LSES students and the theory of trusting networks: A whole of institution approach for Student Services.

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Abstract

What are the driving forces that influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (LSES students) to access support in higher education? Using a constructivist approach to grounded theory methodology, 20 interviews were conducted with LSES students and staff members at an Australian university. The aim was to develop a theory for Student Services departments to inform planning and service delivery for supporting LSES students. Based on coding of transcribed interviews and a thematic analysis of those codes, the theory of trusting networks was constructed. The LSES students interviewed were more likely to seek out support from individuals in their networks that had characteristics associated with being trustworthy. This theory provides insights for service delivery for Student Services departments reinforcing a whole of institution approach to supporting LSES students. This paper builds on an earlier paper that detailed selected findings from the research (White, 2014).

Background

In Australia, increasing attention on raising the proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (LSES students) in higher education arose following the release of the *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*, otherwise known as the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). The Bradley Review set a range of targets, among these was the aspiration for 20% of all undergraduate enrolments to be from LSES backgrounds by the year 2020 (Bradley et al., 2008). It is this aspiration that led to the research that is outlined in this paper.

Despite recent improvements in the proportion of LSES student enrolments, LSES student success rates and completion rates remain lower than those of non-LSES students in Australia (Australian Government, 2014; Edwards & McMillan, 2015). The 2013 Australian University Experience Survey found that the reasons commonly cited by LSES students for early departure from study were "financial difficulties, family responsibilities, health or stress, workload difficulties, need to do paid work, moving residence, study/life balance, academic support, [and] fee difficulties" (Edwards & McMillan, 2015, p. 32). Similarly, LSES students in higher education are reported to be more likely than their non-LSES peers to face a range of stressors and barriers that may impact on their student experience, such as cultural, social, educational, and financial factors including, financial strain, time pressures, competing priorities, unclear expectations of university, low confidence, and lack of academic preparedness (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010; Devlin & McKay, 2014; Ferrier, 2006; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000).

Simply increasing LSES student enrolments does not equate to positive LSES student outcomes and "[i]n order to facilitate completions, support for low SES students needs to be provided during their studies" (Lim, 2015, p. 6). Student Services has had a role to play in the retention and success of students since their introduction to higher education after World War II (Department of Employment, 1993). Student Services in Australia quite often provide

counselling, health, disability, welfare, and careers services as well as financial and accommodation assistance to students. These specialised services were established after the recognition that academics were having to deal with an increase in issues outside of the academic experience (Department of Employment, 1993). Student Services are designed to support student transition, retention, and success (Department of Employment, 1993). They have evolved to be major contributing partners to the student experience and to student success:

> The mainstream activity of university life – the legitimation and dissemination of certain forms of knowledge – is taken as a given, as normative. It is students who must adjust to it in order to be successful. Support services provide the mechanisms for students to achieve this, if they do not come to university with the capacities and resources to achieve this on their own. (Gale, 2012, p. 249)

Given the role Student Services have in higher education in Australia, those departments are well positioned to provide supports to LSES students that may aid in their retention and subsequent success. Research globally has shown that counselling is an important or significant factor in helping students complete their studies (Wallace, 2012) and that students who accessed support services had higher rates of persistence and retention than those that did not (Morgan, 2012; Turner & Berry, 2000). Other research has shown that 45% of LSES students determined asking for help was an important factor influencing their success (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012).

Since 1993, there has been no large scale assessment of student support services in higher education in Australia nor has research assessed Student Services' capacity to target LSES students specifically and measure their impact on student outcomes. The current study contributes to addressing this gap in knowledge and draws on the notion that "access without support is not opportunity" (Tinto, 2008, p. 1). Efforts to increase access to higher education for people from LSES backgrounds needs to be complemented by the availability of appropriate support services. Student Services are in a position to contribute to this support. The current research study addresses failures in previous research to understand how LSES students, in particular, access student support. The research outlined in this paper aimed to determine *what theoretical model can be developed that will inform the development of student support services in Australia to respond effectively to the non-academic needs of LSES students?* The emergent theory is discussed.

The research

A constructivist grounded theory methodology (GTM) was applied to determine a substantive theory in the field of interest. GTM is a qualitative research method that is a systematic yet flexible way of simultaneously collecting and analysing data where constant comparative analysis between themes and patterns in the data results in the construction of theory (Charmaz, 2014). GTM is used to understand a process or the actions of people and in this case, the process of students accessing support. Data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously using coding strategies that are elevated to generate theory.

Critical to the success of this study was that the theory was generated from an intimate investigation of the data, which in this case was participant experiences gathered via interviews. Constructivism is a theoretical paradigm in qualitative research that assumes multiple realities and asserts that the data reflect each participant's and the researcher's constructions and prior experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). In this study, it

is acknowledged the theory is constructed and that both the views of participants and the research are themselves constructions and as such multiple realities are assumed (Charmaz, 2014). The substantive theory is a "theoretical interpretation or explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344), specifically LSES students in higher education.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were held with 17 LSES students and three staff members of a regional Australian higher education institution. Pseudonyms, an artificial name, were used to protect the identity of the participants. Probing interview questions for LSES student interviews are shown in Table 1, while staff member interviews were adapted accordingly to ask their views of LSES student experiences. Students eligible to participate in this study were domestic, studying on campus, over the age of 18 years, and at least in their second semester of study. LSES students were those who had home addresses in the lowest quartile of the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Education and Occupation Index (2006) depicted by the Australia Bureau of Statistics, in combination with those who met relevant income support payment criteria (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). LSES students were identified from existing databases of student loan recipients, scholarship recipients, and university enrolment data. The staff members invited to participate in the study were currently employed in student support roles in the University, were closely connected with the student body, and had both experience and knowledge of student issues.

Tell me about how you feel about studying at university.
How do you define success?
What helps you to manage studying at university?
What problems, if any, do you encounter?
Who has been the most helpful to you during your time at university?
Has any organisation being helpful? What did they help with?
What from your previous experience has really helped you to adjust to university?
What assets/strengths/attitudes do you bring to study that work well for you in this situation?

Table 1: Probing questions for semi-structured interviews with LSES students

The interviews were transcribed and coded line-by-line according to GTM principles. As such, labels were applied to segments of data to provide an interpretation of what that line was about and thus informing questions and inquiry for future interviews (Charmaz, 2014). As recurrent patterns emerged in the codes, common themes were elevated to focused coding and further enquiry was undertaken in interviews with subsequent participants; a process of constant comparative analysis. As the theme was further reinforced, the codes were elevated to categories and explored further with participants until saturation occurred, in other words, no new information regarding the categories is generated. Theorising was then undertaken whereby an analysis of the relationships among categories was performed that helped to answer the research question.

Emerging patterns and themes

Line-by-line coding in the initial stages generated a strong emphasis on the importance of relationships for LSES students whilst studying at university. There was a trend reported that relationship building and having relationships were critical to accessing support and

achieving success. Codes such as 'having personable contact', 'getting to know the person', 'knowing by name', 'having connectedness', and 'having networks' highlighted the importance of relationships. Ongoing exploration of this recurrent pattern in responses allowed an emergence of who LSES students are likely to seek support from, as well as who they were not likely to access support from.

As initial codes were analysed, focused codes were generated that enabled the further understanding and development of a range of concepts surrounding relationships and their involvement in the process of accessing support. When LSES students sought support, they tended to seek support in the first instance from people closest to them; what participants called LSES student 'networks'. This was an early indication suggesting students go to lecturers before they seek support from Student Services. An interesting insight was provided by one student that highlighted a possible reason for this response:

> *"...we've all had at least 12 years of schooling that has programmed, you will go to your teacher if you have a problem. So you can't just break that just because you're at university."* [Jessie]

A further example was provided by a LSES student outlining support from their family. These types of responses were showing a pattern of LSES students being more likely to seek support from people outside of their networks if it was suggested by someone within their networks.

> *"I think it was actually a phone call from my mother actually, saying...you should actually look in and see if you can get a bit of support. I think by memory, that may have been what prompted me to actually look into it further"* [Jamie]

The understanding that LSES students were surrounded by a network that they approached for assistance, or alternatively will respond to advice from, was emerging. These networks were largely family members, peers, lecturers or tutors, or administration staff at the university, mentioned by both LSES student and staff member participants. In particular, academic and administration staff were identified as integral people to have a relationship with for LSES students. They were seen as an authoritative source whereas Student Services was seen as an anonymous entity. This was supported by at least one staff member interviewed:

> *"The academic staff have, particularly in the faculty that I work with, they've drilled it into the students, go to [Jessie] if you have a problem...[s]o it's sort of that thing, and I guess over a period of time they've learnt to trust that, okay yes I had the information - as much information as I know about to be able to tell them about it."* [Jessie]

The importance of relationships and the networks described by participants were explored further in subsequent interviews to gather an understanding of what makes someone a part of the network. 'Having trust' as a code was deemed an important facet of relationships and the code was rated a high level of importance due to its impact in the interviews. As Charmaz (2014) identified in her GTM research, "[o]ccasionally, someone will say something that captures and crystallizes what other people indicated in earlier interviews" (p. 90), and Ashley was able to pinpoint what appeared to be a core issue:

"You wouldn't necessarily go and just ask for somebody just because, but if somebody that you know and trust told you to go and said, they'll probably be able to answer your question well, you'd go and talk to them… you don't really want to just come in and ask the dumb questions kind of thing to a random person" [Ashley]

This type of response resulted in a line of enquiry in the interviews which attempted to elicit an understanding of the characteristics of an individual that the LSES students were likely to seek out support and advice. There were three themes in the qualities that participants found were necessary antecedents for LSES students to approach a particular individual for support. The first was LSES students' desire to gravitate to those who are available and 'there'. They highlighted characteristics like reliable, friendly, caring, and responsive.

"…*knowing that you can rely on them…*" (Ashley)

The second was a recognition that LSES students wished for the person to be known to them, a sense of familiarity. Knowing names and faces appeared important as well as some form of previous exposure or pre-existing relationship.

"…*because I know her*" (Casey)

The third antecedent for a LSES student to seek out someone for support was that the person was credible and appeared to know what they were doing. They had integrity and appeared to have expertise or previous experience.

"*I trust that they have the knowledge, they've been trained, they've got the qualifications to be able to know this is what [I need] to know…* (Erin)

Being there, being familiar, and having credibility were summarised as the three main themes or antecedents for LSES students to access support. These are outlined in Figure 1 along with examples of initial codes that were combined to form the focused codes.
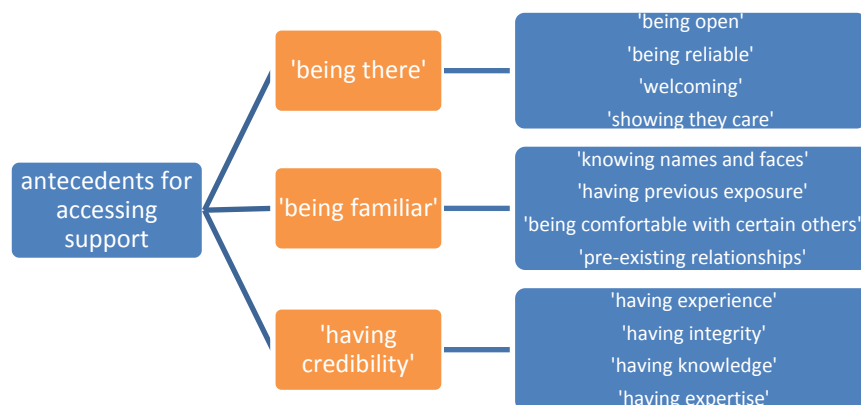

Figure 1: Key attributes of people that LSES students sought support and advice

In GTM, theory building resulted in the analysis of relationships between key themes which resulted in the major component of the theory of trusting networks.

The emergent theory: the theory of trusting networks

Relationships were an important component of the LSES student experience according to participants. Relationships enabled LSES students to form networks of support during their

studies. Networks were established on principles of trust. *Being there*, *being familiar*, and *having credibility* positively influenced the propensity to trust for LSES students. The theory of trusting networks provides an understanding of the propensity for LSES students who are seeking support to seek such from those who are trusted from within their personal networks. This way of behaving is reported by participants to increase the likelihood of LSES students' achieving in higher education.

> "*Yeah well, it comes back to the whole – the respect and the trust of the people you have – you've been able to approach and you're comfortable to approach. If they're on a first name basis, they know Mary and they know what she's going to do a good job, then why would you not trust that if you've trusted every other advice they've given you for the year*" (Sam).

The trust that LSES students placed upon particular individuals within their networks extended to trusted referrals. LSES students were more likely to see someone for support outside of their network, if someone who was trusted within their network suggested that they do so.

> "*You wouldn't necessarily go and just ask for somebody just because, but if somebody that you know and trust told you to go and said, they'll probably be able to answer your question well, you'd go and talk to them*" (Ashley).

Trust is a concept that has been widely studied in various contexts and is commonly seen as "an expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon" (Rotter, 1967, p. 651). A range of antecedents to trust or trust cues have been captured in the literature (van der Werff & Buckley, 2014) and they are not dissimilar to the generated antecedents in this research. This provides an understanding as to why some parties are more trusted than others. Specific to this research, it provides an understanding as to why Student Services are perhaps less trusted, or alternatively, why personal networks are more trusted by LSES students.

The theory of trusting networks is a notable consideration for Student Services departments in higher education. One of the key implications of this theory and the application of this theory is that Student Services are not likely, by default, to be in a student's personal network. An important point made by the LSES students interviewed however is that they are likely to pursue a referral from a trusted individual. Critical to the success of Student Services departments' ability to connect with LSES students will be the Service's need to meaningfully connect with those who are in LSES students' *trusting networks*.

Whole of institution approach

The theory of trusting networks informs Student Services that, regardless of LSES students' awareness of services, LSES students are more likely to take up services if their trusted connections suggest that they do so. Practically, this means that Student Services would benefit from engaging with the networks of LSES students – lecturers, tutors, administration, and other support staff members, as well as their peers and families. Engaging Student Services with the students' networks would include actively educating others about services and providing referral pathways. The theory of trusting networks reinforces recognises the relationships that LSES students have within their networks. These relationships with key influencers create multiple entry points into Student Services for LSES students.

A whole of institution approach should include students, peers, faculty, all university staff members, and families. Multiple partnerships, both within and beyond academia, should be the basic principles of establishing Student Services (Ludeman & Strange, 2009):

> Student affairs functions and services must be delivered in a manner that is seamless, meaningful and integrated with the academic mission of the institution. These practices and resulting policies must be built upon sound principles and research, and carried out by partnering with others throughout the campus community. (p. 6)

The idea of departments within higher education institutions working together to achieve positive student outcomes is not new. There exist multiple examples of whole of institution practices to support student success. Student engagement research has widely recognised that the key to student success is a whole of institution approach (Kahu, 2013; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008; Nelson, Clarke, Stoodley, & Creagh, 2014; Tinto, 2012). The research outlined in this paper emphasises the importance of Student Services departments to map into this model of student support, particularly if they are not already considered within student networks.

> The involvement of academic and departmental professional staff appears to be particularly important in guiding students to appropriate support services (or bringing support services to the students) because as we have seen…students may not seek these out. (Benson, Heagney, Hewitt, Crosling, & Devos, 2013, p. 46)

Student Services were established as separate entities in higher education to resource the support provided by academic staff members. Has the sector gone too far where Student Services are at risk of becoming silos within higher education? The practical implications for the theory of trusting networks is to encourage those activities in higher education that advocate for a whole of institution approach to LSES student success. An implication of a whole of institution approach is the need to bridge the divide that presently exists between academic and non-academic staff members in higher education (Benson et al., 2013; Keeling, 2004). At a time of increasing workload for academic staff members (Steele, 2014), it is important that a shared approach to student success is established. It has been acknowledged that there is an increase in the numbers of students requiring greater support and academics are being asked to do more with less (Steele, 2014). The activities of students in this study continue to access academics for support even though they may not be equipped to do so. Multiple partnerships, both within and beyond academia, should be the basic principles of establishing Student Services (Ludeman & Strange, 2009):

> Student affairs functions and services must be delivered in a manner that is seamless, meaningful and integrated with the academic mission of the institution. These practices and resulting policies must be built upon sound principles and research, and carried out by partnering with others throughout the campus community. (p. 6)

Summary

The theory of trusting networks offers an understanding of how LSES students access support and the theory also offers important insights into how Student Services can reach out to support LSES students. Consistent with student engagement literature, for Student Services

to be effective in supporting LSES students, they need to consider a whole of institution approach to student support.

This research has made important contributions to theory and practice. The concept of trust has been well researched: however, researchers have failed to attribute this concept to Student Services delivery in higher education in the way that this research has succeeded. The research has reinforced understandings of theories of trust as well as student engagement. The theory of trusting networks places Student Services directly and specifically into student engagement frameworks. While these frameworks implicitly incorporate Student Services into their whole of institution approaches, this study explicitly outlines how Student Services mediate their role in such strategies. LSES students are an important component of the student body in Australian higher education, bringing diverse views and rich experiences to the institution and expanding the reach of tertiary study. Regardless of whether the Bradley Review targets are realised, the findings of this study are of importance in Student Services planning and service delivery now.

The theory of trusting networks is not attempting to 'explain' realities but rather to generate one perspective. These findings are a construction of reality that provides opportunities for further research and presents challenges for the next researcher to enquire. GTM is an inductive process and so an area for further research may be to determine if the same theory applies to other contexts, such as other educational contexts or other relationships and networks. It would be valuable to consider other types of student cohorts and to compare their experiences with the findings of this study. Are the LSES student experiences analysed in this study consistent for LSES students who are online learners, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, or studying in metropolitan areas? Are the results the same for non-LSES students or students from non-English speaking backgrounds? Are there differences among mature-age and school leaver cohorts, or for students with disability? There are LSES students with low uptake of services, or even no knowledge of services, yet they still succeed at university – what are their critical success factors? Notwithstanding the opportunities for further research, the generated theory stands as a constructivist view of LSES student experiences in higher education and is of great importance to the ongoing development of Student Services and the understanding of LSES student experiences.

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