for tertiary study. Key principles underlying QUT's approach are that it:

- Relates to the whole person by addressing all their needs, i.e. all the 5 A's: awareness; aspiration; affordability; achievement; and access;
- Is partnership-based, working collaboratively with key stakeholders such as schools, families, communities, other tertiary providers and universities; and
- Focuses on what QUT is best placed to do.

Collaborative partnerships are integral to QUT's approach. Given the complex, multi-faceted, and deeply ingrained nature of the issues affecting low SES participation in higher education, it is clear that this work that cannot be undertaken by universities alone. New forms of partnerships are being developed between QUT and *other stakeholders* (particularly, families, communities and schools), *between universities, within QUT*, and between QUT and *other tertiary providers* such as TAFE.

Families, communities and schools play key roles in aspiration building. QUT has deepened its pre-existing learning partnerships with schools, families and communities particularly in the low SES Caboolture area. This involves making these partnerships more explicit, better organised, clarifying what each stakeholder can best contribute, and ensuring consistent messages are being communicated.

Partnerships between QUT and other universities are also assisting with the task of stimulating demand for tertiary study. A Statewide collaboration of all eight Queensland public universities is assisting each university to maximise its efforts. This is occurring through economies of scale, avoiding gaps and duplications in partnerships with low SES schools, sharing good practice and aligning evaluation activities. The rationale for this Statewide approach is that when interest in higher education is generated, all Queensland universities will benefit from increased low SES enrolments.

Internal collaboration, drawing on the expertise of a range of QUT Faculties and Divisions and utilising the intellectual capital of the university is focused on ‘value-adding’ to student learning. QUT is scaling up and ‘joining up’ existing activities and offering QUT outreach activities to schools in a coherent fashion. Schools are being provided with a scaffolded, age-appropriate Widening Participation activities ‘menu’ of potential Widening Participation activities. The activities, which complement the school curriculum, aim to: (1) demystify tertiary study; (2) stimulate student interest in specific Disciplines and; (3) up-skill teachers through Professional Development opportunities. This strategy also involves refocusing pre-existing Discipline-based schools outreach activities such as *Extreme Science and Engineering* and *YuMi Deadly Maths* to include low SES as well as more affluent schools. Taken together, these activities are intended to lift student engagement, interest and achievement; demystify university; and create interest in specific Disciplines.

QUT is also building its existing partnerships with Brisbane North Institute of TAFE and TAFE Open Learning, Southbank Institute of Technology, and the Coorparoo Secondary College developed during the 2009-2011 DASA-funded (Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund) adult learner project. The main focus is on providing adult re-entry bridging and preparatory programs and promoting TAFE–university pathways.

Rather than replicating the activities of other stakeholders, QUT’s efforts concentrate on four clusters of activities and experiences which universities are best placed to provide:

- De-mystification experiences for first-in-family
- Encouragement/inspiration through student role models and awards/prizes
- Value-adding to learning/achievement, especially via Discipline connections
- Alternative pathways for admissions and scholarships

Improving Student Retention

Along with stimulating demand for tertiary study, HEPPP funding is targeted towards extra support to assist low SES students to successfully complete their studies. QUT considers that increasing the retention of both school leaver and adult students from equity groups is most likely to be achieved by: (1) scaling up existing student success and retention initiatives aimed at reducing overall student attrition and; (2) bolstering key support services.

The entire low SES cohort, all students at the Caboolture campus, all Q-STEP (OP bonus scheme) students, and all Indigenous students have been targeted for student success and retention activities. These include:

1. Promoting timely access to support through early interventions made by the *Student Success Program*. The interventions provide proactive, just-in-time phone calls to offer support, guidance and referral to students identified “at-risk” of disengaging – those showing signs of disengagement at key milestones, including non-attendance, low levels of Blackboard activity and non-submission or failure of early assessment items⁴.
2. Building strong connections to peers through access to a variety of peer to peer opportunities including, peer advisers, mentors, learning advisers, peer learning communities and access to other forms of peer programs including the extensive QUT connect program;.
3. Curriculum content and pedagogical processes that enable all students to engage in the learning experience and have a sense of belonging to their cohort, discipline, academic community, future careers and industries. Particular attention is being paid to students having a successful first year transition (as outlined in QUT’s *First Year Experience and Retention Policy*) to ensure that both school-leaver and adult low SES students, regardless of their previous educational experiences or levels of preparedness for higher education, understand the learning expectations at tertiary level and are supported to develop the necessary Discipline-specific and generic academic skills as part of their transition to higher education. This involves acknowledging low SES learners’ pre-existing strengths and knowledges and the contributions they bring to the learning environment.

QUT’s second low SES student retention strategy involves increasing the assistance provided in key support services. This is occurring through the provision of additional financial assistance (loans and emergency bursaries) and increased staffing. Additional welfare officers, personal and careers counsellors, academic learning support staff, and nEsb student language/learning support staff have been appointed. As part of this strategy, extra support staff have been based at the Caboolture campus to work with the high proportion of low SES students in its catchment area.

Equity Scholarships are another important component of QUT’s retention strategy. The Equity Scholarships Scheme for low SES and Indigenous students, which has been operating on a large-scale since 2005, has a powerful retention effect on low-income students. This is demonstrated by Scholarship holders’ low attrition rates when compared to non-Scholarship holders.

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⁴ This contact is made by trained Student Advisors, second or third year students from the same program, who work with ‘at-risk’ students to develop an Action Plan for success which typically involves referral to appropriate academic and personal support staff.

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