Developing productive relationships with partner schools to widen participation

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The Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR 2008) noted the unacceptably low participation rates of students from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds, Indigenous students and rural and remote students in Higher Education. This nuts and bolts session focuses on strategies for developing productive relationships with partner schools to widen participation. The Aspire UWA program has partnerships with 24 under-represented schools: six in the Pilbara region of Western Australia and eighteen in outer-metropolitan Perth. This session will share ideas to support the diverse stakeholders in this project long term and, in the case of the Pilbara, across vast distances, to achieve positive outcomes.

Introduction

The First Year Experience commences well before school leavers start at university. In order to create the conditions that facilitate success for our diverse first year school leaver cohort, there is a need for comprehensive access programs that prepare prospective students for future study. The Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR 2008) noted the unacceptably low participation rates of students from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds, Indigenous students and rural and remote students in Higher Education. The participation rate nationally has not changed significantly in the past fifteen years. These students are particularly under-represented in Group of Eight universities like The University of Western Australia (UWA) (James 2007).

There are complex reasons why both access and retention of low SES students, especially during first year, has challenged universities in Australia that are beyond the scope of this brief paper (Kift 2008; Skene & Evamy 2009). Suffice to say that there is recognition that meeting the national target of the federal government will require sustained relationships with secondary schools to develop the integrated strategies necessary to address cultural change where aspirations are low or provide support and advice where there are perceived and real barriers to participation (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education 2009). The focus of this nuts and bolts session is on developing sustainable relationships to improve access and the opportunities for success for low SES students commencing university study.

Overview of the Aspire UWA program

The University of Western Australia committed to an ambitious outreach program in 2009 to contribute to the shared national goal of 20 per cent of low SES students enrolments in undergraduate higher education by 2020 (DEEWR 2008). Aspire UWA aims to raise aspirations and improve academic readiness of students in high schools with
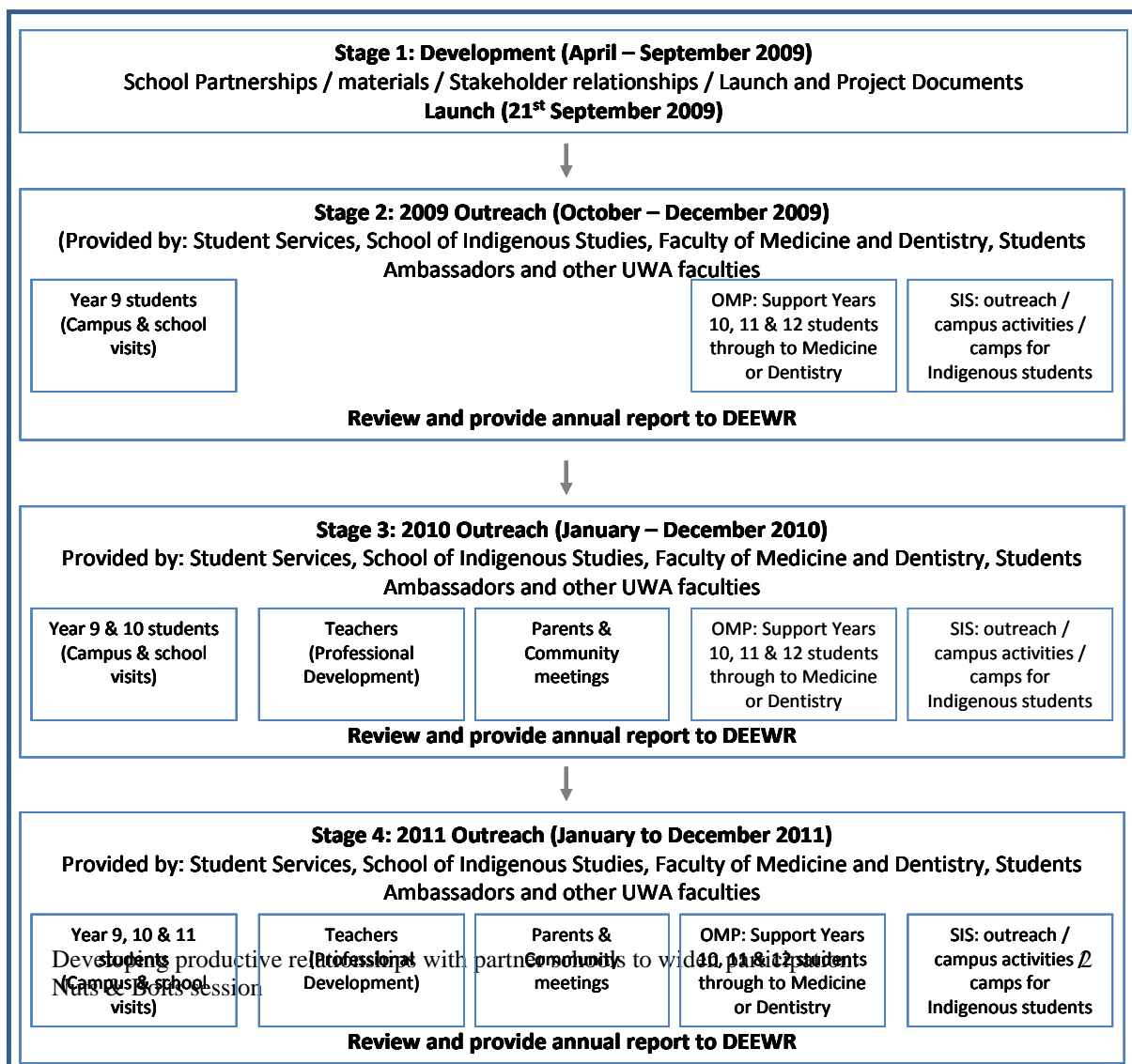
a low transfer to higher education. It is funded by the Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the University and supported by a growing number of external stakeholders such as The Smith Family.
 In 2009, Aspire UWA formed partnerships with 6 schools in the Pilbara region and 18 schools in Outer Metropolitan Perth that are located in a low socio-economic area, have a significant Indigenous student population and/or students drawn from new and emerging communities.

Although in its early stages, the Aspire UWA program has been received enthusiastically by the partner schools. The program has a 'whole of university' approach but the key internal UWA stakeholders are Student Services, the School of Indigenous Studies and the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. The program works with Year 9 students initially and follows them through to transition to higher education, each year adding a new cohort of Year 9 students. In addition, the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, works with those students in Years 10-12 who have an interest in Medicine or Dentistry. There is a separate quota for these students who must meet standard entry requirements but are then competing in a smaller pool of prospective entrants: an initiative that has received strong endorsement from the schools and parents.

Diagram 1 below illustrates how the program grows annually with each new cohort added.

Diagram 1: Aspire UWA program stages

Stage 1: Development (April – September 2009)
School Partnerships / materials / Stakeholder relationships / Launch and Project Documents
Launch (21st September 2009)

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Stage 2: 2009 Outreach (October – December 2009)
(Provided by: Student Services, School of Indigenous Studies, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, Students Ambassadors and other UWA faculties

| Year 9 students (Campus & school visits) | | OMP: Support Years 10, 11 & 12 students through to Medicine or Dentistry | SIS: outreach / campus activities / camps for Indigenous students |

Review and provide annual report to DEEWR

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Stage 3: 2010 Outreach (January – December 2010)
Provided by: Student Services, School of Indigenous Studies, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, Students Ambassadors and other UWA faculties

| Year 9 & 10 students (Campus & school visits) | Teachers (Professional Development) | Parents & Community meetings | OMP: Support Years 10, 11 & 12 students through to Medicine or Dentistry | SIS: outreach / campus activities / camps for Indigenous students |

Review and provide annual report to DEEWR

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Stage 4: 2011 Outreach (January to December 2011)
Provided by: Student Services, School of Indigenous Studies, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, Students Ambassadors and other UWA faculties

| Year 9, 10 & 11 students (Campus & school visits) | Teachers (Professional Development) | Parents & Community meetings | OMP: Support Years 10, 11 & 12 students through to Medicine or Dentistry | SIS: outreach / campus activities / camps for Indigenous students |

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Developing and maintaining productive relationships

Aspire UWA team members recognise that it is not enough just to focus on activities with the students: relationships need to be developed with principals, teachers, year coordinators, careers advisors, Aboriginal Education Officers and other key staff in schools; with families and with influential members of the school's community.

To ensure that partner school principals and teachers are included in planning and that the program is responsive to their needs, teacher reference groups for Perth and the Pilbara have been included in the program's organisational structure. In addition, the program's Reference Group includes some representatives from schools and District Education offices.

Further strategies to enhance relationships with other key staff in schools are being developed. At the same time, the program team is looking at ways to build relationships with families and key community groups and individuals who might play influential roles in assisting young people to choose appropriate pathways for themselves post-school.

The challenge of building and maintaining relationships across distance is also a key concern for the Aspire UWA program. Working with rural and remote schools contributes another often unique set of challenges.

Key Questions for discussion

1.   How do we develop meaningful and sustained relationships with partner schools?

Issues to consider:
- Challenges of distance (ie Pilbara region 1,000 -1,500 kilometres from university)
- Transient school staff
- School staff already time poor
- Other challenges

2.   How do we work with families and communities to engage them in supporting the aspirations of young people for higher education?

Issues to consider:
- Building trust
- Culturally appropriate communication
- What additional resources might be available: corporate support, NGOs, philanthropic groups, community leaders, cultural groups, etc.
- Other resources

Session structure

This nuts & bolts session addresses the conference topic: Strategies for supporting and widening participation of under-represented social groups.

Session outline:

Whole group discussion/ice breaker activity (5 mins) Consider issues in building and sustaining partnerships, both regionally and locally

Presentation of overview of Aspire UWA (5 mins)
 (Note: A short handout on the overview of the program and actual activities with students will be provided as context so that valuable discussion time is not spent on these details)

Split into two groups for issues and strategies discussion: rural and isolated communities or metropolitan communities (10 mins). Participants to consider the following issues:
Rural and isolated: are there specific issues working in these schools? What strategies work?
Metropolitan: what are the issues in sustaining relationships? What strategies work?

Reporting back to whole group and summary (10 mins)
The final ten minutes will be used for reporting back to the whole group. Each group will have five minutes to list their top priorities. The feedback from both groups will be collected and collated for distribution to all participants.

References

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