

Does access equal success? The critical role of the FYE in achieving equity in Higher Education

Judy Skene, The University of Western Australia
Sarah Evamy, The University of Western Australia

Widening access is a topical subject in Australian Higher Education (HE) forums. Students from low Socio-Economic Status (low SES) backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from rural and remote Australia are under-represented and the percentage has stayed static or declined in recent years (James 2007). The Bradley Review of Higher Education released in June 2008 challenges the Federal Government and the HE sector to address this imbalance, through increased funding and institutional targets.

The First Year Experience is a chief battleground where the contest to widen access will be lost or won. Gaining admission is only the first step: providing comprehensive support in First Year is equally important in ensuring retention and success. This paper addresses the challenges of widening access in a research-intensive university and provides a case study of a successful transition program that for 21 years has supported students under-represented in its student population.

Widening access in Australian Higher Education

Widening access is a topical subject in educational policy in 2009. Social inclusion is an important policy platform of the Rudd Government and unsurprisingly, education is viewed as a key driver. One of the government's first initiatives on attaining office was to commission a Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR 2008). Referred to as the Bradley Review after its chair, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia Professor Denise Bradley, the Review rightly notes the unacceptably low participation rates of students from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds, Indigenous students and rural and remote students. For some groups, participation rates have declined in recent years. These students are particularly under-represented in Group of Eight (Go8) research-intensive universities. A lack of progress in improving representation of disadvantaged students characterises the experience in the HE sector, despite the efforts of dedicated individuals over the past two decades.

What can be done about this seemingly intractable problem and how does the First Year Experience (FYE) play a part? The solutions required to overturn structural disadvantage are complex and begin far beyond the gateways of tertiary institutions. The focus in this paper is educational disadvantage but that is only one small piece of the problem. Educational disadvantage can be entrenched from birth, but certainly intervening with quality education programs from pre-primary onwards is a first step in redressing it. The unequal outcomes for school leavers resulting from Australia's increasingly stratified secondary education system

constrain disadvantaged students' post-secondary choices, assuming they have finished Year 12. The same disadvantage impacts to varying degrees on their ability to succeed at first if they do gain entry to university.

Universities cannot compensate for years of disadvantage through their admissions policies alone, but neither can they claim that the solutions lie elsewhere. Universities have a social responsibility to provide opportunities for capable students from across all spheres of Australian society. The Go8 universities have competitive entry processes, largely based on the equivalent of a Tertiary Entry Ranking (TER), a score determined by students' final year of secondary schooling or performance as mature-age entrants. The impact of disadvantage on academic achievement is reflected in the low numbers of students from disadvantaged groups that gain admission to Go8 universities. Reliance on the TER solely as the criterion for admission entrenches the advantage of prospective students from well resourced school and family backgrounds. James (2007) has argued that the admissions policies of elite universities have remained resilient to large scale changes in entry criteria and new strategies must be found to select capable students. But the admissions exercise is just part of the picture. In admitting students, our responsibility then rests in ensuring a quality experience and support networks that will ensure the best likelihood of success. As Vince Tinto (2008) observed,

It is simply not enough to provide low-income students access to our universities and colleges and claim we are providing opportunity if we do not construct environments that support their efforts to learn and succeed beyond access. Simply put, access without support is not opportunity.

Herein lies the challenge for all those in universities responsible for the quality of the First Year Experience.

The role of the First Year in ensuring equity outcomes through improved retention

The First Year Experience is, like the topic of widening access, a contested site. Although a wealth of research already exists, translating that knowledge into practice to ensure retention and quality of the student experience remains a challenge. Our capacity to successfully widen participation is intricately connected with our ability to provide an enabling environment for diverse students to ensure transition and progress to second year (Kift 2008). Evidence suggests that if we retain low SES students through first year, they will have high chance of completing their degree (DEEWR 2008:30).

The goal of widening access in the Go8 universities offers particular challenges. Attracting the brightest and the best is central to the mission of research institutions, both to build future research and leadership capacity and to stake a claim for quality (as measured by TER) of the student body. High status ensures an environment of competitive entry, as students make choices for institutional preference based on prestige and how that translates into future employment opportunities. Indirectly these are factors that contribute to success in international ranking system, the most reputable of which is the Shanghai Jiao Tong. Higher rankings raises prestige, attracts the top students, staff and research dollars and creates high demand for entry: universities need a transparent and defensible admissions process to justify selection processes. Reliance on the TER, however, overlooks the fact that in Australia, the unequal outcomes from a segregated secondary schooling system reflect the case that a competitive TER is often a signifier of privilege.

Universities whose admissions policies are wedded to TER as the best predictor of success in tertiary study, find it difficult to acknowledge a competing discourse of valuing diversity. This may even occur despite their own institutional research that confirms that students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds may perform better in their first year than other students (Edwards 2008), as in the Monash study by Dobson and Skuja (2005) and University of Western Australia researchers Birch and Miller (2006) and Win and Miller (2005). These studies though, often still compare students whose TERs are in the lower percentiles for a Go8 with the top-ranking students at that institution. The institutional response to widening access then is often to compete for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are in the top 20 per cent, offering scholarships and limited flexible entry pathways to fit those students within the existing institutional culture.

Changing institutional structure to create the necessary conditions for success for diverse students requires investment of considerable resources in staffing, course design and support services. With competitive entry, Go8 universities can make assumptions about the academic preparation of their commencing students: they will have high level English competency, sound IT skills and the required subject prerequisites. Most Go8 universities have not invested heavily in bridging programs, foundational units, numeracy and IT skills workshops and other types of academic support. If students are admitted without adequate academic preparation to a high-achieving environment without appropriate supports, there is a high risk that many will fail. That strategy is morally indefensible because those students who do fail will then have a HECS debt and their self-esteem may be permanently damaged.

This is not to argue that Go8s should not act to widen access: they must, but with strategies that give students the best chance to succeed. The debate in Australia on widening access, generated by the Bradley Review, is in danger of being polarized and limited in its utility to effect change. It will require political will and substantial ongoing funding, guaranteed over at least ten years, to affect a permanent increase in the percentage of low SES students completing degrees from the current rate of 14-15 per cent to the proposed target of 20 per cent. In an address at the launch of a new National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education in February 2009, the Director, Trevor Gale, noted that 'the sector was characterised by conflict rather than consensus over excellence and equity' (Gale 2009). There is consensus that our national record on student equity is not good enough but at present there is a climate of blame that focuses on the inadequate record of the Go8s and insufficient focus on the complexities of the problem and the fact that improvement will require sophisticated strategies that acknowledge institutional differences and apply appropriate targets and incentives. For some, that will demand increased access, for others improved retention and for all, identifying what works and where that can be expanded or duplicated. Longer term, sustained outreach that encourages tertiary aspirations in communities where this goal has not been a focus, will be necessary. To be successful in improving equity outcomes nationally, all universities will need to focus on the First Year Experience because it is critical to improved retention.

Improving retention through transition support: a case study in a Go8 university

Transition support will be most effective if it is tailored to the institutional context and

responsive to local conditions. The UniSkills program discussed here has developed over the past 22 years in response to student feedback and student need (Skene 2003). The program is an integral part of a broader institutional strategy for student access and equity. This is articulated in the University Strategic Operational Priorities Plan (Education section) and reported annually in the Institutional Assessment Framework – Equity to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Reform. Details of each university's equity strategies can be accessed from their website: <http://www.dest.gov.au/Search.htm?query=Insttutinal%20Assessment%20Framework>

In reflecting on the effectiveness of providing support for First Year, there has been much valuable work on the role of the curriculum (Kift 2008). For many students, the classroom is the key site where they can access support. Sally Kift's principles of best practice in First Year curriculum design provide a comprehensive model which if adopted universally across an institution would provide students with the skills, knowledge and support they need to make a successful transition. In practice however, implementing such principles is uneven and within devolved institutions, some teaching areas will be better resourced and able to provide more support than others. For this reason, a centrally located program open to all First Year students provides, in the words of one of the students, a 'life raft' to complement curriculum.

The UniSkills program is located in Student Services and works within a partnership model in the Diversity and Transition Group and with faculty colleagues to support students in its target groups at The University of Western Australia (UWA). It is a year-long transition program for commencing undergraduates. It was recognised by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council program award in the category of the First Year Experience in 2008.

Institutional context

UWA is a medium-sized university renowned for having the youngest undergraduate student population in Australia, of whom approximately 82 per cent enrol directly from secondary school annually. The University had 8.8 per cent low SES students enrolled in 2007; 8.1 per cent rural and 2.5 % per cent remote students (UWA data from DEST student data collections). Indigenous students were 1.46 per cent of total enrolments but concentrated in Medicine, Dentistry and Law, due to successful bridging programs into these disciplines. The University is centrally located and surrounded by the most affluent suburbs in Perth. The impact of campus location on student demographics was highlighted by Richard James (2009) in *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, contributing to the debate that postcodes are ineffective indicators of SES status. He pointed out the difficulties universities located in high SES suburbs face in attracting a diverse cohort, whether they are Go8 or not. The University of Canberra has the lowest enrolment of low SES students nationally because Canberra does not have any postcodes classified as low SES even though there are financially disadvantaged students living in Canberra.

Location is a barrier for students from poorer, outer metropolitan suburbs, who face long commutes each day to class, if they chose to enrol at UWA. Time commuting is time away from effective study or paid employment and travel costs also impact. Geographical context is also important when thinking about solutions to improving rural access. Western Australia is a vast and sparsely populated state and rural students often have to relocate huge distances to attend

university as the state has few regional campuses. It is expensive, and adjusting to a large city, a different climate zone and isolation from home are factors facing rural students. Rents in Perth increased sharply over the past five years of strong economic growth and finding suitable accommodation is a potential barrier for many rural WA students. Many find themselves facing financial hardship and renting a considerable distance from campus.

History of the development of the UniSkills program

UniSkills, as an equity programme, developed within the context of the national equity framework, first formalised in the discussion paper *A Fair Chance for All* (NBEET, 1990). This document was ground-breaking in establishing a national equity framework that won international recognition (Universities Australia 2008: 13). UniSkills, as the then Targeted Student Support Program (TSSP), pre-dates this framework, identifying already in 1987 most of the social groups disadvantaged in prior educational opportunity and providing additional support to help establish a positive and enduring connection with their new learning community. TSSP ran as a pilot program for 30 students in 1987, in response to a need identified by the senior Counsellor. The pilot was so successful that ongoing funding was sought to maintain and grow the program. Today, UniSkills is the latest manifestation of the program, which changed from TSSP to the Transition Support Program (TSP) in 1994 and then to UniSkills in 2007. Universities Australia's (2008) wide-ranging report, *Participation and Equity* notes the importance of providing support throughout transition. Indeed, the case study chosen as an example, although not acknowledged, is the UniSkills program (p65), drawn from information provided by UWA in a national survey for the report.

The key equity groups identified by Lin Martin in 1994 in her paper *Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education* (known as the Martin Indicators) which were reaffirmed in the 2004 Commonwealth government HEEP review are:

- Low Socio-Economic Status (Low SES)
- Indigenous
- Rural and Remote
- Student with Disabilities and Medical Conditions
- Student from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB)
- Women in non-traditional areas of study

These remain the target groups for recruitment of UniSkills cohort, although the primary contact for Indigenous students at UWA is the School of Indigenous Studies.

In 2007, membership was expanded to include international students because many faced a challenging transition to first year study. The paper, 'Loneliness and International students' (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008) noted that although same-culture friendship groups were important havens for international students, establishing networks with Australian students was integral to their enjoyment of student life but creating those friendship opportunities was not easy. UniSkills had already in 2006 moved to attract additional funding to include international students in the program. Previously, equity funding dictated a focus on local equity group students. In 2008 UniSkills had 480 members and 21 per cent of the UniSkills cohort was international students, from 22 different countries. A number of international students in the program have taken on leadership roles, which benefits all students as they develop their

cultural awareness and diversify their friendship networks.

Thanks for all the time and effort you all put into making me feel so comfortable and welcomed in a new country I had never been to before. Really appreciate it. (UniSkills Online survey 2007)

Features of the UniSkills program

UniSkills recruits at time of offer writing to all students from any rural school, under-represented local school, student who has identified with a disability, mature age student or alternative pathway student who has received an offer. Recruitment continues at Enrolment when UniSkills leaders greet commencing students and encourage them to join if eligible. International students are emailed in Week 1 in case any arrived after enrolment week. Students apply online and tend to self-select, having read the eligibility criteria on the website. They can choose to join at any time of the year and faculty staff and Student Services staff often refer students. Any student facing a difficult transition is accepted. Through this recruitment process, the University is able to offer immediate and ongoing support to all its students who might be considered 'at risk'.

The success of the program is evident in its longevity and the steadily increasing size of the cohort. The comprehensive nature of the program is one factor: it offers a two-day orientation, Flying Start, with overnight option in a residential college, giving students the chance to make friends and acquaint themselves with campus.

Loved meeting the leaders –they helped me learn at a personal level, what it's like to be at and study at UWA. Loved meeting fellow new students –I'll have a familiar face at the first lectures. I thoroughly enjoyed the program. It has made me feel so welcome, and important! (Flying Start orientation participant 2006)

Once semester starts, members can enrol in peer-assisted study groups led by a senior student, in any unit that they request. The value of peer-assisted study as a learning technique is well recognised and the pedagogy widely adopted in the past five years in Australian universities (Morrison 2007). UniSkills has provided its study group program for the past 18 years. The group leader has achieved a High Distinction in the unit and has been recruited from UniSkills' previous cohorts, so that they are from similarly diverse backgrounds. The leader's role is to facilitate the group but they also act as mentors and encourage the important friendships that develop from meeting regularly as a small group with shared goals. In 2008 more than 40 groups ran each semester across all faculties. In the past two years at UWA, three faculties have set up some study groups in first year subjects. UniSkills helped train faculty study group leaders and shared resources and continues to offer groups in units not supported through faculties. Evaluation of study groups each semester elicits comments such as 'Really enlightening stuff! More productive than the last 3 hours I spent on Facebook...Thanks!' (Human Biology Study group participant 2008) and 'She knew so much about Philosophy and was so amazingly well organized. She really helped in pointing out other valuable resources, and really cared.' (Philosophy study group participant 2008)

Richard Light (2001), in his study of Harvard students, observed that much valuable learning occurred beyond the classroom. UniSkills encourages these interactions through weekly events. It may be a BBQ, or a two hour brunch with some muffins and coffee and the chance to just drop in for a few minutes between lectures or meet for ice-creams on the grass on a sunny day. Even when students cannot attend events regularly, their feedback indicates that they appreciate the

weekly personal emails keeping them up to date with events and study groups: ‘I felt that I’d jumped into the deep end but that UniSkills was a life raft, there if I needed it’ (UniSkills student, 2007).

A critical factor in UniSkills success is the contribution of former members, who stay connected in their role as leaders, where they provide invaluable mentoring and friendship to first years. ‘I’d love to help out with anything UniSkills is doing... the program helped me so much, I really want to give something back’ (Study Group leader, 2008). In addition, UniSkills works within a partnership model, drawing on resources and expertise of staff in the faculties, residential Colleges, other programs within Student Services and the Student Guild to create a network of support and opportunities for leadership for its students.

Evaluating success: qualitative and quantitative data

The UniSkills program is evaluated regularly at both institutional and program level. Membership of UniSkills has resulted in improved academic performance, retention and completion for disadvantaged students. Flexible entry pathways have diversified the student populations in some disciplines such as Law where previously, no student from a rural or outer metropolitan school had gained entry.

The following performance comparisons were made by the Institutional Research Unit (IRU) at UWA between cohorts from 1990 to 1999 (1717 UniSkills students) and other new first year students from the same intake year (18,472 students):

- First-year performance, including the proportion passing a full first-year load and the retention rate from first year into the second calendar year
- Bachelor degree completion rates and retention rates to May 2000
- Honours completion rates and participation rates
- Postgraduate completion and participation rates.

The 1990-1999 report (UWA 2000) found that UniSkills students achieved similar performance outcomes to that of the non-UniSkills group, despite having much lower TER scores than the non-UniSkills group, significantly so in seven of the ten cohorts examined. In several of the cohorts examined the UniSkills group had a higher retention rate from first to second year than the non-TSP [UniSkills] group:

Table 1: Student Retention 1990-99 –Years in which UniSkills had higher retention

Year	TSP (UniSkills) % re-enrol 2 nd year	NON –TSP % re-enrol 2 nd year
1991	90.6	81.2
1996	85.8	81.9
1997	86.1	83.0
1998	83.6	82.6
1999	83.7	82.6
1990-99	84.1	82.9

For more recent cohorts from 2000 to 2006, retention rates from first year to second year are stronger than the previous decade. From 1990-1999 the number of UniSkills students

re-enrolling in second year averaged 84.1% (UWA 2000). From 2000-2006 this average increased to 86.1%.

Table 2 - Student Retention Rates 2000-2006

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
No. Commencing	247	238	185	180	209	234	192
Re-enrolled following year	213	197	167	157	184	197	163
Percentage	86.2	82.3	90.3	87.2	88.0	84.2	84.9

A follow-up ten-year study is planned for the 2000-2009 cohorts.

In addition,

*From the combined data for the commencing cohorts from 1990 to 1997, a **significantly higher proportion** of TSP [UniSkills] students, in comparison to the Non-TSP [UniSkills] group, had completed a postgraduate qualification.* (UWA 2000: 2). (emphasis added)

The UniSkills program evaluates core components of the program regularly, via online and hard copy surveys. Feedback is consistently positive and responses reported back to students, ‘closing the loop’ so that they can see that the program is responsive to their suggestions. When asked if participants would recommend Flying Start orientation, 96 per cent agreed or definitely agreed in 2007; 98 per cent in 2008 and 96 per cent in 2009. Similarly unambiguous responses are received in end-of-year program evaluations. In 2008, 95 per cent of respondents agreed that they were very satisfied or mostly satisfied with what the UniSkills program offered to first year students. Comments from the 2008 evaluation include

My first year at UWA has been wonderful! The UniSkills program, especially Flying Start and the Study Groups have been invaluable in making this year so enjoyable - social and academic wise!

Being a part of UniSkills has made the Transition from full-time work to full-time study invaluable, to learn a little more about University processes and to know there are others going through it for the first time too.

Conclusion

Tertiary education offers many benefits and its advantages should be available to academically capable students regardless of their backgrounds. It is widely accepted that Australian universities operate in a globalised economy and have a duty to produce graduates who are well rounded ‘citizens of the globe’. The current focus of government policy to increase the percentage of students from low SES backgrounds from 14 to 20 per cent by 2020 is critical both from the perspective of fairness and equal opportunity and the economic imperative of having a skilled labour force to face the challenges of being competitive as a nation.

The challenges in meeting that target will be different for each university. For some like the Go8 universities, there will need to be increased emphasis on widening access, less focus on TER as a selection mechanism and alternative entry pathways. But as Tinto argues, merely opening the door without adequate support is not creating opportunities so it is vital to look at retention, especially during first year. Support can take many forms and there has been excellent work in Australia and elsewhere on improving the First Year Experience. Yet attrition is still high across the sector and participation will not be increased overall without widening access **and** improving

retention.

The programme detailed in this paper is one example of a response to supporting students from under-represented backgrounds through their transition to university study. It might not be transferable to other universities *per se* but elements are adaptable. UniSkills has endured because it has been responsive to student need and developed to fit its unique institutional context. Evidence attests to the academic success of these students, but it is the students themselves who speak most strongly of the value of the programme for them:

UniSkills has given me the opportunity to mix with other students who were in minority groups eg mature age, students from rural areas. UniSkills isn't just an orientation program, where you are introduced to services and shown around then left to yourself. Its ongoing support meant the frequent get togethers helped me feel connected to other people and a support network at uni. I wouldn't have passed Quant1101 or Stat1106 without the study groups that I was involved in with UniSkills. I have met some great friends through UniSkills and have had the opportunity to introduce some others to the services (mainly the study groups). I have now become a part of the social committee and am looking forward to helping next year's first years to have a great first year at uni like the fantastic first year that I have had. UniSkills definitely enhanced my experience of uni.

(Unsolicited feedback, nominating UniSkills for a Teaching Award, 2007)

Website: www.transition.uwa.edu.au/uniskills

References:

DEEWR (2008) *Review of Australian Higher Education*. [Accessed 6 January 2009] Available from www.deewr.gov.au/he_review_finalreport

Birch, E. & Miller, P. (2006) Student outcomes at university in Australia: A quantile regression approach. *Australian Economic Papers*, 45(1), 1-17.

Dobson, I., & Skuja, E. (2005) Secondary schooling, tertiary entrance ranks and university performance. *People and Place*, 13(1), 53-62.

Edwards, D. (2008) Increasing competition for university and the challenge of access for government school students: a case study. *Australian Journal of Education*, 1 November. [Accessed 27 March 2009] Available from: <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Increasing+competition+for+university+and+the+challenge+of+access+for...-a0189289832>

Gale, T. (2009) More towards the centre: Search for field position for student equity in Australian higher education. Keynote address to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Forum, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 26 February. Paper available from late March: www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/ncsehe/events.asp

James, R. (2007) Social equity in a mass, globalised higher education environment: The unresolved issue of widening access to university. University of Melbourne. [Accessed 17 November 2007] Available from: http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/people/staff_pages/James/James.html

Does access equal success? The critical role of the FYE in achieving equity in Higher Education, Judy Skene & Sarah Evamy, Refereed Paper 9

James, R. (2009) Postcodes a poor guide [Accessed 18 March 2009] Available from: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25201692-25192,00.html>

Kift, S. (2008) The next, great first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution-wide approaches to enact the FYE as “everybody’s business”. Keynote address at 11th Pacific Rim FYHE conference, Hobart, 30 June-2 July. [Accessed 27 November 2008] Available from: http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/papers08/FYHE2008/content/pdfs/Keynote%20-%20Kift.pdf

Light, R. J. (2001) *Making the most of college: Students speak their mind*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Martin, L. (1994) Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education. Equity Indicators, Volume 1, Canberra: AGPS.

Morrison, K. (2007) Peer Assisted Study Sessions: Supporting quality learning and student engagement in Economics and Business. Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Sydney. [Accessed 15 January 2009] Available from <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/default.cfm?issue=25>

NBEET (1990) *A Fair Chance for all*. Canberra: AGPS.

Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia (2008) Loneliness and International Students, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12:2. [Accessed 12 January 2009] Available from <http://jsi.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/12/2/148>

Skene, J. (2003) ‘Improving student diversity through transition support at the University of Western Australia’, 7th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, QUT, 9-11th July. Available at: http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/papers03.htm

Tinto, V. (2008) Access without Support is Not Opportunity. 36th Annual Institute for Chief Academic Officers, The Council of Independent Colleges, Seattle, Washington. [Accessed 15 January 2009] Available from: <http://aiea.syr.edu/vtinto/Files/Council%20of%20Independent%20Colleges%202008%20Keynote.pdf>

Universities Australia (2008) *Participation and Equity*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne [Accessed 14 December 2008] Available from <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/pubs.html>

University of Western Australia (2000) *A selection of performance Indicators for the Transition Support Programme*. IRU Report No. 00/4, Planning Services.

Win, R. & Miller, P., (2005). The Effects of Individual and School Factors on University Students’ Academic Performance, *Australian Economic Review*, 38 (1-18)

Does access equal success? The critical role of the FYE in achieving equity in Higher Education, Judy Skene & Sarah Evamy, Refereed Paper