Conceptualising a social marketing approach to widening participation in Australian higher education

Maria M. Raciti, School of Business, University of the Sunshine Coast[1]
Cathy Cupitt, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University
Diane Costello, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University
Lynne Eagle, College of Business, Law and Governance, James Cook University

Abstract

Education is transformative. Education delivers benefits to individuals, their families and communities; and it is this far-reaching impact that compels further research into understanding why under-participation by people from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds occurs and finding new ways to attempt to assuage the situation. This paper is novel in many ways, most notably as it synthesises two similar yet different domains, being social marketing and widening participation. Drawing on a transdisciplinary body of knowledge and practices, we present a different lens through which to view the seemingly perennial issue of under-participation in higher education by people from LSES backgrounds. We present a conceptual model that reframes LSES participation in the social marketing Model of Goal-directed Behaviour. Our conceptual model provides fresh insights for use by researchers and practitioners alike.

Introduction

Both social marketing and widening participation domains seek to redress social inequalities. Social marketing addresses social issues in ways that enhance the quality of life of individuals and society as a whole (Hastings & Angus, 2012). Similarly, widening participation seeks to redress social inequalities via increasing participation in higher education by under-represented groups (Gale, 2015). This paper conceptualises a social marketing approach to widening participation, in particular framing widening participation with the Model of Goal-directed Behaviour to provide fresh insights and a potentially effective platform for interventions.

Why is participation in higher education an issue and for whom?

Widening participation in higher education (HE) has been a policy focus of the Australian Government since the release of the Bradley Review (2008). The point of this push is not merely to expand the number of people who have a higher educational qualification, but to shift the demographic of participation in HE to include those who have not traditionally had access. The ideological imperative driving this policy shift is commonly expressed via three interconnected and sometimes conflicting discourses: "social justice, social mobility and the needs of the knowledge economy" (Bowes et al., 2013, p. 9).

The Bradley Review made this ideological background explicit, by linking Australia's social progress and global economic success to the development of a highly skilled workforce, made

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up in large part by those who had not traditionally accessed higher education. This in turn would invigorate the nation's knowledge economy, increase social mobility for those with higher education, and improve social justice for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as "Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas," (2008, p. xi). Although these groups are named separately and face distinct issues, there is also considerable intersection between them, which can play out in the form of compounding disadvantages.

Equity in education is based on the goal of creating an environment in which students with experience of disadvantage can achieve the same representation within both the university student population and university graduates as there is within the broader Australian population. For instance, for students from a LSES, equity of representation would be achieved at 25% of the student population. Currently, the undergraduate enrolment share for LSES students is 17.9% in 2014, having grown from 16.3% in 2008, and which is a gain of 37,848 enrolments for this group in that period (Koshy & Seymour 2015, p. 5). These figures indicate that there has been growth in the overall numbers of students since 2008, largely due to the uncapping of places within universities. However, inequity of participation remains an issue. Students from LSES backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have shown growth in both numbers and, more modestly, in proportional share. In contrast, proportional share has decreased for students from regional and remote areas, despite the increase in enrolment numbers. Adding to the complexity, once at university, there is a further issue of inequity, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds and women under represented in elite institutions and high-status degrees (Southgate & Bennet, 2014).

While theory has been used in intervention programs in order to explain behaviour, it has seldom been used as a framework for changing behaviour (Michie et al., 2008); yet theoretically framed interventions are known to be more effective (Glanz & Bishop, 2010). Archer, Hutchings, and Leathwood (2001, cited in Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012, p. 921) argue that "widening participation strategies often fail because they are 'a-theoretical' in their approaches," in particular because they do not conceptualise the specific social and cultural factors at play. Thus, a theory-based social marketing approach which can fill these gaps offers a plausible anchor for interventions aimed at widening participation.

The potential role of social marketing in widening participation in higher education

The principle remit of social marketing is to enhance the quality of life of individuals and society as a whole (Hastings & Angus, 2012) and is a fitting framework for addressing social inequities such as under-participation in higher education (Kotler & Lee, 2008). The concept of social marketing has evolved over time from narrow and somewhat simplistic foundations, with one of the first indications of the potential for social marketing coming from the question: "why can't you sell brotherhood and rational thinking like you sell soap?" (Wiebe 1951-52, p.679). There is much evidence of the effectiveness and success of social marketing to bring about behaviour change (e.g. Quelch, 2014).

Social marketing should not be seen as a specific theory, but rather as a sector that employs specific processes drawn from a transdisciplinary range of concepts and theories, such as those validated within the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, behaviour science and communication as well from within commercial marketing. Intervention partnerships between different academic disciplines, and stakeholders with specific interest or expertise in the issue are an important feature of social marketing (Eagle, 2009).

In terms of this paper, post-compulsory education is an environment that lends itself to transdisciplinary approaches due to the importance of intrapersonal, interpersonal, organisational, community and societal influences and the multi-level interventions that will be required to address the widening participation agenda (Colditz et al., 2008). Existing educational outreach programs already address many of these factors, with the majority of programs in Australia focusing on: improving engagement and achievement at school; aspirational outreach programs to schools, families and communities; and transition and retention programs once at university (Edwards et al., 2013). The effective aspects of these programs are enhancing knowledge of the benefits of tertiary education, raising aspirations in disadvantaged communities, improving selection processes for entry to courses, financial support, and building partnerships between key stakeholders (Edwards et al., 2013).

Model of Goal-Directed Behaviour (MGB)

An extension of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the MGB links an individual's beliefs to their behaviour and has been effectively used in social marketing studies (e.g. Schuster et al., 2013). MGB highlights the key role that an individual's desire plays in driving their goal-related behaviour, with anticipated emotions of success/failure which function as determinants of desires (Perguini & Bagozzi, 2001). Overall, MGB posits that an individual's desires (comprised of their attitudes, anticipated emotions and subjective norms, which are beliefs of significant others such as parents) impacts their intentions and subsequent behaviours. An individual's desires and behaviour are also influenced by their perceived behavioural control, being their perception about the difficulty or ease of performing a particular behaviour. Finally, MGB posits that the frequency and recentness of past behaviour are also influenced by an individual's desires, intentions and behaviour (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001).

Conceptual Model: Adapting MGB for the widening participation context

The MGB was adapted for the widening participation context with the resultant conceptual model presented in Figure 1. A discussion of the method follows.
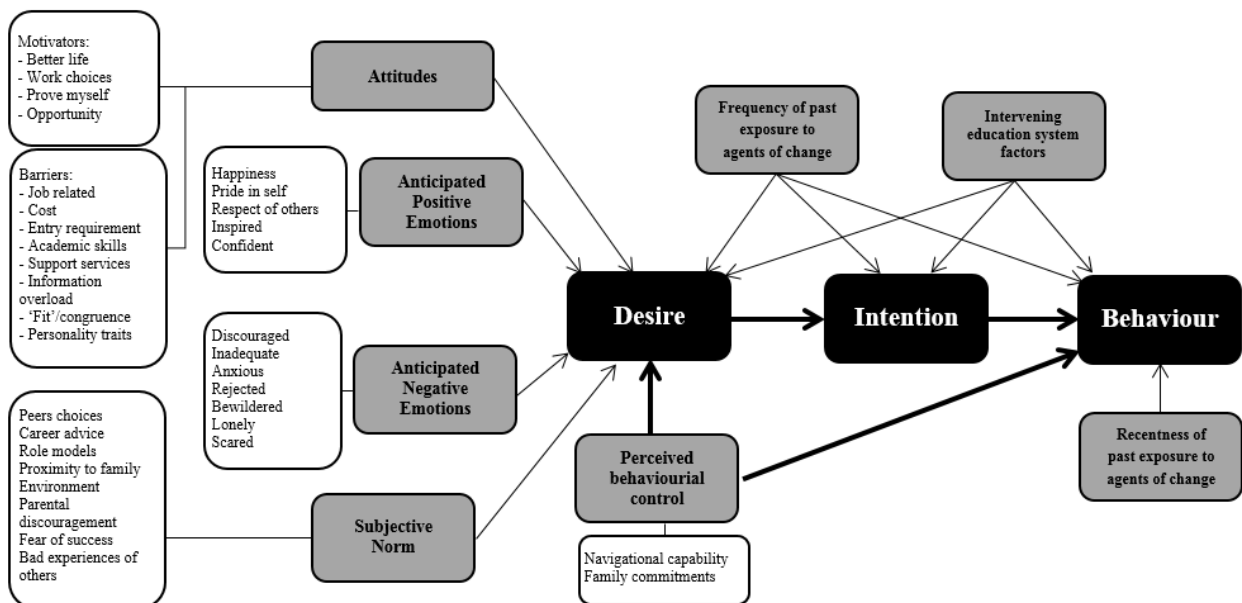
Figure 1: A conceptual model for a social marketing approach to widening participation

The conceptual model was developed via three phases. First, the extant literature about LSES non-participation in HE was distilled. Second, the MGB was adapted for the widening participation context. Modifications included reconceptualising the notion of 'past behaviour' to two elements apparent in the extant literature being a) frequency of past exposure to agents of change (such as guidance officers); and b) intervening education system factors (such as the need to go to boarding school to complete senior secondary schooling). Similarly, the MGB notion of 'recentness of past behaviour' was revised to 'recentness of exposure to agents of change', which is more relevant to the context. Finally, feedback from an expert panel comprised of four widening participation equity practitioners, three social marketing academics and two widening participation experts resulted in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

Discussion

A theoretical model which values the autonomy of participants, enables the identification of behavioural determinants and their relationships, and allows for individual, group, community and systemic levels of interventional awareness is needed to more robustly effect change when it comes to inequalities of educational access associated with systemic disadvantage. Such a model will enhance and fine-tune existing best practice in the field of widening participation. The social marketing approach taken to widening participation in the proposed conceptual model encompasses all of these variables.

The proposed conceptual model is the first phase of a larger research project. It is planned that the proposed conceptual model will be the basis for a quantitative survey that will be administered online to equity practitioners in Australia. Analysis of the survey data will examine the robustness of the model for LSES populations. Furthermore, the survey data will enable comparison and contrasting of equity practitioners' experiences with sub-populations such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people with a disability.

The intended impact of the proposed conceptual model is to promote a holistic perspective of widening participation and to encourage exploration of theories from disciplines that may have been considered removed from equity and higher education domains. In this instance, the MGB provides new lens through which equity practitioners may view their widening participation endeavours. The proposed conceptual model may help equity practitioners to develop comprehensive activities and programs as it organises the extant widening participation literature in a novel way and consolidates previously disparate aspects, such as emotions and exposure to agents of change. For example, equity practitioners may integrate into their programs that anticipating both positive and negative emotions are a part of an individual's decision making process that influences the desire to participate to higher education. Furthermore, equity practitioners may find ways to optimise the positive influences of agents of change (e.g. teachers and Elders) such as increasing the frequency and recentness of exposure to positive agents of change at critical points in the potential student's journey. Framing these exposures to a) enhance the desire for higher education, b) encourage the intention to pursue this goal and c) to participate in higher education (behaviour) would refine practices.

Audience Discussion Topics

- MBE highlights the importance of positive and negative emotions. Can you share anecdotal evidence of your experiences and observations of the role of emotions?
- Are there additional factors recommended for inclusion in the conceptual model?

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