Different Strokes for Different Folks: Responsive Approaches to Working with Diverse Cohorts of Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Introduction
In 1990 the Labour governments’ A Fair Chance for All (DEET & NBEET 1990) argued that Australia needed a more equitable higher education sector and highlighted the need for strategy and initiatives that targeted specific equity groups including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; people with disabilities; people from rural and remote areas; and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. This document became the cornerstone of Australian higher education equity policy and funding for many years.

The recent Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report also referred to the needs of specific student cohorts noting that “successful projects … have been highly targeted and operated in partnership or collaboratively with other sectors” (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008, p.37). The report challenged universities to adopt a “more sophisticated approach” (pp. 37 & 40) to the needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. We interpret this to mean, in part, being responsive to local-level needs through the provision of targeted programs.

However, the participation targets and funding criteria arising from the Bradley Review do not differentiate between members of this cohort, referring to people from low SES background as if they are a homogenous group. The new Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) guidelines outline funding criteria for “people from low SES backgrounds” as a whole and the higher education participation targets also fail to differentiate groups within this broad cohort. There is no mention of the specific needs of migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, or people from rural and remote areas. As Gale states:

Low socioeconomic status appears to have become an umbrella term for all under-represented groups. There are in fact distinct differences within this grouping that again are derived from their different social and cultural differences. (2009 p.4)

There is a risk that this one-size-fits-all approach may filter into universities’ approaches to equity programs, with generic initiatives being developed in response to the HEPPP funding and reporting guidelines’ treatment of students from low SES backgrounds as a homogenous group. As reporting criteria (so far) relate to the number of activities and number of students participating in these activities, strategies that aim for maximum numbers in the hope that this will lead to quick results in relation to student participation, retention and success which funding is now contingent on may be favoured. This does not recognise or address the complex policy and practice issues involved in working with the diversity of this cohort.

We argue that tailored initiatives addressing specific local-level needs offer a ‘more sophisticated approach’ and have the potential to have a greater long-term impact, benefitting not only program participants but also their wider communities. In support of this argument we examine three such initiatives at Griffith University’s Logan campus. The campus serves a south Brisbane outer metropolitan area of cumulative disadvantage. In fact, Tony Vinson’s Dropping off the Edge report
(2007) indicated that Queensland’s second and third most disadvantaged postcodes are in the Logan area. Logan City has a diverse population – comprising some 170 different ethnic communities (ABS, 2008) and it takes the highest number of humanitarian refugees in Queensland. It also has a significant and rapidly growing Pacific Islander population, with Samoan being the most frequently spoken non-English language (ABS, 2008).

The three case studies featuring different disadvantaged groups illustrate the conference theme of ‘aspiration, (social) mobility and voice’:

- Students with disabilities (including students with vision impairments);
- Logan’s Samoan migrant community; and
- Skilled migrants and refugees experiencing unemployment and under-employment.

Several common and interrelated themes are evident. First, assumptions have been made that these groups are deficient in the skills required for success; that overseas-qualified health professionals lack the skills necessary to work in the Australian workplace; that Pacific Islander community leaders are ill-equipped; and that students with disabilities will struggle to cope in a higher education environment. Instead, as outlined below, overseas-trained migrants and refugees possess a wealth of valuable skills and experiences, Pacific Islander community leaders have rich knowledge and experiences, and students with disabilities display considerable agency when they have access to the necessary resources. Second, as evidenced by low achievement outcomes, systemic issues in schools mean the needs of Pacific Islanders and students with disabilities are unmet. There are parallels also with Education Queensland’s Skills Recognition Unit’s approach to the contribution of overseas qualified professionals to the Australian workforce. Third, an education paradigm has been imposed on these groups that is potentially disempowering. Fourth, these programs were implemented because individual university staff members had the passion and commitment to develop and maintain a strategic focus that was responsive to community needs. Fifth, the initiatives were funded with short-term grants only, were not part of the University’s long-term equity strategy, and therefore have been difficult to sustain. Lastly, and consistent with the Government’s approach to advancing the social inclusion agenda, a ‘joined up’ services strategy developed in collaboration with government and/or other agencies underpins all three initiatives.

**Case Study 1**

**Tertiary Education Experience (including Uni-Vision) for Students and Staff Professional Development Program**

**Presented by: Ms Suzanne Wilkinson (for the Disabilities Service)**

In 2009 the Australian Government stated its commitment to providing all Australians with equitable access to University study and embarked on a reform agenda that has seen new policy and funding frameworks which have prioritised students from low socio-economic backgrounds and Indigenous students.

This paper discusses the implications of this agenda for students with disabilities, by:

- emphasizing that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not a homogenous group; they include students with disabilities from diverse backgrounds who have unique requirements;
- arguing that achieving a vision of social inclusion involves —
  - addressing the needs of students with disabilities, and
  - going beyond the dominant themes of access and quality of student; and
- describing a successful customized initiative that addressed the University transition needs of blind and vision-impaired students.
From Bradley to HEPPP¹ – what’s in it for students with disabilities?

The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, et al. 2009) acknowledged importance of disability support by suggesting that Indigenous and disability programs be given priority for funding aimed at increasing access and success. This was made explicit in Recommendation 31 which stated that “funding for the Disability Support Program ... be increased to $20 million per year”. (p. 160)

However, issues relating to the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education have been largely overlooked in subsequent discussions. The government’s response to the Bradley Review (DEEWR, 2009) did not respond to this specific recommendation and the subsequent HEPPP funding guidelines made no reference to people with disabilities. As Gale (2009, p. 4) stated:

... in the current equity policy hierarchy, Indigenous people and people from regional and remote areas are located first and second respectively under the low socioeconomic banner, while students with disabilities are less conveniently subsumed and indeed are displaced from current policy debates.

We argue that it is important to ensure that: this omission of people with disabilities in these public documents and current equity policy does not lead to assumptions that people with disabilities are not as disadvantaged as the specified student cohorts; assumptions and stereotypes that people with disabilities do not participate in higher education are not made; and that it is recognised that people with disabilities are significantly disadvantaged and frequently experience multiple layers of disadvantage. We assert that realising the spirit of the Bradley Review and implementing the Government exhortation to advance the social inclusion agenda by delivering ‘joined up’ services and whole of government solutions involves providing people with disabilities with the opportunity to actively participate in and benefit from initiatives such as HEPPP.

The extent of disadvantage experienced by people with disabilities:

Recent Government reports (for example, Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2010; FaHCSIA, 2009a; Physical Disability Council of Australia, 2003) have documented the disturbing extent of the disadvantage experienced by that people with disabilities in Australia. The situation described in relation to education in the National Disability Strategy Consultation Report Shut Out is disquieting. Some 29 per cent of discussion paper submissions (n=750) said that “far from ensuring young people with disabilities have every opportunity to realise their potential, the education system acts as a barrier to greater achievement and independence in their lives”. (FaHCSIA, 2009b, p. 47) The report goes on to describe how, despite legislation to the contrary, students with disabilities still fall behind on a range of attainment indicators.

Some submissions argued that these results reflect the failure of the system to meet individual needs noting that “the current system has little or no capacity to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities and lacks the resources to ensure their full participation in classrooms and schools”. (FaHCSIA, 2009, p. 47) Submissions argued that low participation rates in post-secondary education were indicative of young people being denied access to the support required to successfully transition to an independent adult life. Similarly the 2004 Analysis of Equity Groups in Higher Education (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause & McInnis, 2004) stated:

...using the current reference value of 4.0 %, these students are clearly disadvantaged in terms of accessing and participating in higher education compared with the rest of the population.

This assessment becomes more compelling when we consider the current population reference value of 8%.

¹ Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program, DEEWR
Uni-Vision – a Griffith outreach initiative for students with disabilities

Consistent with Griffith’s long-standing commitment to providing opportunities for students with disabilities, its Disabilities Service, in 2004, reinvented the formerly highly successful Unitaste program for high school students with disabilities as the Tertiary Education Experience Program (TEE). TEE evaluation outcomes and the extended experience of the Disabilities Service reinforced concerns that vision impaired commencing students often lacked the skills in efficient use of assistive technology needed to undertake tertiary studies. As individual support to assist these students to become familiar with the technology is extremely resource-intensive and training students who have already commenced university diverts them from their studies Uni-Vision, a program for senior secondary students, was devised.

Uni-Vision sought to:

- raise University staff awareness about the strengths and areas for further development of vision impaired students
- implement a customized program that fulfilled student, teacher and parental needs for information, understanding the higher education learning environment and preparing for University study
- improve the retention and success of vision impaired Griffith University students.

The program was developed following a scoping project which involved:

- The appointment of a vision impaired Project Officer with an Education background and research interests in this area along with first-hand experience of the issues confronting future students;
- National and international research into:
  - initiatives at other universities that prepared vision-impaired students to transition to University; and
  - case studies that supported the project rationale and approach;
- Surveying specialist support teachers and equity officers in eight local schools and TAFEs with vision-impaired students, to:
  - ascertain the educational requirements and competence levels of students with low vision and those considered legally blind;
  - identify the training levels and support provided for students with vision impairments, students’ independence levels and ease of mobility;
  - develop the Uni-Vision proposal to address gaps in the training students received from other providers; and
  - seek feedback on the appropriateness of the proposed project.

Program Overview

Uni-Vision was offered in July 2010 as a two-day, on-campus activity for students (Years 8 to 12), with a parallel one-day activity for teachers, guidance officers and other personnel working with students with vision impairment. It was a collaborative initiative, involving Griffith’s Student Equity Services, Information Services, Griffith students/mentors and external providers such as Vision Australia, HumanWare and Quantum Technology. Rural/regional students were assisted with the cost of transport and accommodation.

The project sought to provide:

- Early intervention;
- Awareness raising for students, teachers, parents and University staff;
- Aspiration building;
- Opportunity identification - pathways and other ways to realize aspirations;

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2 Few programs match Griffith’s Uni-Vision program for students with vision impairments
3 See Dimigen, Roy, Horn and Swan (2001) for two divergent cases illustrating how the support provided to vision impaired students before higher education can impact on their experience at university
• Skill development (student and staff) and sense of capability in relation to managing the learning environment and academic work; and
• A holistic approach by working with families/teachers, and appropriate service providers (internal and external).

The pre-project survey identified that a focus on increasing student independence and competence with assistive technologies was a priority. Specific areas of technical weakness included lack of understanding of MS applications other than MS Word, editing and formatting tasks, and the effective use of on-line research tools. A framework for developing digital skills (Van Deursen & van Dijk in van Puffelen, 2009) provided a useful training approach. The University’s expectations of independent study and personal responsibility for training on-campus were also identified as important. The complementary staff program aimed to maximize the experience and reach of key influencers.

The final program involved:

- **For students:**
  • Practical learning activities (e.g. simulated tutorials), insight from current students, and computer skills development;
  • Computer laboratory sessions which covered teaching students how to create individual settings in JAWS, Zoomtext, searching the web for contacts, programs, and courses, searching Google Scholar and problem solving issues with inaccessible documents;
  • Displays of assistive technology, specialised software & resources;
  • Mentoring from vision impaired/blind students/graduates;
  • Blog site for dialogue between students and mentors; and
  • Drama performance about overcoming barriers specifically for vision impaired students.

- **For teachers:**
  • Academic/information sessions which included negotiating reasonable accommodations and providing an overview of accessible formatting and assistive technology at Griffith University

- **For both students & teachers:**
  • USB with Uni-Vision program and suite of assistive software programs; and
  • Mock assistive technology laboratory.

Six Griffith students and graduates with vision impairments participated as Mentors. 14 students, 4 parents/grandparents and 26 teacher participants, from across Queensland and New South Wales, participated and feedback from the program evaluations was most positive.

**Case Study 2**

Pacific Islander Community Capacity Building Project

**Presented by:** Dr Alison (Ali) Green in collaboration with Dr Judith Kearney

Trevor Gale recently noted that appreciating socioeconomic mobility and people’s sense of place “could see universities working more closely with and making contributions to communities rather than offering lifelines to individuals within them to escape to a higher education” (Gale, 2010, p.11). Similar views were expressed in a New Zealand review of strategies to engage Pacific Island parents in education which noted that the “co-construction of shared knowledges” (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006, p.1) was likely to be the most effective approach.

This paper reports on a 2010 project where university academics worked closely with the Samoan community in Logan city on a community capacity building project which aimed to enhance the educational outcomes of the local Samoan population.

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4 School personnel are often ill-informed about assistive technology options and applications due to limited resourcing. They also tend to base their description of the higher education learning environment on their personal experience and few have had contact with the services and support currently coordinated through a university’s disabilities service.
As already indicated, Logan has a significant and rapidly growing, predominantly Samoan, Pacific Island community. The exact numbers are not known because data collected by country of birth, does not accurately identify Pacific Islanders who may have been born in Pacific Islands, New Zealand or Australia. However, it is know that Samoan is the most frequently spoken non-English language in Logan City (ABS, 2008) and that Pacific Islanders comprise more that 50% of the student population at some schools (Kearney, Dobrenov-Major & Birch, 2005).

Prior to the project outlined in this paper research by Griffith University Education academics had identified significant literacy needs among Pacific Island school students who tended to be disproportionately represented in populations of underperforming students. Non-alignment between children’s worlds at home and at school was considered to contribute to student underperformance (Kearney, Fletcher & Dobrenov-Major, 2008). Unsurprisingly, few Pacific Island students progress to higher education.

Griffith University had previously engaged in a Bilingual Children’s Book Project, and Mata i Luga (“look upwards-aim higher”) a project where Year 10 Pacific Island students were mentored by Pacific Island tertiary students and Student Equity Services staff. In addition, members of the Samoan community had instigated a school-based Homework Centre run with the support of Griffith education academics and pre-service teachers.

While these activities provided benefits for the students involved, they did not actively support the Samoan community to develop and sustain their own projects in response to self-identified needs. It was recognised that, while they had many strengths, additional skills and increased levels of confidence would enhance Samoan community members’ effectiveness in finding solutions to the challenges they faced.

As the project aimed to enhance the Samoan community’s capacity to address community issues explicit instruction and mentoring in the action learning and action research process was provided (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009) Action learning methodology was chosen because it was collaborative, change oriented, and its cyclic nature made it responsive to emerging needs (Dick, 2000). The project engaged the University in a partnership with both schools and members of the wider Samoan community including highly regarded elders and church pastors. A series of workshops facilitated by action learning experts assisted members of the Samoan community to identify community needs, set goals, envisage a process for change, develop and implement an action plan and evaluate outcomes. Mentoring and support was provided by Griffith University Education Faculty staff. This approach maximised impact and increased the likelihood of sustainable interventions.

Project activities were developed in response to key concerns arising from a focal question developed by attendees at the inaugural meeting: For you personally, what are the felt needs of the Samoan Community to improve the educational opportunities for all? The following key issues were identified using the Nominal Group technique (McDonald, Bammer & Deane, 2009) a structured group decision-making technique which ensured all participants contributed equally:

- Parental involvement in their children’s education;
- Communication between all stakeholder groups;
- Identity and belonging issues; and
- Cultural understanding.

Project sub-groups were subsequently established to plan and implement activities for each of these themes as outlined below.

The parental involvement group focused on a local primary school where 46% of the students were Pacific Islanders. They supported a newly appointed Pacific Island School Liaison Officer to maximise his effectiveness by setting up discussions with the Principal and facilitating a staff workshop to establish priorities. A culturally appropriate Pacific Island parents’ meeting where information was conveyed in both Samoan and English attracted 60 attendees, a considerable
Improvement on the two attendees at the previous meeting. Project members and pre-service teachers also established an after-school Study Centre and supported the Liaison Officer to increase Samoan parental involvement in a babies and toddlers program and parent computer literacy classes.

The communication between stakeholders group ran a successful workshop with Pacific Island students from two secondary schools. Participants identified communication issues they faced with their teachers. These related to students’ perceptions that teachers demonstrated a lack of respect for Pacific Island students. The students also expressed themselves through music.

The identity and belonging issues group surveyed Samoan teenagers to identify youth issues. Preliminary findings indicated that these related to a perception of being caught between two cultures with a lack of opportunity to communicate their point of view to either their elders or their teachers.

The cultural understanding group aimed to ensure that Samoan young people had an accurate understanding of traditional Samoan culture. After identifying that limited information was available on the Internet, this group developed a website featuring information on aspects of Samoan culture such as its oral history, religion and the role of the family.

A fifth project involving optional leadership development through mentoring using the GULL (Global University for Lifelong Learning\(^5\)) process was later added to provide project members with additional support. Action learning was core to this process which enabled participants to reflect on appropriate action to address issues they had identified within their community.

The project generated considerable interest and enthusiasm with the numbers of participants and project ideas increasing as the project progressed. Samoan community members increasingly took on leadership roles, taking ownership of the project by initiating and sustaining activities. Another positive indicator was that several Samoan participants decided to undertake university studies as a direct result of their project involvement and interaction with university staff members.

Factors which aided the project’s success included project champions, who were respected community members, encouraging other key community members to become involved. This led to the involvement of several influential church pastors\(^6\). A further success factor was that project teams had a balance of perspectives and wide skill base as each team had a mix of University, schooling and community representatives. This also created a range of networking opportunities.

As the current project (and funding) draws to a close the issue of sustainability remains. Project members are seeking additional funding so that momentum can be maintained and future projects implemented. To this end a grant writing workshop is planned to assist community members to develop the requisite skills. Data from schools with regards to the numbers, attainment levels and post-school progression of Pacific Island students is needed to establish an evidence base for the need for future initiatives. Proposed future projects include developing pathways to university study for Pacific Islanders currently working in teacher aide and school liaison roles; negotiating a parental involvement oral language project with Education Queensland; a youth leaderships program to be run through the churches; and further music/creative projects in secondary schools. Project members also intend to lobby the university about the establishment of a Pacific Island liaison position and Federal government to urge for changing the regulations to allow Pacific Islanders to qualify for HECS-HELP student loans.

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\(^5\) Further information about GULL can be found at: [http://www.gullonline.org/](http://www.gullonline.org/)

\(^6\) Samoan ministers are highly respected community members and exert considerable influence over their congregations (Hendrikse, 1995).
Case Study 3
Inclusion by Degrees: A Program to Assist People with Overseas Qualifications
Presented by Dr Ann Ingamells

Across Australia, people who have arrived as migrants and refugees, who had status and qualifications at home, find themselves driving cabs, cleaning offices, working in meat factories, and generally doing work that is “dirty, dangerous and difficult” (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Watt, 2010). Bradley et al (2008) emphasise that well qualified people are essential if Australia is to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global economy, yet skilled people are settling for jobs that are way below their capacity. Colic-Peisker (2009) argues that refugees have a higher unemployment rate than other residents, and when employed are often isolated from the wider community in low status, low paid jobs requiring long hours of work and poor job security.

Griffith University, in partnership with Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) developed a mechanism to provide a post graduate pathway into health and human service work for people who already hold overseas health related degrees. Logan Campus, located in Logan City, an outer metropolitan, low SES area, provided the perfect site for this unusual equity opportunity. Logan City demographics reflect every wave of refugee intake this century, and all of the characteristics referred to by Colic-Peisker, above. Unpacking this initiative, adds weight to Gale’s (2010) argument that universities need to reinvent themselves in the new equity environment and work more closely with communities rather than encouraging individuals to escape in pursuit of higher education and jobs.

The project offered ten full fee scholarships into a Graduate Certificate in Community and Youth Work to overseas professionals with a health related qualification. The assumption was that difficulties securing suitable work resulted from new settlers’ limited English skills, non recognition of their qualifications, limited social networks, and limited knowledge of Australian systems and workplace culture. On this analysis the forty credit point program was modified to include an intensive course in workplace English, a course on the Australian health and welfare system, a course on community work practice and 200 hours of work placement in a health/welfare agency.

Whilst systemic approaches to equity are necessary, the narrative they are embedded in will shape overall outcomes. The grand narrative, now well critiqued by Lyotard (1984), Rose (1999) and others, is one of development and progress via which all populations across the world enter into the individualistic, materialist, aspirational lifestyle of the western middle class (Sellar & Gale, 2009). In this narrative universities are construed as culturally and class neutral pathways for higher learning. Identified with this narrative are notions that students (in all their diversity) are transformed through the educational process to reach their full potential, as (culturally neutral) employees, professionals and leaders who will actively contribute to economic development and enhance the competitive position of their countries in both national and world affairs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Both business and funding models in the increasingly corporate venture higher education has become reflect this. Whether people enter university under merit or equity arrangements they are expected to participate in the same curriculum, meet the same standards and achieve the same graduate attributes. Supports are provided, but with the aim of bringing low performing students to a set standard. Meanwhile, all those nuanced and responsive relationships and activities that students and teachers know have to happen if the boundaries between non traditional university groups and the university are to be spanned are rendered invisible.

The Promise of Coveted Places in the Labour Market
Through their university course, the students in the program this paper describes improved their English, learned about the Australian health and welfare systems in terms of both structures and intervention processes, undertook 200 hours of work placement and received significant support and mentoring around job search skills. They also developed new relationships, told their stories to each other, were affirmed in their cultural and community relations, and wrestled their way through a number of topics that go to the heart of their own acculturation struggles. Nevertheless, three months
after graduating only one graduate has found full time permanent employment. This should not be surprising. The literature is clear that well educated refugees, when competing for jobs with Australian born applicants, will rarely be successful because of systemic issues such as persistent discrimination in the Australian employment market (Colic-Peisker, 2009, Fozdar & Torezani, 2008), and the very weak arrangements in place in terms of promoting and managing cultural diversity in the Australian workplace (Syed & Kramer, 2010).

That new settlers know this was evidenced through our recruitment process. We were offering ten complete fee scholarships, yet we were not flooded with enthusiastic applicants. Even with deliberate intervention it became clear that the people we targeted had not incorporated university into their aspirations. People knew they were overlooked for jobs despite having the skills. They had friends who had regained degrees in Australia and still could not get professional positions. They were not convinced the outcomes of studying would justify the commitment. In some cases they had settled for earning money through low status jobs and were reluctant to re-jig their hopes and lives. Nevertheless ten people did enrol and ten people did complete the program. From the networks of these people, others have enrolled, and of the original ten, two are now enrolled in Masters programs and at least two others are considering it. Yet, despite still struggling to find jobs, this group of students did find ways of linking their very diverse aspirations to the various things that university can offer. Unpacking this requires a closer look into the nature of their university experience.

A more just and social education process
Because the students progressed through the program as a cohort of ten, their voice became a critical ingredient in shaping their experience. This means they had a distinctly different experience from that of other international and equity entrants. A particular effort was made to meet this cohort at their starting point, hearing their stories and aspirations, acknowledging their concerns about the embedded western cultural values in curricula and readings, working intensively with topics they were excited by, and varying assessment to allow for their capacities and interests. Each participant brought different interests, strengths and challenges. It became increasingly evident to teaching staff that the focus needed to be on working with what each brought, assisting them to build their strengths, explore the areas they found culturally contentious and extend their English capacities according to where they were at. Curriculum and standards share centre stage with a dynamic adult learning process here.

Representing their own desires: a dynamic equity agenda
Against the dominant story of jobs and contribution to the national economy, a number of different kinds of outcomes emerged from this program. Three are described.

Reliance on ‘bonding networks’ within their own ethnic group is often seen as a limitation on upward mobility (Colic-Peiskar and Tilbury, 2006). African networks contributed significantly to recruitment for this course, and these students reinforced each other in massaging the curriculum to meet their own agendas and aspirations. As individuals, people in this group wanted jobs, but not in isolation from other aspirations. They wanted their own communities here to flourish. They saw the resources of the university as valuable to this aspiration. Some students used the opportunity of work placement to engage some of the university’s community partners in a project to assist the most marginal members of their communities. People who came to Australia without ever having become literate in their own country, and perhaps never having been to school, find learning English in formal classroom settings very difficult. The graduate students heard of these tensions from their community members and planned a response. They negotiated with a local community centre, TAFE and Centrelink to enable such community members to learn together around gardening, cooking and craft at the local community centre. They involved similar members of the Burmese community, along with their leaders, so as to ensure quite distinct cultures would work together, using their English, in accomplishing their tasks. They also then engaged 15 or so Griffith students in planning and running a welcome day at the community centre for the new English learners and their families, and gained from them a commitment to volunteer in the English program. The students wrote project plans, budgets, ran meetings, wrote minutes and organised multi-layered gatherings. They also recognised that a sense of community and belonging in a friendly space like a community centre would not only
be conducive to learning but would have multiple benefits for the families’ futures, accessing them to resources and relationships that they had not known existed. With support from the university, these (now) graduates are voluntarily managing this project and trying to transform it into a paying job for themselves.

One of the topics that generated a lot of interest in the classroom was family violence, and the different ways that different cultures construct and respond to this. Class resources included a number of readings and videos that depicted analyses and intervention strategies (mostly Western). Vehemently objecting to such portrayals, but encouraged to dialogue and explore, the students moved from resistance to acute interest. As their defences dropped, they began to see the value of discussions between within and between families on this topic. One of the graduates is now running a group (paid casually) at a local agency for men to discuss and examine such issues. This is not a task a western worker could do, and illustrates the added value that is brought by cultural workers to community services in Australia.

Finally, a number of the students have joined with university and some of its industry partners and some of the members of local ethnic communities to research the issue of refugee employment and unemployment in Logan. This direct outcome of their engagement with the university will carry their voices and call for justice into the public arena.

**Re-imagined equity**

Gale (2010) argues that a key difference between low SES students and their more advantaged counterparts lies in the richer archive of resources that the latter have access to. Universities can assist students to access a much richer range of resources, and it is this that may contribute to equity. Small projects on the margins of university equity systems may have greater potential to achieve this, than mainstream initiatives. As the story suggests, people shine when they find their voice, undertake work that is meaningful to them, and contribute to their communities. It could be argued that the university is richer for the experience too. Engaging with students as people and as community members and facilitating ways for their concerns and aspirations to influence the educational process brings new life and new possibilities to the higher education process and to the communities students value.

**Conclusion**

The structural effect of the HEPPP funding criteria puts at risk the recognition and attentiveness needed to address issues of higher education participation for people from diverse backgrounds (often dealing with compounding disadvantage) who fall under the low SES banner. The strengths of the described initiatives lie in their responsiveness to community needs, customisation to meet specific needs and their ‘joined-up’ approaches. They highlight the challenges to understanding the implications of the complex relationships that exist between a person’s access to resources and the nature of those resources, how this impacts on their capabilities and opportunities to achieve the outcomes they aspire to and how gaps in any of these can lead to people being isolated and not fully participating in society.

The outlined initiatives also demonstrate that a long-term commitment is needed to build trust and allow sufficient time for communities to build the capacity to address issues arising within them. Notwithstanding, the community involved in each of these programs is now approaching Griffith and driving processes towards further initiatives. Further positive outcomes are evident. By working with targeted groups university academics are becoming aware that there are structural barriers to participation and are engaging in research into identifying the barriers. Academics are therefore becoming involved in genuine community engagement and advocacy.

While responsiveness to community needs was key to the success of the outlined initiatives, it is important to note that there are limitations in what universities can achieve. They are responding to significant social issues and are only part of the solution.
References


Teacher Education Association: 33rd Annual Conference, 6-9 July, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia.


