

# Good Practice Report

## UNSW ASPIRE / Aspire UWA: A look back and look forward.

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### Abstract

*While the national equity agenda was established in the 1990s under “A Fair Chance for All” little headway was made in addressing underrepresentation of equity groups until the Bradley Review. As a result of this review universities across Australia established outreach programs to widen access and participation of students underrepresented in higher education. Outreach programs take different shapes and forms and are tailored to their context, yet often have the same underlying objectives and therefore similar core components. In this good practice report we examine the development of two programs that grew out of the Government focus to widen participation in higher education post Bradley. ASPIRE UNSW and Aspire UWA initially benchmarked and established similar frameworks and went on to develop into different programs adapted to their geographical contexts. The report will discuss commonalities and differences and examine the outcomes and learnings of both programs.*

### Introduction/Background

Widening access and participation in higher education has been on the national agenda for almost thirty years, with the *A Fair Chance for All* Report setting a clear policy agenda and focus on six equity target groups which are still in place today (Australia Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). The report also put the onus on universities to take responsibility for ensuring their institutions are accessible and reflect the demographics of our country (Jardine, 2016). However, it took the 2008 Review into Australian Higher Education (referred to as the *Bradley Review*) to see the Government commit significant funding that meant institutions could and did implement major initiatives purposely designed to raise awareness, aspiration and capacity of students from underrepresented groups in higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Skene, Pollard & House, 2016). The Australian Group of 8 research-intensive universities responded with an equity strategy which influenced the scale, shape and direction of initiatives at these highly selective universities (Montesin, Caruana, Ashley, & Mackay, 2009). The commitment included tailored programs for the most disadvantaged groups that focussed on relationships with schools and communities (Skene *et al.*, 2016).

With some initial seed funding and this context of renewed energy to widen participation, The University of New South Wales (UNSW) had already formed the beginnings of UNSW

ASPIRE with small scale relationships with two partner schools in metropolitan Sydney. The initial program design and model was heavily influenced by work well underway in this space in the UK through the English Aimhigher initiative (Jardine, 2016). However, it was the injection of funding following the *Bradley Review* that saw these humble beginnings transform into a significant multifaceted initiative addressing the underrepresentation of students from low socioeconomic cohorts in higher education working with students in metropolitan and regional and remote areas across New South Wales. A key difference was also the opportunity for 3-year funding rounds (as opposed to previous annual allocations) that meant for the first time a longitudinal approach could be confidently established (Jardine, 2016). On the other side of the country, the same funding opportunity and context saw The University of Western Australia (UWA) take on the challenge in the even more vast and sparsely populated state of Western Australia.

### **Building Aspirations and Awareness – the early days**

Both the UNSW and UWA programs took an evidence-based approach in developing their approach. Examining the longer standing widening participation programs of others, particularly Aimhigher, both programs were able to use their learnings while developing initiatives that took into consideration the Australian context. Underpinned by a learning framework first developed in England (Action on Access 2008) the programs have set out to address the enabling of aspirations, the building of awareness of university cultures and the support of academic attainment. To do this the programs have addressed key barriers identified as preventing students from low SES communities in going to university. They have also built specific strategies to engage successfully with students living across large geographical regions within each state. As a result, the programs took on the core elements of: on campus experiences at key stages with residential components for regional and remote students; working in schools with age appropriate workshops; and whole school engagement across all age groups.

Although situated on either side of the continent UNSW ASPIRE and Aspire UWA were able to support and help each other in the growth of both programs. Collaboration began with discussions at the Director level in the formation of the programs. This was followed by several team visits into remote and regional schools in the other state, to both learn from and contribute ideas, and take home new perspectives. These informal and formal benchmarking and review activities have resulted in close collaboration that has enabled learnings from each context to be shared and as a result the two programs to be strengthened.

### **Program Philosophy and Delivery**

Emerging from a similar robust evidence base and building on a collaborative approach between outreach staff at UNSW and UWA, it is unsurprising that the two programs have strong commonalities. These are reflected in the widening participation activities that form the core components of the work with students. The similarities of the two programs can also be retrospectively mapped to the Equity Initiatives Framework (Bennett et.al. 2015), which was built upon the Critical Interventions Framework (Naylor, Baik & James 2013) and identifies

effective equity initiatives along the higher education continuum. These will be described in the following sections.

### *Long term school partnerships*

Key to the success of the programs has been the approach taken with partner schools. In both NSW and WA the approach taken has been longitudinal and sustained. Schools that can be clearly identified as disadvantaged have been partnered with over a number of years. This enables a holistic and in-depth approach to be undertaken across all school years. The underlying strategy of working with the whole school is to build social capital at a community level. While there is a significant body of widening participation evidence (Eg Moore Sanders & Higham 2013, Doyle & Griffith 2012) that supports such a longitudinal and sustained way of working, such intensive support means that the number of schools that can be taken on as partners is restricted. Schools have recognised the benefits of the programs and have been keen to stay as long-term partners; there is also no shortage of schools wishing to join either program.

### *Major principles and aims*

Guiding the actual learning experiences are the learning frameworks that both programs have developed. These frameworks enable a robust educational approach where outcomes are clearly articulated, experiences are age appropriate and build learnings year on year. The frameworks assist outcomes to be achieved while also enabling flexibility in the content of the actual activities that are delivered. As such they provide a clear basis for outreach across many contexts and have resulted in the core programs delivered in each school being tailored for individual situations.

### *Funding and expenditure*

Another commonality across the lives of the programs has been funding sources. The development of the two programs has been mirrored by similar external funding streams which enabled the regional work in particular to grow and thrive. In the formation of the programs, this was significant Federal Government funding through long-term competitive grants, but as this turned into smaller annual allocations and more restrictive short-term grant opportunities, the majority of costs have been covered by the two Universities themselves. The willingness of the institutions to continue to invest in the programs demonstrates the impact and value placed upon outreach and widening participation. To support and drive innovation, the programs have also continued to seek additional external funding. Both programs have won annual Federal grants to pilot innovative program ideas, and UWA has been able to expand the program to additional schools by securing corporate philanthropic support.

Stemming in part from the external funding won by each program and the strengths within the two universities, both programs have developed additional strands outside the core. The strands all address important aspects of social capital that assist students to make the choice to go to university and illustrate that there is no one model to widen participation.

### *Key program types*

Core to both programs are the workshops that are undertaken in partner schools across age groups and the on-campus activities coupled with a residential experience for regional and remote students at key stages of their high school experience. The involvement of university students as relevant role models with credibility with young people is recognised as an

important part of the widening participation work. Where possible the university students have come from the partner schools or communities. Such involvement is relatively easy with on campus activities. However, taking students out into regional areas has been challenging for both UNSW and UWA. This is due to both the cost and the time out of study. In addition it can be challenging to identify potential student ambassadors from partner schools where very few students are enrolled at the institution.

At both UWA and UNSW, a strand around explicit career development was developed and has been embedded into all workshops and activities. With Aspire UWA, this approach was designed and piloted through a federally funded project. Understanding regional employability trends and providing relevant career advice ensures students are able to make the important link between school, university and a career. Both universities have built partnerships with corporations and industry and taken students into different workplaces, to expose them to the range of different career options and introduce them to graduates. At UNSW this has also extended to work experience opportunities.

Another strand has centred on the provision of academic enrichment in STEM subjects. The provision of STEM is a particular challenge for regional and remote schools due to the paucity of resources. It is known that on average students from regional and remote areas lag behind their metropolitan peers in terms of attainment in key areas and that students from low socio-economic (SES) areas lag behind their higher SES peers (Thomson De Bortoli & Underwood 2017). Both programs developed bespoke STEM workshops supporting the development of numeracy and underpinning STEM skills before critical decision making milestones for upper secondary school. At UNSW workshops are aimed at upper primary and lower high school stages, while UWA's workshops are focussed on lower high school. Both universities also complement workshops with professional development opportunities for teachers.

The third strand has involved the development of mentoring programs. There is evidence that such programs can be very successful in widening participation (Moore Sanders & Higham 2013) and can help connect regional students with university students. UNSW has successfully piloted both online and face to face programs using UNSW staff and students as mentors. In addition, both programs have since establishment engaged university students from the partner schools, connecting them into programs whenever possible as role models. Whilst UWA has developed this into a strong Ambassador program, there has not been the ability to translate this into a formal mentoring program. The additional distance to and between partner schools makes connecting mentors and students challenging.

From those early beginnings with a handful of partner schools, each university now has over 50 partner schools engaging well over 10,000 students per year. The similarity of the additional strands developed by each program is reflective of the strong commitment of each to engage with national and international widening participation research. Each program is also committed to developing, adopting and delivering innovative programs by learning both from each other and other outreach programs across Australia.

#### *Differences between the two programs*

The commonalities between UNSW ASPIRE and Aspire UWA have developed through the evidence base underpinning them and the collaboration between the two. However there are also clear divergences, particularly in the delivery of the programs to regional, rural and remote schools. These can be traced to the geographical contexts of NSW and WA and the strategies

that have been able to be employed in the much smaller regional and remote scale of NSW compared to the vast distances of WA.

At UNSW, a community-based model has been put in place with regional and remote schools. Wherever possible UNSW ASPIRE works with all schools in an area, including local primary and high schools. As such there is a strong primary component to the widening participation work which reflects the evidence (eg Croll 2004, OFFA & HEFCE 2014) that such work needs to begin at an early age. Coupled with this has been the piloting of embedding part of the project team in a community, enabling work with students in a number of schools to take place across the school year rather than just when the central team visits. An expanding outcome of embedding members of the team has been the partnerships that have emerged with other community groups such as ASPIRE led school holiday programs. The smaller geographical area of NSW has also enabled UNSW ASPIRE to build in more residential type experiences across the high school years by alternating such events between a regional centre and Sydney.

In contrast, UWA has adopted a wheel and spoke model of regional engagement. This model was developed due to necessity: the distance between schools means there is no central regional location where activities can be held, and the cost of travel for large numbers of students is prohibitive. In-school visits to individual schools allows for engagement across the whole school community. Core program workshops for secondary school students are delivered at all schools, with activities for primary school students delivered at District High Schools. Residential camps for students in Years 9 and 11 provide intensive engagement on-campus for a smaller number of students and teachers.

## **Evaluation and Impact**

The evaluation of outreach programs can be an interesting conundrum. While it has proved difficult at a global level to establish clear causal links between outreach activities and access to university, there are methods that can be employed to evaluate the outcomes. UNSW and UWA have established evaluation frameworks that are regularly reassessed in terms of fit for purpose and are used to constantly assess the programs in order that relevant informed changes can be made. Evaluation methods utilised by both programs are informed by best-practice within the sector in accordance with the Equity Initiatives Framework (Bennett et.al. 2015), including:

- Assessing learning framework outcomes against the activities
- Measuring attitudinal shifts in students towards going to university
- Obtaining qualitative feedback from school partners and student alumni from partner schools and the universities
- Monitoring annual quantitative data related to applications and offers to university and offers and enrolment in UNSW or UWA
- Regular external reviews undertaken by subject matter experts.

Such a broad evaluation framework captures important measures and can inform the programs' overall impact on the diverse range of stakeholders. By incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research measures, there is an opportunity for gaining both research evaluation and ongoing program feedback. Evaluation provides insights into specific cohorts and the factors that influence aspirations and choices for post-compulsory schooling. Program feedback

provides the teams with immediate insight into the effectiveness of activities, informs development and highlights current needs of partner schools. Both the UWA and UNSW programs have been able to adapt and respond based on such feedback, and develop longer term strategies informed by evaluation.

Both programs aim to raise aspirations for university rather than specifically recruit students to their institution. Internal institution application and enrolment data is in most cases readily available, especially for school leavers, however, it is more difficult to get accurate data reflective of broader applications and enrolments. State-based university application centres capture some data, however there are sector-wide gaps in information about student pathways, particularly those who enrol in private universities, travel interstate for their studies or access university via alternative pathways, including as mature age students.

One measure of impact is the number of offers to university received by students from partner schools. In both cases the programs can track higher growths in offer rates when compared with control schools as well as a growth in the range of degrees where offers are received. This success stands out in a national context where there is a current and predicted trend of stagnation in higher education participation (Noonan & Pilcher, 2018). In addition, there are fewer students applying to university through direct entry processes using the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Anecdotal evidence from students and schools suggests that recent government proposals and negative media coverage regarding universities have had a significant detrimental impact on students' intentions for higher education. Fewer students are taking ATAR subjects, opting instead for vocational pathways or taking alternative pathways to access university.

A constant tension in the evaluation of widening participation programs is the desire to see short-term impact and direct correlation between outreach and university enrolments; and the reality of the long-term nature of the work. This desire for short-term impact is particularly prevalent in the tighter fiscal environment of reduced federal funding and the economic rationality of universities. This is coupled with a broader focus on measuring social impact and availability of external funding opportunities. This tension is highlighted when programs engage with younger students, for whom any potential data on university applications and enrolments are not available for many years.

## **Learnings and Future Directions**

In the development of the two programs across the years there have been a number of learnings that can be applied broadly within the widening participation sphere.

The success of the Aspire programs at UWA and UNSW are owed in part to the initial longer-term federal funding grants, and significantly to the institutions for adopting and embedding outreach as an important and significant component of their student equity commitment. There continues to be entrenched educational disadvantage for groups of students in accessing higher education, so there is more work to be done. Regional and remote outreach is, in particular, very expensive yet absolutely imperative if higher education is to be accessible across this vast and sparsely populated country. There needs to be a strong and long-term commitment to outreach particularly in regional and remote areas from Government and all universities. This can and should be supported with industry partnerships.

The importance of collaboration can also not be underestimated. The formation and joint benchmarking of these programs have continued to support excellence and drive innovation. By working together, significant professional development opportunities have helped staff at all levels in both programs step back and reflect on the purpose and impact of the work being undertaken and risk trying new things. Utilising a strong evidence-based approach, similar building blocks for the programs were developed, trialled and tailored in their unique environments, and learnings shared across the country. Bennett *et al.* (2015) articulated the core underpinning principles, aims and key program elements of equity initiatives across the student lifecycle, which unsurprisingly these two programs can be retrospectively mapped to. This tool will allow universities across the country to easily compare and contrast their outreach initiatives for the benefit of providing relevant and meaningful engagement for students.

With these core underpinning elements, specific program design can then take local contexts into consideration. One size does not fit all especially when managing the tyranny of distance. The size, shape and composition of communities differs substantially and impacts the design of each outreach program. Pollard (2018) highlighted the importance of knowing your students by demonstrating the masking of remote students when regional and remote cohorts are considered as one group. By understanding our students we can tailor and support distinct cohorts and the different ways students from equity backgrounds aspire to and access higher education.

Being flexible and innovative has kept these programs relevant and will see them continuing to evolve into the future. Australia is currently in a place of reflection and redefinition of what equity in higher education means going forward. The Bradley Review set clear targets for participation of equity groups by 2020, and progress has been made, however, there is more work to be done. In this context, a new vision for Equity 2030 has been developed by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, and the federal government is reviewing the equity groups that were outlined 30 years ago to ensure funding and focus is directed to where it is needed. With the Equity Initiatives Framework and subsequent Equity Initiatives Map (Zacharias 2017), there is also an opportunity for further collaboration and sharing of best practice, by aligning reporting and evaluation across the country.

ASPIRE UNSW has been going for over a decade and UWA are celebrating their tenth year. With this longevity we can meet the students who have benefitted – those that the programs inspired and supported to access Higher Education and who have now completed the studies they first participated in. We can understand where they are at today and their journeys, and use this knowledge to help the next generation of students coming through. Over the last decade positive gains have been made in terms of participation of equity groups in higher education, yet there is still more work to be done. We can refine and make more significant gains by learning where we have come from and recognising where we are going.

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