

**UStart@UOW and UStart2@UOW:  
A comprehensive approach to supporting commencing students  
from low socio-economic backgrounds**

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*Students from low socio-economic backgrounds as well as those who are the first in family to attend university often report feeling that they don't 'belong' at university (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; O'Shea, 2008). The isolation they sometimes experience may be exacerbated when families are unable to provide personal support through a basic lack of knowledge and understanding of university life. This nuts and bolts session explores two initiatives introduced at the University of Wollongong to support commencing students from low socio-economic backgrounds and to provide information for their families. The session will provide details about how this framework was employed and also report on preliminary findings from a study that runs in conjunction with this initiative. Opportunities for discussing how this approach translates to other contexts as well as feedback on strategies used in other institutions will also be provided.*

## **Background**

UStart@UOW and UStart2@UOW represent an holistic approach to addressing some of the challenges that commencing students from low socio-economic backgrounds face when they enter the higher education sector. UStart@UOW is a peer-led orientation program designed by current students for commencing students from low SES backgrounds to prepare them for transition into university life. The program was presented prior to the beginning of first session in 2011 to commencing students across four faculties at the University of Wollongong. It has grown out of a similar program offered at the University of Newcastle (initiated in 2006 by Dr Sarah O'Shea). Commencing students, particularly those from traditionally under-represented groups, report feeling overwhelmed and under-prepared for the challenges associated with university life (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Programs that support these new students by providing relevant information and opportunities for establishing contact with others, both new and continuing students, are critical.

Family life and, in particular, the relationships that new students share with parents and partners are also likely to be affected during this period of transition. The goal of UStart2@UOW, developed in conjunction with the student-based program, is to demystify university life for the parents and partners of students identified for inclusion in UStart@UOW. Given the low SES status of the new students and the likelihood that some would also be 'first in family' to attend university, their parents and partners may be unaware of how university systems work and of how they might assist the student in their family

(Brooks, 2004). If parents do not have access to relevant social networks, for example, those who have no familial tradition of attending university, then this is possibly a further disadvantage for all concerned. Ball and Vincent (1998) refer to the role of 'hot knowledge' in parental educational choices for their children; this 'grapevine knowledge' plays an essential role and is provided by social networks. While Ball & Vincent's study focuses on the school environment, what is interesting is how parents refer to the information derived from local networks or 'hot' knowledge as being a key source of information. This nuts and bolts session will report on the implementation of a transition program that has been adapted to focus on the provision of support for students from low SES backgrounds and their families.

## **Literature review**

Compared to twenty years ago, Australian higher education populations are now not only larger but also more highly diverse. In the decade from 1996 -2006, the numbers of students in Australian universities almost doubled to over one million (Alexander, 2006). Similarly, the number of universities has grown exponentially from nine publically funded universities in 1956 to a current total of 37 (Australian Universities, 2009). Aside from the sheer number of students now participating in higher education, many students now commence studies after a significant gap in educational participation. In the decade between 1994 and 2004, the total number of commencing university students in Australia grew by 36%, but in the same period the numbers of these students who were school leavers (aged 19 or younger) dropped from 54% to 50% nationally (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005).

The increase in the numbers of students who are older or who have accessed university through non-traditional forms of access is a global development but this has not necessarily negotiated a more equitable educational landscape. The 2005 HEFCE report, *Young Participation in Higher Education*, which examined participation across England between 1994-2000, highlights how "there are broad and deep divisions in the chances of going into higher education according to where you live" (HEFCE 2005: 10). In Australia, lower participation rates have also been noted amongst people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, James (2008) states how 'people from low SES backgrounds are about one third as likely as people from high SES backgrounds to participate in higher education' (p2). While the Bradley Review and the recent Higher Education Reforms have put funding in place to address these inequities, there is much work and research required to increase the participation and success of students from recognised equity groups.

Given the Australian Government's agenda for widening participation and ensuring social inclusion in the higher education sector, universities must expect to 'cater for a larger and more diverse group of incoming first year students' (James et al., 2010, p.1). Identifying each student cohort's profile and their related needs in the first year of study is an important task for universities and a basic step in the process of improving the quality of services for all students. As Swaminathan and Alfred (2001) argue, rather than locating difference within a deficit framework, diversity should be regarded as a positive factor, offering the potential to enrich and inform the learning environment.

## **Description of the initiative**

This session will report on two related initiatives introduced at the University of Wollongong in 2010 – 2011. These initiatives were run in conjunction with one another and target students from low SES backgrounds and their families.

## *UStart@UOW*

The focus of UStart@UOW is on students from low SES backgrounds to prepare them for the realities of university life and academic study by creating a social learning network with more experienced students. Experienced students were recruited from across the faculties of Arts, Education, Law and Science. These students responded to requests for involvement and in each faculty a small team was selected. A training day, held late in 2010 and led by one of the developers of the program, was provided for all student teams. Through workshop activities, they were given background information about developing a team approach to structuring a student-based orientation program and also about facilitating the delivery of a program. The students identified key items of information that would have supported them on their arrival at university. This 'wish list' and the experiences surrounding different items on it were contextualized and supported by the use of the students' personal narratives of arrival. Over the course of a number of weeks, each team of students developed a one-day orientation program including authentic materials to support the commencing students in their respective faculties.

## *UStart2@UOW*

UStart2@UOW was developed in recognition of the need to provide an opportunity for parents and partners of low SES students to come on to campus to gather information about university life. Apart from the provision of information through a Handbook designed specifically for this program, a panel of staff from across the university provided information in response to questions linked to student scenarios. These scenarios presented a series of different student stories and the challenges each faced. This provided the parents and partners with an opportunity to consider how best to support the student in their family. This opportunity was deemed to be particularly important for those students who arrive at university with few existing social networks, including those coming from communities where attending university may not be a regular or common occurrence. Indeed, Thomas (2002) highlights how anxiety about 'not fitting in and not being able to cope' at university may be more pronounced 'in families and communities where HE is not the norm' (p.8).

### **Impact of the initiative**

The session will report on the preliminary findings of research that has been conducted in conjunction with these initiatives. These findings include data collected from the following sources:

- 1. Reflective logs kept by the UStart facilitators on their participation in designing and delivering this program.*
- 2. Focus group interviews conducted with the UStart facilitators which examined the nature of their involvement in this initiative*
- 3. Individual interviews conducted with the new students who participated in UStart as well as written evaluations they provided about the program.*
- 4. Evaluations from the parents and partners who participated in UStart2@UOW*

### **Session outline**

**Whole group discussion** (5 mins): Consider what students entering their first year of study in higher education and their families may need to know to survive!

**Presenter** (5 mins): Present a description of the initiative (UStart@UOW and UStart2@UOW), its implementation and preliminary data.

**Paired discussion** (10 mins): Discuss the following questions in pairs or small groups:

1. How might this initiative enhance the experience of first year students?
2. What obstacles or limitations can be identified in relation to this initiative?
3. How can this initiative best be evaluated?

**Presenter + Whole group discussion** (10 mins): Whole group discussion to explore how this initiative could be developed and adapted for other cohorts as well as other institutions.

## Final notes

UStart@UOW and UStart2@UOW both provide a basis for further development. Apart from extending the programs to all faculties at the University, there are opportunities to vary the approach that was taken to suit the needs of particular cohorts who are traditionally under-represented in the higher education sector. At the University of Wollongong, this work is already underway with a program adapted specifically for incoming Indigenous students. The families of students in transition to university are also a very important source of encouragement at a time when the demands are high for new students. Providing information to families of students from non-traditional backgrounds will provide them with a basis for understanding the student experience and offering support and direction. In addition to enhancing the student experience, support that is given during this critical period may improve participation and completion rates for the students involved.

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