Principles for the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds

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Abstract

This session will report on five principles for the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds at university. These guiding principles were developed from a review of the literature and interview and other data arising from a national research project. The project has developed a distinctive framework for inclusive teaching in higher education that conceptualises the facilitation of LSES student success as a 'joint venture' towards bridging socio-cultural incongruity. The project's focus is on the institutional contribution to this venture. 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. Participants will briefly explore the implications of the five project principles for institutional teaching and support practice and consider the relationship between these principles and current institutional 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" (np) 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 by synthesising 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 by making resources available and producing evidence-based guidelines.

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 and the United Kingdom. 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 for a new conceptualisation of effective teaching and support for students from LSES backgrounds that is relevant to the Australian context and that can be adapted to suit diverse institutional priorities and circumstances. The project has developed this new conceptual framework, which acknowledges that teaching and support required to promote LSES student success is not the primary responsibility of either the student or the institution. Instead, such requirements are more usefully conceptualised as a 'joint venture' towards bridging socio-cultural incongruity (Devlin, 2011).

Approach

The project is working to develop and promote new and better teaching and support for LSES students. It acknowledges and is working with institutional and student diversity to embed research- and evidence-based 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 has been developed to allow institutions to select resources and adapt these to their own institutional contexts and thus avoid any sense of 'reinventing the wheel'. The LSES agenda is common across the Australian higher education sector and, in a climate of reduced funding for higher education research, it is important that good and scalable practice be identified, developed and shared amongst higher education providers.

The theoretical approach adopted for this project is 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) on constructive alignment and Warren (2002) on 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).

The examination of theory and existing literature enabled the development of five principles which describe the "institutional" responsibility for bridging socio-cultural incongruity

(Devlin, 2011). These principles have been subject to an ongoing verification process during the coding and analysis of the qualitative interview data. This verification process included inter-coder reliability checks, review of the alignment with the data and resultant refinements throughout the coding and deeper analysis of data.

Project principles

The project principles are:

Effective teaching and support of Australian university students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds is underpinned by the goal of assisting students in their construction of both their understandings and identity as successful learners. Such teaching and support:
1. Values and respects all students;
2. Encompasses an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and coordinated through the curriculum;
3. Incorporates supportive learning environments and strategies;
4. Empowers students by making the implicit explicit; and
5. Focuses on student learning outcomes and success.

Environmental scan

An ongoing stage of the project comprises 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 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); an 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). Project dissemination activities, including a nuts and bolts workshop at the 2011 First Year in Higher Education Conference, have generated leads for the environmental scan as well as being used to build a repository of effective practice, which continues to be developed.

Qualitative data collection

Success-focused, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted by telephone and face to face with 89 LSES students at the three universities. These were guided by a protocol combining interview questions and related prompts. Initial screening for participant eligibility included: successful completion of at least one year of university; a home address with an LSES postcode; and whether parents had studied at a university.

Interviews were also conducted variously by telephone and face to face with 26 teaching and support staff from around Australia, again guided by an interview protocol. Participants were identified by purposeful sampling of individuals identified by project team members or their universities as exponents of good practice in the teaching and support of LSES students.

This Nuts and Bolts session will present the project principles with illustrative quotes from the data as the stimulus for an interactive session that aims to:

1. briefly explore the institutional implications of the project's five principles for the effective teaching and support of LSES students; and
2. seek input from participants to identify current effective practice that aligns with these principles.

Session plan

- Presenters: Setting the scene (10 mins)
    - o Introduction to the five principles emerging from the national project – Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education

- Break–out small group discussion activity (10 mins):
    - o Identify the key issues your first year and/or LSES students face.
    - o What strategies do you have in place to address these issues?
    - o Do these issues and strategies relate to the project principles? If so, how?

- Whole group discussion (10 mins):
    - o Any surprises in the principles?
    - o Any obvious gaps?

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