

# **Access Without Support is Not Opportunity... But Stop Singling Them Out!**

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## **Abstract**

*There is renewed energy by universities in Australia to embark on a journey of social inclusion driven by the Federal Government's widening participation agenda. Much research and attention is being given to access and outreach programs to raise the participation rates of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (LSES) as well as learning and teaching initiatives to aid their success in higher education. While Student Services units in higher education are designed to build the personal resources of students, LSES students can bring with them unique and complex social, economic, and cultural factors that can affect Student Services' capacity to support them effectively. It is important to reflect on the role Student Services units can play in the retention and success of invisible cohorts such as LSES students as well as the challenges they will face in supporting an increasingly diverse cohort. This paper proposes a strategy to build collaborative outreach models with multiple entry points into Student Services. Strategies based on universal design principles will enable Student Services units to respond effectively to an ever-changing and increasingly diverse student demographic.*

## **Introduction**

The inclusion of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (LSES) in higher education is not a new concept in Australia. Federal initiatives to encourage LSES participation levels date back to 1973 (Chapman, 2001) and more recently participation targets have been set to the highest to date suggesting that by the year 2020 20% of all undergraduate enrolments will be students from LSES backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Australia has a growing body of research, funding and resources allocated to learning and teaching, access and outreach programs, and financial assistance initiatives in order to increase the participation levels of students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Contrary to this, there has been a disproportionately low level of effort exploring the capacity of student support services (in particular, Student Services units) to accommodate for this growing cohort. Emerging research has identified that already there is a depletion of the 'traditional' cohort in higher education and that the growing diversity of the student population has warranted a new approach to programs and initiatives (Magolda, Perenzini, & Hutchings, 2010; Middleton, 2010).

Student Services in this context are those non-academic units in higher education that are primarily responsible for welfare and advisory services. Services often include counselling, disability support, health, careers and employment programs, financial aid, scholarships, accommodation and housing advice. This discussion paper will not be considering other student support services that often are prevalent within universities such as academic support, study skills, learning assistance programs, recreational programs, or library services.

## **Context and background**

One of the earliest attempts by the government to minimise barriers to education for financially disadvantaged people was the fee abolition for higher education in 1973 which did little to improve the proportion of LSES students entering the Australian higher education sector (Chapman, 2001). Higher education has long been a privileged post-compulsory education choice for Australian students (McMillan & Western, 2000) and Australia is now faced with increasing unmet labour market demands and a social justice conscience that has pressured for changes to the higher education system (Bradley, et al., 2008; Clarke, Zimmer, & Main, 1999). Increasing the access and participation of LSES students in higher education is an economic imperative as much as it is a social and political one.

Equity in higher education became a political issue following the release of what is known as the 'White Paper' in 1988 called the Policy Statement on Higher Education (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). This paper tabled equity as a central concern for higher education institutions and the Government. In 1990, the landmark *A Fair Chance for All* report was released by the Australian Government which defined the national equity objectives and set targets for higher education (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). Each of the following groups was identified as an equity group experiencing educational disadvantage and a disproportionately low participation rate in higher education: people from LSES backgrounds; people from rural and geographically isolated areas of Australia; Indigenous Australians; people with disability; people from a non-English speaking background; and women. Funding was provided to tertiary institutions as incentives to source innovative programs and to reward demonstrated commitment to increasing participation levels.

In 1994, Martin (1994) furthered the equity agenda by providing definitions for the equity groups and identifying performance indicators. Ad hoc reviews continued around the policy framework and, in 2003, the Federal Government introduced Commonwealth Learning Scholarships to minimise the financial burden of higher education and to attempt to increase the participation rates of individuals experiencing financial hardship. The Federal Government also introduced performance-based equity funding, known as the Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) to replace the block grants that were previously available. The prioritisation of the student equity framework continued and equity became one of four principles underpinning the Federal Government's *Backing Australia's Future* reform package (Department of Education Science and Training, 2004).

Much literature and empirical data has demonstrated that HEESP and initiatives before it have done little, if anything, to improve the access and participation rates of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education since the 1990s (Birrell, Calderon, Dobson, & Smith, 2000; Bradley, et al., 2008; Clarke, et al., 1999; Department of Education Science and Training, 2006; Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). The recent Bradley Review of Higher Education in Australia formed part of the social inclusion agenda (Australian Government, 2009a, 2009b; Bradley, et al., 2008). This included an aspiration to widen participation in universities, equating to 20% of all undergraduate enrolments being from LSES backgrounds by the year 2020 and 40% of people between the ages of 25 and 34 holding an undergraduate qualification by the year 2025 (Australian Government, 2009a, 2009b; Bradley, et al., 2008). The Australian Government over the past two decades has allocated considerable funding to the higher education equity framework in an attempt to increase the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education and \$433 million has been allocated over the next four years in the 2009-2010 federal budget (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010).

The barrier for LSES students is ingrained and difficult to permeate as higher education has long been viewed as the domain of the elite and upper middle class. LSES students today generally come from families who have not ordinarily considered or experienced higher education and do not necessarily view higher education as a post-compulsory schooling option. Ferrier's (2006) literature review of equity in higher education identified that LSES individuals tend to be confronted with a multitude of cultural, social, educational, and financial factors that impact on their aspirations for higher education. This is consistent with Patton and McMahon's systems theory of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Birrell et al. (2000, p. 51) found that when income, family values, family encouragement and peer group support were accounted for, "...family income can be shown to be of limited significance in shaping the social make-up of the higher education student population" demonstrating that the constraints on the LSES cohort are far more complex than simply financial.

The multitude of factors affecting students in higher education was further identified when the Australian Council for Educational Research conducted the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008). This research explored the experiences of Australian youth over the past 20 years as they have moved through various levels of education and into life beyond post-compulsory education. It has shown that students are more financially disadvantaged than they were 10 years ago, students today are spending less time on campus and students are working more (McInnes, James, & Hartley, 2000). Further research has demonstrated that

socioeconomic status is linked to particular barriers that affect use of support services (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). More specifically, students from LSES backgrounds may lack the necessary social and cultural capital to easily engage in help-seeking behaviours. This, in turn, is likely to affect their retention and progression in higher education (Bourdieu, 1979; Coleman, 1988).

Applying Bourdieu's definitions of cultural and social capital to this context, cultural capital will affect the fluency with which students are able to operate within the bounds of a traditionally 'elite' culture, such as university, while social capital will affect the degree to which students and prospective students may feel entitled to seek higher education and academic success. Social and cultural capital in themselves are affected by many social and economic factors, such as a person's position in society, wealth, income, occupation, level of education, parental expectations and willingness to invest in their child's education, social networks and social norms (Bourdieu, 1979; Coleman, 1988). While there is much research to date investigating the help-seeking behaviours of diverse cohorts (Chen & Mak, 2008; Clegg, Bradley, & Smith, 2006; Koydemir-Özden & Erel, 2010; Luu & Cheung, 2010; Salim, 2010), there is currently little empirical research into the help-seeking behaviours of LSES students more specifically.

Another challenge for Student Services is that of trying to target an 'invisible cohort'. This term has often been used to describe populations with 'hidden' disabilities such as learning disorders or mental health issues (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003). It is argued here that LSES students are an invisible cohort themselves given they do not tend to self-identify and are not easily identifiable. Such invisibility makes the targeting of services and support even more difficult. LSES in higher education has long been ill-defined, making identification of these students a hit and miss affair. LSES has traditionally been defined by the Federal Government as those individuals who have home addresses in the lowest quartile of the **Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA)** Education and Occupation Index defined by the Australia Bureau of Statistics, that is, via postcode (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). The Federal Government has debated the operational definition of LSES in terms of measuring student performance data in higher education and, to date, the postcode methodology has prevailed (Martin, 1994). More recently, the Federal Government is considering improving the measure of LSES, including considerations of census data and the receipt of income support such as Dependent Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY, Austudy, or the Pensioner Education Supplement. However this is yet to be implemented.

Although research and effort into improving the participation of LSES students in higher education is intensifying, it appears that much of the research to date has centred around either outreach initiatives (for examples see Elliott & den Hollander, 2010; Skene, 2010), academic transition programs such as access or preparatory programs (for examples see Adam, Hartigan, & Brown, 2010), learning and teaching initiatives (for a discussion on this see Gale, 2010), or first year experience programs (for examples see Kift, 2008; McInnes, et al., 2000). It can be argued that personal adjustment and social integration into university life are just as important as academic factors in enabling a student to persist and succeed in higher education (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Therefore, the role Student Services units play in supporting students is significant. As stated by Elliott and den Hollander (2010, p. 27), "if we have been successful in raising application and participation rates from equity target groups, we rightly should be interested in their subsequent success." A leading international researcher into student retention puts it quite simply "access without support is not opportunity" (Tinto, 2007, 2008). In Australia, it appears that little research and action is being undertaken in preparing the non-academic student support services to systemically meet the demands of the anticipated influx of students from LSES backgrounds, even though Federal funding arrangements are giving scope to financing student support services.

## **The Role of Student Services**

*"The fundamental role of student support services is to assist and enhance the educational experience and outcomes of the diverse range of students participating in quality Australian higher education... [t]he services play a role in the maintenance of diversity and heterogeneity in the university community by providing support to*

*students with differing needs” (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1994).*

During a recent World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century it was suggested that “...meeting student needs through an effective student affairs and services programme is central to the development of successful higher education” (Ludeman, Osfield, Hidaglo, Oste, & Wang, 2009, p. xv). European research has demonstrated that, since the implementation of the Bologna reforms which peaked in 2007, Student Services are still not sufficiently developed to adapt to the growing diversity of the student body (Crosier, et al., 2007) but knowingly make a valuable contribution to individual students. “Student services such as academic guidance, career services, accommodation, psychological counselling and welfare services, play an increasingly important role...they provide national and international students with the infrastructure to assist each individual student to navigate through higher education in the best possible way...” (Crosier, et al., 2007, p. 47). A recent shift in focus of European higher education has moved away from the transitional, pre-admission process to improving student retention and the student experience (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). “The value of student support services needs to be better recognised, supported and developed in the interest of all students. In particular guidance and counselling services play a key role in widening access, improving completion rates and in preparing students for the labour market” (Crosier, et al., 2007, p. 52).

The problem facing Student Services units is the difficulty in finding empirical evidence of a demonstrable link between the services they provide for students and positive academic outcomes. According to Promnitz and Germain (1996, p. 1), “[t]he existence of many extraneous variables, such as student motivation, family and financial circumstances, unforeseen traumas and so on, makes the examination of attrition data in association with service introduction or usage patterns problematic if we seek to establish such a link.” Later research, however, purports to have identified a link between the uptake of student services and retention of students (Jardine, 2005). An earlier project in Australia (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1994) sought to examine the link between the two by examining student experiences and perceptions. This research showed a relationship between students’ judgements of services and their continuation of their studies. Later research purports to have identified a link between the uptake of student services and retention of students (Jardine, 2005).

Saying this however, there is limited empirical research into the efficacy of Student Services. While it may be regarded that the use of, or satisfaction with, various student services, is an indication of the ‘success’ of Student Services as a whole, more empirical data is required to define and measure this success. There is also an inherent assumption that Student Services units have a positive impact on the student experience and/or the retention and success of individuals (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1994). Further investigation into this is also warranted.

The increasing diversity of students in higher education is not unique to Australia. Research in the US, UK, and in Europe also reveals increasingly diverse student populations. Such research attempts to define the offering of services that is likely to support students and the impact of these services on student success. (Crosier, et al., 2007; El-Khawas, 1996; Promnitz & Germain, 1996; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). But is it enough simply to *offer* services? Approaching a Student Services unit is a confronting experience for many and can only begin to be contemplated once an individual has accepted the notion that they may require help.

Despite the widening participation agenda and the emerging evidence to suggest that Student Services can contribute to the success of diverse student groups, this paper argues that it would be a mistake for Student Services to isolate particular programs or initiatives solely for the benefit of LSES students. Today, the majority of students are from “non-standard” populations who have unique and complex needs (Abbott-Chapman & Edwards, 1999; Middleton, 2010). Today, higher education is undertaken by more mature age students, students with disability, international students, students from a non-English speaking background, students studying via distance and students from rural and geographically remote areas of Australia. As stated in a recent European research study “...the language of ‘non-traditional’ is itself contested” (Field, Merrill, & Morgan-Klein, 2010, p. 2). Non-traditional students are arguably those under-represented in higher education. However, today, the

proportion of non-traditional students is certainly catching up to the proportion of the typical 'elite' class. This demonstrates that the need for Student Services is likely to extend to many groups of students, with LSES being but one of these.

Should the Federal Government's widening participation targets be successfully realised, the student body will further diversify. There will be increasing pressure on Student Services units to respond to the growing complexity of non-academic issues related to studying within higher education and there will be a higher demand for services.

### **The Future of Student Services**

This paper proposes a future in which Student Services steer their focus with two principles in mind: universal design approaches that will enhance service to all; and collaborative initiatives that engage an institutional-wide approach to support. Higher education retention intervention programs generally aim to support all students, not just those identified in a specific cohort or equity group (Jardine, 2005; Stone, 2005; Tinto, 2006-07). These usually aim towards a collaborative approach in which academic units and non-academic units working together to support students. Universal design principles have been in place for learning and teaching design for some time (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008) and provide a framework that attends to the needs of specific groups but inherently, due to their design, provide assistance to all groups. Through investing energy in a collaborative outreach campaign with academic and other non-academic units within the institution, with universal design principles in mind, Student Services can avoid the risk of targeting one specific cohort (such as LSES) over another. Student Services units should not feel compelled to respond to the government's widening participation agenda by isolating particular services to be utilised only by the LSES cohort. As a largely invisible cohort, it would be difficult to implement and evaluate such targeted programs and, in addition, there are other groups that will benefit from Student Services' continued involvement and outreach. There is evidence to support the view that successful strategies involve a collaborative approach across the institution (Abbott-Chapman & Edwards, 1999; Stone, 2005; Tinto, 2007) and it is therefore argued that if promotion of the available services is conducted across the whole institution, Student Services will be better able to target cohorts in need, whoever they might be.

Student Services units need to work effectively with academic and other non-academic units such as student administration, library services, colleges, and learning centres, in order to reach out to all students effectively. There is research, for example, to suggest that some cohorts of students are more likely to seek support from units other than university counselling units (Constantine, Chen, & Ceesay, 1997; June, Curry, & Gear, 1990). Students naturally interact with their faculty in order to engage with their course and naturally interact with student administration to address matters relating to their enrolment. Student Services units need to provide further resources and education to enhance the capacity of non-Student Services staff to appropriately determine if a student needs support and to refer accordingly. If other units across the institution are well-informed of the services available to students, are equipped to identify students in need of support, are fluent in referral procedures and encouraging students to seek formal support, 'multiple entry points' into Student Services are created. Without a cross-institutional focus, support programs will not be sustainable (Tinto, 2008), whereas integration with other areas of the institution may encourage students to seek out help. This has the potential to reduce barriers to help-seeking as well as any possible stigma associated with engaging with Student Services (Chen & Mak, 2008; Constantine, et al., 1997).

### **Conclusions**

Student Services, historically, have relied on students walking through the front door for support. However this traditional self-referral approach is no longer appropriate to meet the needs of a diverse student cohort, in which there may be many students with limited social and cultural capital. A concerted effort to reach out to the student body through a collaborative approach with academic and non-academic departments is warranted for two key reasons. Firstly, promoting services directly from Student Services to the student body will not in itself diminish the possibility of stigma being attached to seeking help, nor will it address the issues of whether a student may even have the capacity to self-

identify their need for help. Secondly, an education campaign to 1,500 or so staff seems more achievable than an outreach campaign to perhaps 25,000 students or more.

The situation that Student Services units find themselves in is complex. The definition of a LSES student is moot and it is difficult to identify them and offer targeted support. What is becoming a common thread within many intervention programs (for example, transition programs, first year experience initiatives) is the move to support all students, not just those identified in a specific cohort or equity group, via a collaborative approach by academic units and non-academic units (Jardine, 2005; Stone, 2005; Tinto, 2006-07). This will become even more important as the higher education cohort diversifies. We know that access without support is not opportunity. However, as this paper has discussed, singling out LSES students for targeted programs is problematic due to the complexity of variables at play. Collaboration is the key to success. Using universal design principles, creating multiple entry points for all students to access services has the potential to enhance the capacity of LSES students, as well as many others, to succeed in higher education.

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