Placing ASPIRE Outreach Officers within remote regional communities: an interim report.

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Abstract

In 2017, the ASPIRE program will trial the placement of two Outreach Officers within a remote regional NSW community. These Outreach Officers will work with a small cluster of schools and communities to increase their access to information and advice about Higher Education. This pilot is an innovative approach to widening participation work in Australia, and is informed by a modelled trialled in Greater Manchester in England. This pilot has been funded through HEPPP and will be evaluated to inform the sector of the impact this type of engagement can have on increasing access to HE advice and guidance for students from remote, regional LSES backgrounds.

Introduction

In 2017 the University of New South Wales' widening participation outreach program, ASPIRE, will trial the placement of two graduate officers within a remote regional NSW community in a pilot called *Beyond Borders*. These graduate officers will work with a cluster of eight schools and their communities to increase access to information and advice about Higher Education (HE). This pilot has been funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), as part of a National Priorities Pool targeting regional and remote students. This Applied Studies project will culminate in an interim report analysing the effectiveness and impact of the *Beyond Borders* pilot, commenting on the challenges encountered when embarking on a small yet complex outreach project. In this proposal the background to the project will be outlined followed by a discussion of relevant literature that has informed the *Beyond Borders* pilot, and explanation of the methodology proposed for the report. This report is focussed on WP for rural and remote students, and is situated with the *Students* topic area. It offers a strategy for broader social inclusion and potential to increase access to HE for LSES, rural and remote students.

Background

The *Beyond Borders* (BB) pilot is part of the ASPIRE program, UNSW's widening participation (WP) schools outreach program. ASPIRE sits within an equity and diversity unit at the university called AimHigh. The ASPIRE program began in 2007 and has been predominantly funded through the HEPPP until last year. Currently core funding for the ASPIRE program is being provided by UNSW, with several HEPPP funded projects running alongside. Following a change in government, HEPPP funds have decreased in size each year, with universities competing for grants through competitive funding rounds. BB was a successful grant proposal which targets one of the government's priority groups: regional and

remote low socioeconomic status (LSES) students. This group has been a focus of WP policy since the Review of Higher Education in Australia (known in the sector as the *Bradley Review*) (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) and is also a key target group for the core ASPIRE program.

The aims of the BB pilot program are threefold: to examine the efficacy of embedding recent university graduates as outreach project officers within regional and remote schools; to explore the scope of how such an approach can support and extend the work of an established but geographically remote widening participation program in enabling aspirations, building awareness about higher education and helping to build academic attainment; and finally, to enable individualised tailored approaches to university access barriers to be developed and implemented, and raise the visibility of universities within regional and remote communities. BB will be delivered by two graduate officers (GO1 and GO2) who were recruited in December 2016 and commenced working on the project in January (GO1) and February (GO2) 2017. Their supervisor is the Regional ASPIRE Team Leader. The GOs are based in a regional town geographically very separate from the wider ASPIRE team who are 450 kilometres away in Sydney. The eight schools they are working with in this region have been ASPIRE partner schools for the last 3 to 5 years (depending on school) and are involved with BB in addition to the core program.

The ASPIRE program offers each partner school the opportunity to engage with in-school workshops for years K to 12 as well as residential events for students in years 8, 9, 10 and 11. At the time of writing there are 14 staff employed in a variety of roles across two teams: metropolitan Sydney and regional NSW. The program has 52 partner schools and runs two "community hubs" in Western Sydney, where two project officers are based in metro Sydney communities. In addition to workshops and residential events, the program offers a range of academic enrichment activities to schools including access to faculty-run events and teacher professional development in key areas such as digital literacies and coding. The program is located within the AimHigh unit, which encompasses a range of equity programs at UNSW, including a research team. Researcher evaluation of the ASPIRE program undertaken in 2011 and 2014 (Jardine, 2017) has reported a positive impact on students, and the program is generally well-regarded within the Australian context (ibid).

Australian Widening Participation outreach programs

In response to the *Bradley Review* and with the support of HEPPP funding, many Australian universities have run WP programs for the last ten years, either as individual institutions or collaboratively with other universities (Gale & Parker, 2013). The formats for these programs vary however a review of literature and university websites suggest that the majority tend to focus on senior secondary students from LSES backgrounds as well as other target groups including Indigenous Australians, rural and remote students, and women in underrepresented areas (Austin & Heath, 2010; Gale et al., 2010; Gale & Parker, 2013; Jardine, 2017; Scull & Cuthill, 2010; Skene, Pollard, & House, 2016). WP programs have been effective at increasing the number of LSES students enrolled in HE overall (Ross, 2017), however in the current political climate HEPPP funds continue to diminish, with WP programs relying on universities for core program funding.

Despite diminished funding, a continued national priority is WP of students living in rural and remote parts of the country. This year over $4 million (AUD) of HEPPP funding was

committed to National Priority Pool programs targeting rural and remote students, including the BB pilot. The recognition of the government of the additional barriers to HE faced by rural LSES students is clear, including the educational disadvantage experienced by rural communities resulting in students testing significantly behind their metropolitan peers (Smith, 2017). As the BB pilot is located in a disadvantaged rural part of Western NSW, the rural context will add an additional layer of complexity to the project as well as its' evaluation. Indeed, there are can be significant challenges in researching rural education particularly by those who are perceived as "outsiders" or "urban elites" (Roberts & Green, 2013). However having worked with the communities for a number of years, it is hoped that there is sufficient goodwill between all stakeholders for honest dialogue to take place around the BB pilot.

The Greater Manchester Aimhigher graduate program
The Australian context is often compared to WP in England, where similarities are shared between the two countries both with regard to equity of access to HE as well as institutional similarities, for example fee structures. The BB pilot and grant application was inspired by the Aimhigher graduate program, an initiative based in Greater Manchester in England. Aimhigher was the name given to a national WP program funded by the UK government from 2004 to 2011 (Miller & Smith, 2011). The graduate officer model was established in Greater Manchester in 2009 and was a program unique to this particular location and not used elsewhere in the country (Moore, Christopoulos, Dimitriou, & Hutchinson, 2011). Similarly to BB, recent graduates were recruited for the role, which was "to provide information and advice about progression to higher education, to inspire, and encourage learners to actively progress to higher education options and support learners in accessing further sources of IAG [information, advice and guidance]" (Moore et al., 2011, p.6).

The evaluation of the Aimhigher graduate officer program found this model to be an effective way of supporting students with the aim of widening participation. Of particular value was the closeness in age recent graduates had with the students they were working with, as this gave them additional credibility as "role models" when compared with other sources of information (Moore et al., 2011). Despite their relative youth and inexperience, graduate officers performed well in a role that was "complex and requires graduate officers to operate as autonomous practitioners, juggling competing priorities and? expectations" (Moore et al., 2011, p.16). However, these authors also reported difficulties in evaluating the WP programs' effectiveness, both on its own and within the wider context of the Aimhigher program. Evaluation of the BB pilot (and the wider ASPIRE program within which it sits) is also problematic and shares similarities with the evaluation attempts of the UK's Aimhigher. Whilst many positive examples and success stories can be provided, the program "cannot provide a consistent body of evidence (in 'new orthodox' terms) which shows target pupils progressing into HE as a direct result of its interventions, largely because of competing or parallel schemes and the fact that specific targets and ways of measuring impact were not built in sufficiently from the start" (Doyle & Griffin, 2012, p.78). A conclusion sentence is warranted here – noting the challenges, and how this shapes your study.

This interim report will be focused on investigating the following research questions:
1. What have been the challenges in adopting a flipped, non-traditional outreach approach and, at this point in time (halfway through the pilot), is the program perceived to be effective?
2. What are some of the management issues that have arisen and how have they been overcome?

To answer these questions, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with the two GOs (either face-to-face if possible or over the phone), as well as other key stakeholders such as the ASPIRE Director, Operations Manager, school staff and Principals (subject to participants' availability). The interview questions will be semi structured, and solicit data from participants regarding their:

- Involvement to date with the project
- Perspectives regarding what has worked, and what needs improvement, in both the operational and management of the project
- Perceptions and evidence of interim impact of the project
- Beliefs regarding the project's momentum and likely long term impact.

After collection the data will be analysed using Yin's (2016) five phases of analysis for qualitative data. The research will adhere to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. As such, all participants will be over 18 years of age, they will be not personally identified in the research, their participation will be voluntary at all times, and the research will be of a non-sensitive and non-confrontational nature.

Expected findings

As an interim evaluation the success of the pilot overall will not be ascertained at this stage. Part-way through the project, many activities and milestones are yet to be delivered, the outcomes of which will remain unknown at least until later in the year. The WP sector is notoriously difficult to evaluate due to the difficulty in collecting data, the longitudinal nature of most programs, and the difficulty in attributing access to HE to WP programs when a number of other factors are also at play (Doyle & Griffin, 2012; Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013). However it is expected that there will be findings around some of the successes and difficulties in implementing the pilot thus far. These will most likely include and elaborate on:

- some of the challenges involved with the physical remoteness of the pilot location from the core program,
- engaging stakeholders in the communities,
- time management and allocation issues with the program of two staff being shared across eight schools,
- starting behind schedule due to recruitment turnaround times
- effectively tailoring programs to suit target cohorts
- staff as recent university graduates acclimatising to full-time work
- government KPIs as set in the Conditions of Grant

Questions and issues for audience discussion

- Has anyone in the audience had experience with a similar program and if so, can they please explain the program and share some learnings/experiences?
- Are there any issues with this pilot that have not been considered or discussed so far?
- Is this a model that others feel might be applicable to their context/work? How could you see this working for you?
- The employment of recent graduates is a key aspect of the pilot. What are your thoughts on this and any experiences to share on the effectiveness of using role models to increase student access to HE information, advice and guidance?

- Groupwork: audience will work in groups to brainstorm challenges that might arise in the pilot as well as possible solutions.

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