

Effective teaching and support of low socioeconomic students

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Abstract

This session will report on the first stage of a national project that will investigate, identify and document programs and practices for effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds at university. Guided by the literature's characterisation of LSES students and the implications of this for institutional teaching and support practices, we take the research-informed view that inclusive teaching and support, undertaken with skill and care and an emphasis on a quality first year experience, is of benefit to all students. While the project will ultimately generate an integrated national resource comprising materials and exemplars of effective practice, this session will report on the findings of an environmental scan of available evidence that has identified curricular and co-curricular initiatives that contribute to effective engagement and learning of LSES students. Participants will explore key themes that emerged from the literature and identify further exemplars of effective Australian practice.

Context

The federal government's response to the 2008 Bradley Review of higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) sets a clear target for increasing the number and proportion of low socio-economic status (LSES) students participating in higher education within the next decade (Australian Government, 2009). An Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) national project has been funded to focus attention on the student experience beyond recruitment and to examine the challenge of creating the educational conditions necessary to support the retention and success of LSES students once they have reached our institutions. As Tinto (2008) has argued, access without support is not opportunity, and as Devlin (2010) notes, it would be "a moral and economic tragedy" to attract LSES students to our institutions without having made the changes to teaching and support necessary to facilitate their success. Quite fundamentally, we will need to consider adapting, both culturally and structurally, the prevailing character of the first year student experience to ensure that student success is not left to chance, at least in those aspects that are within our institutional control (Kift, 2009).

While a small number of Australian universities have significant experience with LSES students, the government's widening participation policy targets mean new directions and new emphases for many more, if not most, universities. Currently, there is not widespread understanding about how socio-economic disadvantage impacts on the learning experiences of cohorts of LSES students in Australian higher education. Furthermore, institutions and their staff are not ready to respond *en masse* to the changes they are about to experience (Devlin, 2010). This national project will contribute to collating existing knowledge and developing new knowledge about the experiences and perspectives of LSES students and, therefore, will inform policy and practice within institutions and across the sector to facilitate LSES student achievement. The project will assist universities to make use of available evidence on the most effective ways to teach and support students from LSES backgrounds.

A conceptual framework for effective and inclusive teaching and support for the Australian context

Much work has been done on inclusive higher education teaching in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). While we have much to learn from this work, the Australian higher education sector is different structurally and operationally from its international counterparts and operates within a unique policy, regulatory and cultural context. There is therefore a need to develop a conceptual framework for the provision of effective teaching and support to students from LSES backgrounds that is relevant to the Australian context and that can be adapted to suit various institutional priorities and circumstances.

A definition of inclusive teaching and support has been adapted from extensive research and related work undertaken in the UK by Griffiths (2010) has been modified for the Australian context and aligned with the project's focus on LSES students. The modified definition also addresses the various aspects of teaching, support, leadership and institutional culture that might support this cohort's learning, success and retention. Inclusive teaching and support have been initially conceptualised as incorporating the institutional policy framework and culture, the work of both academic and professional staff, and the entire pedagogy, including curriculum design, delivery, evaluation, assessment, learning support and the learning environment. Our definition is that teaching for inclusion includes teaching technique and also:

...extends beyond technique, respecting students as individuals who have diverse backgrounds, different learning needs, and a variety of valuable prior experiences. By facilitating learning for inclusion, individual strengths and differences are acknowledged, fostered and maximised to enrich the student's own potential, knowledge, skills and understanding as well as that of others within the learning community. Such an approach is intentionally and thoroughly integrated into every part of an institution and implemented rigorously, vigorously and thoughtfully. (Adapted from Griffiths, 2010)

Inclusive teaching and support

As the federal government identified in Transforming Australia's Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009, p. 14):

Once students from disadvantaged backgrounds have entered university the likelihood of them completing their course of study is broadly similar to that of the general higher education population. Often, however, they require higher levels of support to succeed, including financial assistance and greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services.

In order to meet the national LSES goal, proactive work towards increasing the retention of and ensuring a high quality experience for all students is necessary. The sector needs a considered pedagogical response to the social inclusion agenda and there is an urgent need to examine, from a research- and evidence-based perspective, how we might support, include, retain, and graduate LSES student cohorts who will enter our programs with greater diversity in preparedness and social capital than ever before. The Australian Government (2009a) has indicated that it expects the sector to change its practices to assure the successful completion of students from LSES backgrounds. However, the available research shows evidence of some apprehension in the Australian sector around the equity agenda. For example, Griffiths (2010) reports that an Australian participant in her research study commented:

Our government has put a large agenda in place to increase attendance by more disadvantaged people—but has not provided resources to do so, just a big stick. There is considerable concern as Effective teaching and support of low socioeconomic students, Nuts and Bolts.

to how we might cope with the extra numbers and that different skills will be needed by staff, as well as additional support for the students. (p. 4-5)

One way to support LSES students is through integrated, intentional, supportive, and inclusive curriculum design and approaches to teaching and learning (Kift, 2009). This is likely to benefit not only LSES students, but all students. The United Kingdom research on supporting the widening participation agenda argues persuasively that, in addition to the many ways in which student diversity can be harnessed to enrich the educational experience, “the changes to curriculum provision and learning, teaching and assessment, which have occurred alongside the transition from an elite to a mass participation HE sector, benefit all students and can have a positive impact on higher level and critical thinking skills” (Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman, & Reid, 2007, p. 48).

Approach

The project seeks to encourage recognition of the fundamental importance of effective teaching and support of LSES students. It acknowledges and will work with institutional and student diversity to embed new and better systematic approaches to inclusive pedagogical practice and to build institutional capacity to deliver policy, practice and support that will not leave the quality of the LSES student experiences and learning outcomes to chance. A national repository will be developed to allow institutions to select resources and adapt these to their own institutional contexts and avoid any sense of ‘reinventing the wheel’. The LSES agenda is common across the Australian higher education sector and economic resource usage is important in the climate of reducing funding higher education research.

The project is a collaboration between Deakin University, as the lead institution, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Charles Sturt University (CSU). The team comprises Professors Marcia Devlin and Sally Kift, Associate Professors Karen Nelson and Judy Nagy, and Ms Liz Smith. We will adopt a theoretical approach to this project drawn from constructivism (Bruner, 1996), transition pedagogy (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2009) and inclusive pedagogy (Waterfield and West, 2006), as well as on conceptual work undertaken by Biggs and Tang (2007) in constructive alignment and Warren (2002) in integrated curriculum design. As Hockings (2010) notes, rather than assuming that non-traditional students have ‘special needs’ that require attention outside the curriculum in adjunct programs, integrated curriculum design targets all students and assumes that they bring to the learning environment varying resources in the cognitive, linguistic, knowledge and cultural domains and that they need to be guided to ‘develop the critical and communicative skills and conceptual repertoires that will enable them to deal with academic tasks’ (Warren, 2002, p. 87).

Environmental Scan

The project’s first stage has comprised an environmental scan of the available evidence of curricular and co-curricular initiatives, and leadership arrangements that contribute to the effective engagement and learning of students from LSES backgrounds. This stage has been built on a solid, existing evidence base, including a qualitative study of the experiences of LSES students at Deakin University (Devlin, Nagy and O’Shea, 2010); the recent annotated bibliography on peer-reviewed literature related to LSES student achievement at university produced by Deakin University (O’Shea, 2010); and the synthesis of the research on inclusive teaching and learning produced by the UK Higher Education Academy (Hockings, 2010).

Effective teaching and support of low socioeconomic students, Nuts and Bolts.

This Nuts and Bolts session will utilise an issues study of the environmental scan as the stimulus for an interactive session that aims to:

1. explore the theoretical foundations and major themes emerging from this overview of evidence, initiatives and strategies; and
2. seek input from participants as to further identification of effective practice.

Session Plan:

- Presenters (5 mins): Setting the scene
 - Introduction to the national project – Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education
- Break-out small group speed talk and tell activity (10 mins):
 - Identify the key issues your first year and/or LSES students face?
 - What strategies do you have in place to address these issues?
- Presenters (5 mins): presentation and brief exploration of the theoretical foundations/ key themes emerging from the environmental scan (including handout)
- Whole group discussion (10 mins):
 - Any surprises in the findings?
 - Any obvious gaps?

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