

Working towards social inclusion in higher education: an integrated approach to outreach and retention

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Understanding the barriers – both imagined and real – which prevent low-income students aspiring to university study has been one of the key elements to developing a comprehensive strategy for designing and implementing appropriate outreach initiatives and has informed the design for retention-supporting first-year activities. Drawing on action-research and experimentation in the outreach area, QUT has developed a deeper understanding of the beliefs held by low-income students and explored some of the ways and means of busting these myths and building aspiration. Thousands of students from low-income, rural and Indigenous backgrounds are already enrolled in higher education, and in a post-Bradley world, there could be thousands more. It's now more important than ever that we understand more about equity students – their hopes and fears, the barriers they face, and the particular cultural capital they bring. This understanding can be very helpful in creating outreach activities, learning experiences and support services which contribute to retention and success.

For over a decade, QUT has provided a range of outreach, admissions and support programs for attracting and retaining under-represented groups, with particular emphasis on low-SES, rural and Indigenous students. Such activities include on-campus days for high school students, admissions bonuses for low-income applicants, interview-based pathways for Indigenous students and needs-based scholarships. QUT is certainly not a pioneer in its endeavours, but it is the University's integrated approach to outreach, its organisational commitment, and its cooperative approach which has seen successful outcomes, and which may provide good ideas for other institutions.

QUT's approach

In 2004, QUT's Council committed to 'expanding University efforts to support participation and retention at QUT by individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, across four broad categories – creating aspiration (outreach); opening the door (admissions); helping with costs (scholarships); and supporting enrolled students' (QUT, 2004). Most of QUT's social inclusion activities prior to this were small-scale or niche activities, and there have been both internal and external barriers to expanding these activities with mixed results in terms of retention and success.

Underpinning this four-point approach is a set of beliefs and principles which inform all outreach activities (QUT, 2004):

- Low-SES students are chronically under-represented across Australia, although their pass rates and completion rates are reasonably close to those of other students. Making university affordable and accessible is the core challenge.
- Barriers to the participation of low-income students in higher education are a complex mix of issues – affordability, cultural/family issues, awareness and achievement.
- Integrated, long-term effort across is required in order to affect change.
- New activities should build on the fundamentals which already exist and the aim is a sustainable, embedded, University-wide program.
- An all-University partnership approach is required. For some elements, co-operative activities with other universities and with other sectors will be needed.

These principles provide a useful anchor for integrating activities which tackle affordability, aspiration and achievement simultaneously. It also highlights that there is a place in higher education for non-competitive partnerships and collaborations aimed at building aspiration both inside and outside of the institution.

From 2009 onwards QUT is focussing on building deeper connections with its networks of low-income high schools; engaging with prospective adult learners through innovative partnerships; and on fostering non-competitive partnerships with other Queensland universities and sectors. The latter will, in the post-Bradley Review world, be of increasing significance in the higher education sector and one for which QUT is currently preparing. The following discussion outlines strategies and activities for initiating institutional change, opportunities for and developing links with fellow practitioners and best practice models.

The three A's – aspiration, affordability and achievement

It is difficult to convince low-income students to aspire to uni if you don't address two important barriers – achievement and affordability. Based on QUT's strategic approach over the four broad categories we have, over time, developed a comprehensive suite of activities aimed at students from equity target groups. One example which illustrates this approach and addresses the issues of achievement and affordability is QUT's Scholarship Guarantee and the embedded university-wide activities around this guarantee. The Scholarship Guarantee is essentially a 'package deal' – providing aspiration-building activities while still at high school, special admission for students whose achievement is affected by financial hardship, a guaranteed scholarship and a range of support services once enrolled.

Central to our aspiration-building activities with equity target groups is an inherent understanding of the barriers, identified through research (QUT, 2005), about the perceived and real myths students have about university and the people who go there. A number of key issues, myths and misconceptions about university were identified and solving these challenges forms the basis for the content of the DVD and web resource called 'project u' (www.projectu.com.au). The key issues identified included:

- Too expensive
- Not hands on – too theoretical and not practical

- Too hard to get in – you have to be a ‘genius’
- Too much information and too stressful to decide
- It’s not worth it - there are easier ways to get my goals
- What if – I don’t get in or I don’t succeed
- Maybe later – deferring uni and/or deferring decision-making
- People like me don’t go to uni

Our message to these students is that ‘people like you *do* go to university’ despite a range of challenges and issues they may face. Activities also emphasise that university should be one of the options available when schools finishes or, at the very least, an option to consider at some point in their lives – whether it is QUT or not, and whether it is straight after school or later on.

One area that needs addressing when undertaking aspiration-building activities is the role that traditional or mainstream marketing, and broader media has. Often it reinforces the idea of the ‘certain types of people go to uni’. Students who may be the first-in-family to go to university also have no referential experiences to rely on so media is a powerful influence. Through effective collaboration with our own Marketing and Communications team there is a true understanding of the diversity amongst prospective students and consideration is given to competitive campaigns and outreach activities that are not at odds with one another. Student decision-making develops over time and so too should the messages that we send – firstly, ‘you can go to uni, anytime and anywhere’ and secondly ‘if you do decide to go, then come to us!’

A sense of belonging

By addressing the issues of achievement and affordability we have seen some improvement in retention and success rates especially amongst scholarship holders. Our own research shows that even relatively small amounts of money have a significant impact (QUT, 2009: 12). Over 80% of students utilise their scholarship to ‘buy time’ back from part-time work. Significantly, students who receive scholarships routinely suggest that they feel more supported. This sense of belonging teamed with appropriate support services are an integral part of a positive and successful first year experience and one of the keys to retention and success.

Students who enter through QUT’s special entry programs are incorporated into QUT’s comprehensive First Year Experience program to support them once enrolled. This includes specific pre-orientation sessions for low-income students who enter via the Q-Step program, a welcome to QUT camp for Indigenous students, explore Brisbane sessions for Rural and remote students and one-on-one support for students with a disability. For all cohorts, activities focus on a range of free and relevant services that students, especially those with complicated lives, can access as needed.

New opportunities

In 2009 and beyond QUT will focus on deeper engagement with its network of target schools and to enhance the internal and external partnerships that exist. Work has also begun amongst Queensland's eight public universities to make connections that can focus on non-competitive marketing and widening participation activities throughout the State. In March of this year, a roundtable discussion with equity practitioners, recruitment and marketing staff and staff from Indigenous recruitment units met to discuss how to better collaborate across the sector in light of the recommendations in the Bradley Review.

This roundtable was a chance to consider what existing outreach activities universities undertake, to share these successful models, and to generate new ideas where the key focus is 'point-in-time' promotion. A survey of the activities discussed revealed a range of opportunities to collaborate and connect. It has already yielded additional discussions amongst members, additional discussions by Indigenous educational units, and with state government partners. The roundtable has also yielded a commonly agreed upon communiqué outlining how each of the eight Queensland universities will proceed, a document noted by Vice-Chancellors and acknowledged nationally (O'Hare, 2009).

Looking forward

The Bradley Review will soon usher in a new attitude towards widening participation which brings with it opportunities for greater innovation and collaboration within the sector. The Government has two KPIs around participation by low-SES people – that 20% of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level will be of people from low-SES backgrounds by 2020; and that 40% of 25–34 year olds – will have a bachelor degree by 2025.

In the 2009 Federal Budget, the Government incorporated a number of equity-related recommendations of the Bradley Review with a total of \$433 million in support for low SES participation over the next four years (Australian Government, 2009: 13 – 15). As the Government's 'education revolution' reveals itself we will also find our own roles as equity practitioners, administrators, teachers and support staff evolving too. Now is the time to throw out old and small thinking and think big – both strategically and collaboratively.

References

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