

LEAP Imagine That! Access, agency, and inspiration

Rajindri De Silva, Widening Participation Unit, Macquarie University, Carolina Morison, Widening Participation Unit, Macquarie University, Penny Van Bergen, School of Education, Macquarie University.

Abstract

Widening participation efforts in higher education have traditionally been concentrated at stages of transition into the senior years of high school and pre-university-entry. At this point, however, high school students have often already formulated future career options and notions of self. To inspire future Higher Education (HE) participation among a diverse range of students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the “LEAP Imagine That!” initiative is designed for children in primary school. LEAP Imagine That! is a multi-faceted and interactive program that engages Australian primary school students in years 3 – 6, in explorations of the arrays of future selves available to them. Drawing on theories of child psychology, it facilitates early exposure to the possibilities of HE. By empowering children with a range of future pathways to success, the program aims to disrupt well documented associations between socio-economic disadvantage and under-participation in higher education.

Background

Following the implementation of the Australian Government’s Higher Education Partnership and Participation Program (HEPPP) and expansion of the widening participation in higher education agenda, many beneficial engagement programs have emerged to enhance students’ educational aspirations (Singh & Tregale, 2015). Most, however, are concentrated at pre-university-entry and senior transition stages (Raciti & Dale, 2019; Gale et al., 2011). Recent research highlights the potential for additional interventions delivered at an earlier learning stage: that is, prior to decisions surrounding subject selections, HE, and future career pathways (Raciti & Dale, 2019; Gale et al., 2011). Such interventions should encourage students to be creative in imagining their potential futures and considering the breadth of their potential scope: thereby promoting motivation and goal setting and increasing the visibility of opportunities available to all young people (Fleming & Grace, 2015; Harrison & Waller, 2018).

Description of Initiative

LEAP Imagine That! is a Macquarie University widening participation initiative designed to engage learners in years 3 - 6 in interactive explorations of their possible future selves. Building on developmental psychology literature, which highlights the role of self-perceptions and self-efficacy in children’s future educational outcomes, the initiative seeks to:

1. Contribute evidence of practice in support of the literature on the engagement of younger learners in the ideation of future possible selves, and
2. Explore the impact of play-based curriculum to enhance younger learners’ aspirations to pursue diverse learning pathways and careers.

LEAP Imagine That! is a play-based program delivered across four lessons. Each lesson engages students in age-appropriate, team-based activities that support the importance of the self as an independent entity able to experience a myriad of imagined potentialities. Through these potentialities, learners are encouraged to identify and articulate their own skills, strengths, and interests, and to consider their application across a range of social contexts: both real and imagined. By embedding pathway information within these play scenarios, *LEAP Imagine That!* aims to encourage young learners to consider higher education as a key to success: enabling the aspirations of self-determined individuals.

In engaging with educational imaginaries, students can “imagine oneself and one’s future in different ways, [which] plays a major role in the attainment of these futures – especially for those who lack physical, familial or ‘lived’ experiences with those futures” (Fleming & Grace, 2015, p. 353).

Implementing such a targeted initiative with younger learners is not only aligned with the literature but is also timely given the contemporary impacts of COVID-19 on social and economic environments. The longevity of disruption caused by COVID-19 is yet unknown, and it is vital that young learners are empowered with viable sources of information that inspire aspirations to participate in future learning pathways.

Questions for audience discussion

1. How can initiatives better support and engage with students from early in their learning through to periods of critical decision making?
2. How can early engagement with students be supported through the middle years of schooling (years 7 – 9)?
3. How can we enhance our engagement of parents and carers to reinforce concepts of possible selves that encourage student learner identities and self-efficacy?

References

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