

Designing outreach programs for student success in the classroom and beyond.

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Abstract

One of the major barriers for low-income students' participation in higher education is the difference between the belief in their ability to succeed and their actual ability. Many students are overwhelmed by the perceived and real differences between school-based and university-based learning and by their ability to equip themselves with the necessary tools for success in the classroom and beyond. In 2010, QUT piloted a program with Year 11 students from low-income schools to undertake a university-level subject focussing on generic learning skills. The aim of the program was to test whether Year 11s could pass a university subject which would equip them with skills to improve achievement at school and build interest and confidence in post-school study. The program design included a number of retention strategies to support the students and was evaluated using an equity-oriented research framework to determine the efficacy of the program under QUT's widening participation agenda.

Context: QUT's widening participation agenda

For over a decade, QUT has delivered a range of outreach, admissions and support programs for attracting and retaining under-represented groups, with particular emphasis on low socio-economic (LSES), rural and Indigenous students. Such activities have included on-campus days for high school students, admissions bonuses for low-income applicants, interview-based pathways for Indigenous students and needs-based scholarships.

QUT takes an integrated and cooperative approach to outreach in terms of school and community partnerships and collegiate arrangements with other tertiary institutions. QUT's four major widening participation strategies aimed at recruiting and retaining low-income and Indigenous students are: 1) stimulating demand for tertiary study; 2) reviewing and improving admissions processes; 3) increasing enrolments at QUT's Caboolture campus; and 4) improving retention.

With increased Federal funding through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program¹ (HEPPP) and a cooperative state-wide approach by Queensland universities, QUT's widening participation focus has been strengthened. In particular, there has been an increased focus on developing more opportunities for discipline-specific activities in school and on campus to enhance classroom activities through QUT's Explore Uni program² and provide

¹ The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) provides funding to eligible universities to improve access to undergraduate courses, for people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, in addition to improving retention and completion rates of those students.

² See www.equity.qut.edu.au/everyone/wideningparticipation/exploreuni.jsp

generic learning skills. In recent years the focus has also been on deeper engagement with schools and communities in the regions north of Brisbane, in particular, the outer urban areas around QUT's Caboolture campus, has been a key focus in QUT's widening participation agenda.

In 2010, a pilot program – *Applied Skills for Year 11s* – was developed with the first strategy of stimulating demand in mind but which also encompassed strategies three and four. The emphasis was on forming partnerships with schools in the Caboolture region and ensuring that the *Applied Skills* program included proven retention strategies³ as part of the design and implementation. Integrating an evaluation process into the pilot program was two-fold: 1) to evaluate the program objectives in providing generic skills that would be useful for students now and in the future and 2) determining if the program was effective in terms of equity outcomes.

To this end, the program was evaluated using the Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach (DEMO) developed by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (Gale et al., 2010). This framework has allowed QUT to objectively assess the feasibility and the equity orientation of the program to determinist likelihood of success and whether there were any design flaws which could be improved upon for future expansion.

Generic skills – the tools for success

The *Applied Skills for Year 11s* program has two key objectives: 1) to provide a university 'taster' experience to students from low-income backgrounds to see if it was a suitable vehicle for unsettling some of the student perceptions of their own abilities to take on university or other post-school study; and 2) to assess the suitability of Year 11s to undertake a university-level subject. The underpinning rationale for the program was that if students had these learning skills while still at school it would enhance their school achievement, thus improving their potential to enter university, and better prepare them for successful tertiary study through this skills acquisition.

Applied Skills and Scholarship is a first year university subject with a focus on generic skills acquisition. It covers the range of learning skills that all students need to master in order to be successful in tertiary study including time management, critical thinking, information literacy, academic writing, exam preparation, referencing and effective study techniques. The pilot program – *Applied Skills for Year 11s* – was delivered to a specific group of students as an equity-based outreach enhanced studies or extension program. This program is one of a number of equity-focussed niche programs⁴ with a strong equity focus nested within QUT's existing enhanced studies program START QUT which is primarily for high-achieving Year 12 students. The existing START QUT infrastructure was utilised to build this equity-oriented program.

³ QUT's Student Success and Retention Project is a proactive activity that supports students who are new to university with universal monitoring of every commencing student. Student Success Advisors (SSA) contact students by phone and email to provide peer support and advice in a timely manner (Adams et al., 2010).

⁴ Additional programs include QUTeach@Redcliffe (<http://www.ed.qut.edu.au/news/news-event.jsp?news-event-id=30434>) and SARUA (<http://sarua.ed.qut.edu.au/>)

Unlike traditional arrangements for enhanced studies programs or extension programs, *Applied Skills* was offered to Year 11 rather than Year 12 students. By shifting the focus to Year 11 it was hoped that it would facilitate the learning skills to be utilised in both Year 11 and 12 studies, and to relieve the pressure that students tend to face in their last year of high school. The program was not exclusively offered to high achievers as is generally the case with enhanced studies or extension programs. The program was offered to ‘average’ Year 11 students with results of C or above in English rather than high achieving Year 12 students (B or above in English). (A number of students from the program were slightly below the benchmark but were yet to meet their full potential). Four schools were involved in the pilot with each school nominating up to ten students. Students from low-income backgrounds and Indigenous students were specifically encouraged to apply and the program was offered to schools near QUT’s outer urban campus in Caboolture which is about 48 km north of Brisbane’s CBD. In the initial enrolment 30 students from the four schools enrolled in the program. Students were provided with a range of supports – taking into account the low socio-economic area where the schools were located. These benefits included free transport to and from school to university each week, supply of all text books, free learning and computing support and free tuition. Students were required to have at least a C average in English and could demonstrate a commitment to undertaking of the additional workloads involved. Parental support and recommendations from teachers were also required.

Retention and support

The results of a longitudinal study of first-year university students’ attitudes, perceptions and expectations about the first year showed that students differed greatly on tertiary preparedness and had increasingly higher expectations about the support they needed to thrive at university (Krause et al., 2010). A good ‘first year program’ or retention program includes high quality teaching and curriculum, a supportive academic environment, opportunities for students to engage and develop a sense of belonging and mechanisms to monitor ‘at-risk’ students. Good retention comes when a university has a strong and universal culture of retention and where dedicated staff and systems support this (Adams et al., 2010). QUT’s own first year experience program, QUT Student Success and Retention Project, which has been a strong priority since 2002, arises from a strong culture of retention and has contributed to QUT’s national recognition of its in retention programs for first years.

The needs of the *Applied Skills for Year 11s* cohort and the additional support necessary to allow these students to thrive in the program was particularly important in the design phase. A number of learning and retention strategies were needed to ensure the success of the students in this pilot program:

- Carefully chosen academic staff to teach the unit
- Extra learning support from academic staff including additional paid teaching hours, marking time and consultation time
- Student inclusion in the QUT Student Success and Retention Project with fortnightly calls and/or emails and other monitoring mechanisms set up for this particular cohort
- Additional support from the dedicated program manager
- Additional social activities to promote a ‘sense of belonging’ on campus given their part-time status on a small regional campus.

It is the adoption of appropriate retention strategies within the *Applied Skills for Year 11s* which has been integral to the success of the students in this program.

Program outcomes

Out of the 30 students who initially enrolled 17 students successfully completed the program, 12 students withdrew without academic penalty citing workload as the main issue, and one student failed to withdraw before the census date. Of the successful students, one student received a High Distinction, seven students received Distinctions, five students received Credits and four students received a Pass. Many of the students themselves were surprised by their own achievements and valued the chance to try this university experience given that some of the drivers included seeing it as beneficial to their schoolwork, most said they would recommend the program to other students. When surveyed students' attitudes towards university had changed or that they were now more confident about the prospect of going to university. "I was thinking about uni, but I am definite about it now. It is completely different to high school and you can go at your own pace" (King, 2010, p.15).

Evaluation

Apart from the academic outcomes of the program, QUT undertook an independent evaluation process (retrofitted to the program at its conclusion). The aim was to ensure the program met institutional objectives in terms of its efficacy as a useful and appropriate equity program which builds aspiration towards tertiary study. In evaluating the program, a number of questions were considered primarily feasibility and scalability.

Data for the evaluation was obtained via face-to-face and telephone interviews, small group interviews groups and surveys. Project documentation was also reviewed, including student results. This process enabled the evaluator to not only obtain feedback on the program but to ascertain whether it met program objectives and identify any shortcomings. The evaluation also included modelling the *Applied Skills for Year 11s* program to the Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach (DEMO) (Gale et al., 2010), in order to determine likely program effectiveness. This modelling process showed that the program was "quite likely to very likely" to be effective (King, 2010, p.8). The program model was measured as robust in terms of equity orientation, strategy and the program composition.

The evaluation also showed a number of areas for improvement. This was a challenging group of students both because of the individual issues for some students and because of the extra burden to existing student workloads. The students required very strong support from teachers, parents and QUT staff; extensive resourcing to remove any financial or transportation burdens; strong and additional academic support in and out of the classroom; and a regular schedule of interventions and monitoring mechanisms from the QUT Student Success and Retention Project. It means that while the scheme is effective it is also resource intensive (cost per student was about \$2340) and had some limitations in terms of scalability in its current format due to the intensity in terms of staff resourcing, costs for some elements such as student transportation, choice of students by schools, etc.

The students themselves were a mixture of low to above average achievers, first-in-the-family to attend university, and had mixed attitudes about progression to university after high school. Despite this, the students also achieved beyond their own expectations and those of others in terms of their determination and ability to complete the program in this format.

Conclusion

As a program within QUT's suite of widening participation activities the Applied Skills for Year 11s delivered on its program objectives and was found to be an effective equity program under the DEMO model. By providing students with the tools for learning while still at school, students' achievement is improved, and confidence in university as a post-school option enhanced.

The success of this model is also enhanced by the internal cooperation across a number of organisational units – Admissions, Student Recruitment, the Faculty of Health, the Library and IT services, Caboolture campus and in particular the Student Success and Retention Project. Buy-in from external stakeholders such as administrative and teaching staff within the four pilot schools was also important and is a good example of the inter-sectoral partnerships being encouraged under the HEPPP funding. In the future there are plans to expand the program to other cohorts such as Year 12s and adult-learners in other suitable formats to meet their needs for further education.

In any outreach program there are also limitations, drawn out in the program evaluation, such as resourcing and cost. This makes the current model limited in terms of scalability. However, lessons learned in this pilot will help in adapting a model that can be scaled to larger numbers of students is possible. Ultimately, the evaluation allowed us to objectively consider the effectiveness of the program and future innovations and to ensure the program delivered on its objectives. In terms of the latter, one student said it best – “I thought it would be quite hard. I didn't think it would be as good as it was. Lecturers were helpful. Everyone could do it. It is less scary now” (King, 2010, p.15).

References

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Biography

Gabrielle O'Brien is a senior equity officer with QUT's Equity Services. She has worked in Queensland's higher education sector in various roles and institutions for over 15 years. Since 2001 she has been involved in developing outreach activities and strategies with a focus on increasing participation of disadvantaged students in higher education. She is currently studying a Masters of Human Rights.