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Access and Success: Not Just a Dream!
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Abstract

In March 2008, the Federal Government initiated a Review of Australian Higher Education. The Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008) highlighted the fact that Australia has reached a key stage in its history with respect to higher education. It states that Australia is falling behind other countries in performance and investment in higher education. Currently Australia is ranked 9th out of 30 countries in the proportion of the Australian population aged 25-34 years with a degree level qualification (down from 7th a decade ago).The Report argues that in order for Australia to remain internationally competitive in the global economy, it must have access to increased numbers of well qualified people in its workforce. The challenge is to identify where this increased number of degree qualified people may come from. In order to address this issue, the Report recommends that there is an urgent need to increase those members of groups that are currently under represented in higher education: "Those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth; indigenous people; people with low socio-economic status and those from regional and remote areas" (p.xi).

The focus of this paper is to consider how the Access and Success project at Victoria University in Melbourne is attempting to increase the representation of people from low socio-economic areas in higher and vocational education. Victoria University is located in the western suburbs of Melbourne, where there is a predominance of young people who are recent arrivals to Australia, whose first language is not English and/ or who typically have no family members participating in higher education. Victoria University of Technology was established in 1990 by the *Victoria University of Technology Act,* a statute that put in place a strong social justice charter. From its inception Victoria University has developed detailed policies to implement its founding Act as well as to conform to Commonwealth and State legislation and policy guidelines on equal opportunity and human rights.

The Access and Success project grew out of research that identified serious concerns for students in Melbourne's west regarding their aspirations, school attendance, academic achievement, and completion rates together with higher unemployment and crime rates, when compared with other regions. The 2001 Socio Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics provides an index that enables one to rank and compare population levels of social disadvantage. Local government areas in Melbourne's' west (e.g. Maribyrnong (915.4), Brimbank (918.6), Hobson's Bay (988.7) and Melton (997.4)) have low index values that reflect relative disadvantage in terms of low income families, people with low skilled occupations and high proportions of the population without training. Levels of education in these western local government areas further exemplify the disadvantage. With an Australia wide average of 12.5% of the population having a higher education qualification, Brimbank (7.5%) and Melton (7.6%) are at the low end of the scale. Similarly, the national average for people with vocational education qualifications is 19.1%, while Brimbank (the largest municipality in the west) has the lowest recorded level of 13.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Participation in higher education by people from low SES backgrounds is significantly under-represented: urban low SES comprises 12.8% of the population but only 9.0% of the higher education places; rural low SES comprises of 10.6% of the population but only 5.9% of the higher education places and similar results occur with remote low SES comprising of 1.8% of the total population but only 0.6% of the higher education places (Universities Australia, 2008). Victoria University has the highest proportion of low-SES students (24.6%) of any university in Victoria (Refer to Chart 1).

Chart 1: Proportion of low SES students in Victorian universities 2006 (% students)
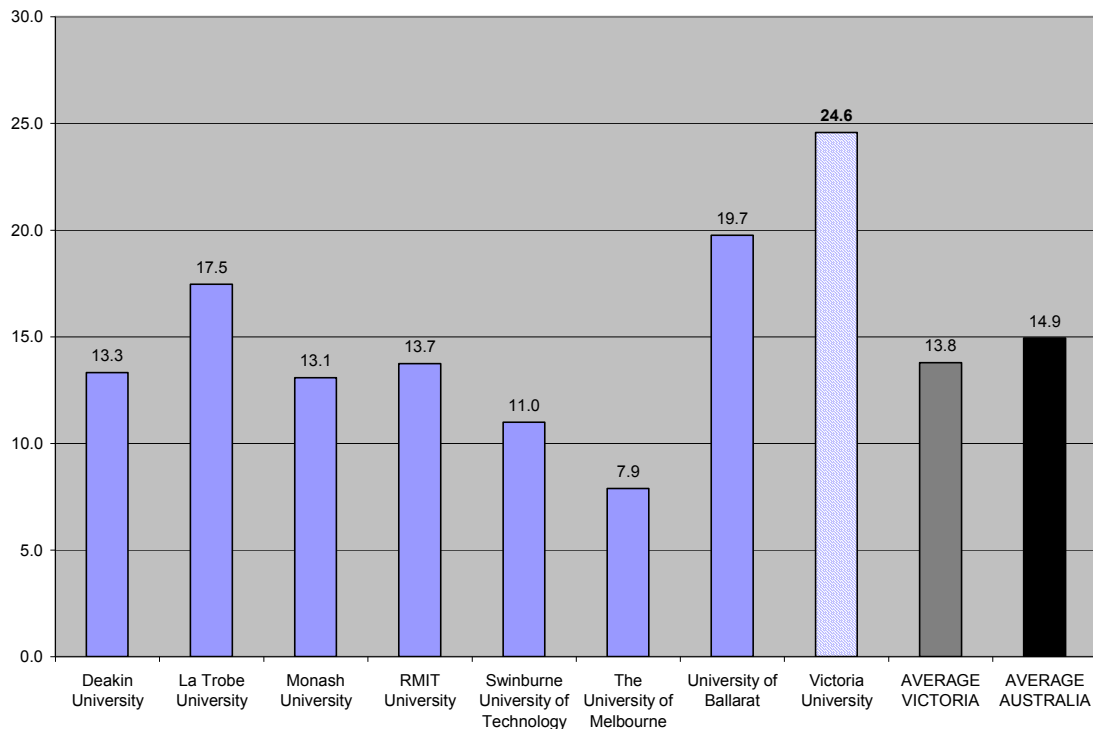
(Source: DEST 2007, Appendix 2.3)

Universities Australia research argues that there has been little change in the levels of participation over the past decade. They suggest that the under representation of people from low SES backgrounds is influenced by a number of interrelated factors including the lower levels of educational achievement; lower educational aspirations and the lower rates of school completion. Their research also noted that the lower participation rates in higher education is more an access issue than a success issue as "low SES background students do almost as well as other groups in retention, success and completion"(2008, p.2). Birrell, Calderon, Dobson and Smith (2000) concur indicating that very little has occurred over the past decade to increase the numbers of low SES background students in higher education. The Access and Success program at Victoria University is attempting to address this low level of participation by developing school-university partnerships that focus on the 3 key areas mentioned earlier: educational achievement, aspirations and school completion.

Methodology

Access and Success is a research-based project that is trialling a range of school-university partnerships with schools in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The key research questions for this aspect of Access and Success work are:

- How can a university increase the access and success of young people from Melbourne's west in higher and vocational education?
- What university strategies, partnerships and outreach activities can support young peoples' aspirations and capabilities in succeeding in higher and vocational education?
- How can recommendations emanating from this research be used to support an increase in the participation rates of people from low socio-economic status in higher and vocational education?

The Collaborative Practitioner Research (CPR) methodology being used in this research has proved to be an enabling strategy for teacher researchers and university researchers to work respectfully together in the collection and analysis of data and in the proposition of research findings (Cherednichenko, Davies, Kruger and O'Rourke, 2001). Data collection strategies include:

- Case writing – practitioner descriptions of practice (Wassermann, 1993). Shulman (1992) described cases as case writing or case reports that are first hand accounts written by practitioners such as teachers who are reporting their practical experiences. "The case writer is the final arbiter about how the case is to be constructed and what it should finally contain" (Wasserman, 1993:198).
- Interviews, minutes of meetings, participant observation. Seidman (1991:4), wrote, "Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behaviour and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour. . . . [It] allows us to put behaviour in context and provide access to understanding their action".
- Research meetings. The focus and nature of these meetings vary with some, for example involved in case writing that prompts practitioner inquiry and interpretation of practice. Others inquired into the nature of school student learning and others involved participants inquiring into the nature of their own learning (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, Sachs 1997).

The Access and Success Project constitutes one aspect of Victoria University's broader community engagement agenda, seeking to develop educational opportunities and outcomes of young people in the western Melbourne region. It is a research and development project, anchored in school partnerships. The Access and Success project team has focussed its work in Learning Enrichment, Youth Access, Schools Plus and Educational Leadership. Within these 4 key areas, the team has developed school-university-community partnership projects in support of enhancement of educational opportunity in the West.

School-university Partnerships
Many of the project findings around school-university partnerships extend work undertaken in the School of Education, especially work generated by the Research into Innovative Practice in Education (RIPE) projects (2005-2007). Access and Success (A&S) projects have been built on this research with the development of "longer, deeper, richer" partnerships where all stakeholders not only bring to the relationship an expectation that the project will continue over some years but share fully in determining the focus and progress of site based projects. There is a strong research element in both Learning Enrichment and Schools Plus projects – school staff, university students and university staff form site based professional learning and research teams that meet regularly to discuss, monitor and evaluate their work.

Embedding the mentor teachers in the professional learning team
environment, combined with the freshness, energy and extra capacity
of the preservice teachers, linked to the research knowledge of a
University colleague has provided this partnership with educative
dividends for all contributors (Mentor teacher case, September 2009)

One of the challenges that A&S is facing is evaluating the impact of its partnership work with schools and professional learning teams. There has been considerable feedback and data collected that provides insights into the collaboration of the professional learning teams. The A&S team has negotiated with school teams that project outcomes will be evaluated on two counts – in immediate effects on school students' outcomes and experiences and in the development and generation of shared knowledge and understanding about enhancement of educational engagement and achievement. Due to the fact that A&S work involves "longer, deeper and richer" partnerships has created an additional challenge that requires formative evaluation strategies to be employed to determine progress over the 3-5 years of each partnership project.

Learning in the Workplace and Community (LIWC)
The prime goal within the Learning Enrichment area of A&S work was to establish and build 50 specific long term school based partnerships that focus on 3-5 year initiatives aimed at improving schooling outcomes. This has been achieved during the first 18 months with individual and school cluster partnerships at both the primary and secondary levels. One outcome of the A&S partnerships that has become apparent has been the facilitation of respectful collaboration and democratic dialogue with school colleagues. Lipman (1997) used the term 'community of inquirers' to describe a similar environment in which professional learning team members share discoveries and information (Wilks, S., Treseder, R., Burgh, G., Cherednichenko, B. 2004).

A&S has been proactive in sharing these important elements of partnership across the university, informing others about successful engagement with schools and comparable settings. Victoria University is embedding the Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) initiative, whereby all university students are required to complete 25% of their course assessment in a workplace or community setting. It is clear that within VU there are other Schools and Faculties that are already engaged with particular school communities or clusters in limited ways. Social work students for example support programs in selected schools and in recent months undergraduates from the School of Sport and Exercise Studies have worked closely with students from local schools in providing swim coaching programs..

Increasing the awareness of higher education does have a significant impact on school student aspirations. Having grown up in Melbourne's west has enabled some VU students to mentor students in schools (or similar schools) that they completed their secondary education in. Through the development of these mentor-mentee relationships, arise conversations about post-secondary education that prompts school students to consider: 'If he/she can do that, then perhaps I can to'. A&S has been active in facilitating visits by groups of school students to VU. For many secondary students, VU could be considered as just a set of buildings on Ballarat Road in Footscray or in St Albans. When provided with a tour of the campus, these same students experience first hand what the university potentially has to offer them in their areas of interest. One Staughton College student commented in an A&S interview in the Australian newspaper that: "You see what it is like, you can see what is ahead of you" (The Australian, May 20, 2009).

Victoria University (VU) supports the premise that Year 12 students should have the opportunity to enroll in VU based on more than just their ENTER/TER score. The traditional ENTER/TER process of university entry has blocked entry for low SES students whose successful completion of secondary school has been negatively impacted due to their life circumstances. As mentioned earlier, research by Unversities Australia indicates that once they have gained access to higher education, low SES students do almost as well as others. The Portfolio Partnership Program (PPP) is an alternative entry program for Year 12 students who attend one of the VU partnership schools in Melbourne's west. PPP is about school students developing a portfolio application that articulates their goals, achievements and community involvement. Students must also receive an ENTER score of not less than 50. All VU courses offer students entry via this PPP pathway. Access and Success has facilitated school partnerships that have enabled VU students to support and encourage school students to consider the PPP as a realistic pathway for them to higher education.

Pedagogy – higher education pedagogy and school pedagogy
Many of the considerations in the above section deal with the actual pedagogy of learning in the Workplace and Community. VU student evaluations of their experiences in partnership schools have provided important insights into their contributions to specific projects. Again, this A&S work is in its early phase but we are able to draw on the experiences of the first cohort of students.

Across many of the A&S projects, school based professional learning teams of VU students teachers, university staff and in some cases school students meet on a regular basis to plan, implement and evaluate their respective projects.

> *[School name] believed in establishing a community of learners that shared a common vision, values and objectives through the skill and knowledge gained during professional development. [In doing so] we have worked collaboratively to enhance the curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment in information and communication technology. In developing highly empowered teams, we used the talents, diverse expertise and knowledge of staff to reflect upon our pedagogical knowledge and apply best practice to student learning (VU student log entry, September 2008)*

One of the challenges has been how best to acknowledge and recognise the commitment, passion and involvement that the VU students have exerted in these A&S projects. Some VU students have commented that their project unit grades and assessments are un-graded with no overt recognition of excellence. Students, school colleagues and university staff recognise the gap between effort expended on the projects (often involving many extra days of school based work, much consultation of research literature, mastery of specific research skills etc) and university acknowledgement. Conversely, VU students all recognise that the A&S project experiences when documented well provide an important addition to their professional portfolios and their professional contacts and networks.

Social Inclusion
This year the Access and Success team played an important role in generating a regional response, in partnership with the Western Metropolitan Region of DEECD, local municipalities and non government providers such as the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, to the emerging Federal agenda of social inclusion with a particular focus on education. In assisting

to shape the discussion and discourse around events such as the regional conference on Social Inclusion and Education at Williamstown (August, 2008) and the University of Melbourne Conference on Partnerships for Social Inclusion (October, 2008) A&S has been able to draw on its work to inform understandings of the ways and extent to which universities can engage with their communities to effect educational and social change. One of the outcomes of the Williamstown conference has been the development of a proposal for the Institute of Teaching in Context, which involves the establishment and development of a new interdisciplinary institute to enhance the quality of teacher education through exemplary preparation and support of educators working in challenging contexts from early childhood through to post compulsory settings. The proposal builds on the work of Access and Success in proposing the development of a research hub where initiatives, interventions and policies can be evaluated and developed to improve educational outcomes and social inclusion in Australia's disadvantaged areas.

Current collaborations with the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP) highlight the potential that strategic partnerships can have in enhancing learning; increasing the participation rates of young people in tertiary education; increasing the quality of teaching and learning in both the university and in schools; and raising the commitment to and the outcomes of collaborative research. A&S has recently met with senior Western Metropolitan Region of the DEECD personnel to discuss a number of new collaborations that build on those already in place. As has been stated earlier in this paper, the identification and subsequent management of new collaborations/partnerships must be carried out in a transparent and respectful manner. LIWC can provide many opportunities for both VU and school students. Learning from A&S experience in negotiating, maintaining and evaluating collaborative school-university partnerships can support VU in providing leadership through its LIWC initiative and in developing innovative and exemplary collaborations that are of mutual benefit for all participants.

Metacognition Mentors @ Box Forest Secondary College
The Access and Success partnership with Box Forest Secondary College, situated in Melbourne's North West, has focused on a whole-school approach to improving students' literacy skills. This year was the first year for the project, and saw two Victoria University preservice teachers in the College each Tuesday across the academic year, participating in a professional school-based team led by the College Literacy Coordinator. The role of the professional learning team has been to undertake research into teaching and learning in the school with a focus on the acquisition and integration of core literacy skills, and to develop and implement strategies to support improved student outcomes. There has been an emphasis on professional development for staff with a view to developing a consistent approach to literacy development across the school.

The VU preservice teachers from the School of Education have acted as mentors within this team, and have met regularly over the year with school colleagues to plan how they may support the work of the Literacy Coordinator in her leadership and management of 'whole school' teaching and learning development. Their role has included;
- Evaluation of lessons in the college, data collection
- Undertaking training in the learning tools and strategies supported through the project
- Directly instructing students in small groups in the use of the learning tools
- Conducting surveys of a cohort of students about their learning
- Documenting the experiences of the team over the year.

This partnership has achieved considerable initial success through the work of the VU students within the school professional learning team. During 2009, project evaluation will focus on student learning outcomes through the tracking of students as they are increasingly exposed to the program.

Let's stop passing the buck: Student engagement in the Keilor Cluster
The Keilor Cluster project began with an initial conversation between Access and Success staff and the Principal of one of the cluster schools. The principal highlighted general frustration at his school's lack of success in supporting what he referred to as "disengaged" students, an issue that was strongly echoed by the other local principals, and which has had a flow-on affect for all students and their learning environments. In 2008, 10 VU preservice teachers, a teacher from one of the schools and an A&S research colleague formed the professional learning team that agreed to investigate this problem. Based on that initial conversation, an action research project was developed, that focussed on examining critical student disengagement and developing cluster wide strategies that could address these students' needs.

The first year of the project involved an extensive literature review, an investigation of the types of programs and placements available for "disengaged youth", and the development of aggregated profiles of "disengaged students." The research team then analysed their data, developed a report to present their findings to the schools and the wider Cluster audience, and a research paper which was accepted at the American Educational Research Association's annual conference.

In 2009, the project has an emphasis on school-based initiatives aimed at encouraging disengaged students who are routinely "withdrawn" to alternative settings, to return to or instead remain in regular schooling and continue on positive pathways. The team is presently researching and evaluating existing approaches in the cluster schools and elsewhere to prepare a report for the cluster principals, as well as a checklist for effective student engagement strategies. VU students have also led a number of project events and facilitated and analysed student attitude focus groups data. The professional learning/research team has been led by a school colleague, who has had access to both time release and project support as a result of a successful DEECD grant application submitted by the cluster and A&S.

Career Ladder at Bayside College
The Career Ladder project has focussed on young people working with each other to develop understanding and readiness around education and career opportunities. The project utilises the developing insights and expertise of Victoria University Youth Work students to act as mentors for senior secondary students. The secondary students then learn mentoring skills themselves, which they can put to use with younger students. Career counselling and leadership development are key components of the relationship between the university and secondary schools. The goals of developing student aspirations and informed decision making, particularly with regard to pathways, guide much of the considerations and actions throughout the collaborative projects.

Inspire to Aspire: Roxburgh College
The need to address student aspirations and their respective capacity to embrace tertiary education is apparent as early as Year 9, and is reflected in the emphasis at Roxburgh College

on developing student knowledge about pathways and work education in the Middle Years. This work was the starting point for considering the A&S project at Roxburgh, which is aimed at developing the aspirations and perceptions of post compulsory education of Year 9 and 10 students, with a particular focus on university and TAFE.

The first year of the project has involved two VU preservice teachers working with the Assistant Principal and College Pathways Coordinator and a small group of Year 9 and 10 students who have been identified by the school to demonstrate high academic capacity, but relatively low or under-developed aspirations. The group has been intentionally kept small to best facilitate the development of a climate of trust amongst all participants in which all students feel comfortable expressing their views freely.

Plans for 2009 include a visit by this group to a number of VU campuses, where they will be exposed to a range of learning experiences relating to Further and Higher Education as well as Vocational Education. A great deal of time and effort will need to be accorded to the collection of feedback from students and staff at the end of the 2009 school year so that an informed approach can be made with regard to the following year. It should remain of prime importance that the students gain ownership of the project and realise the contribution they can make to the project and more importantly their own futures.

Bulldogs Friendly Schools Program
Schools Plus Provision project work is developing productive links between schools and community bodies with a specific focus on optimising student engagement. One such partner is the Western Bulldogs Football Club who together with VU, have a commitment to their local communities in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

When the Western Bulldogs established the *Bulldogs Friendly Schools Program* in 2006, they found that schools wanted a quality program that made a real connection to their students learning and community development. A&S, VU and the Western Bulldogs formed a partnership with schools in the west of Melbourne that has focussed on the development of the Bulldogs Friendly Schools program. This 8 week football program in 30 primary schools is delivered by preservice teachers from the VU School of Education and supported by the AFL. The program explores football skills, healthy eating, wellbeing and leadership skills, and is supported by 2 visits from elite AFL players who act as role models reinforcing the leadership and wellbeing themes. In 2008 a commitment was made, ensuring the same AFL player visited the school over the year to foster a connectedness to the students and staff. There are other supporting activities that engage students and their families and maintain the excitement generated through the program itself. Attending a Western Bulldogs home game for example has enabled school students and their parents with free bus travel and entry into the MCG, and invitations to visit the Whitten Oval to train with the players. Results from an initial survey of school student participants have identified this program's ability to develop greater understanding of the relevance of diet, team work, respect, fairness, harmony and leadership in school students' daily lives.

Conclusion
This paper has highlighted a range of social and equity issues that are inhibiting people from low SES backgrounds in participating in higher and vocational education. The original research questions were:
- How can a university increase the access and success of young people from Melbourne's west in higher and vocational education?

- What university strategies, partnerships and outreach activities can support young peoples' aspirations and capabilities in succeeding in higher and vocational education?
- How can recommendations emanating from this research be used to support an increase in the participation rates of people from low socio-economic status in higher and vocational education?

Despite having the largest enrolment of university students from low SES backgrounds in Victoria, Victoria University continues its commitment to access and equity policies. The Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education report recommends that the Australian Government set a national target that, by 2020, 20% of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low SES status backgrounds. Recent comments by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne argue that this target will not be met. Professor Davis suggested that the target was based on unrealistic estimates and that only limited numbers of students from low SES backgrounds would obtain adequate school results to enroll in university. Quoted in the Age Newspaper he stated: "No Victorian university is going to come anywhere near to meeting this target," (Perkins M, 2009).

Based on evaluative data collected over the past two years, Access and Success is supporting the building of sustainable and enduring university-community connections, is focussing appreciation of access issues within the university in terms of selection and pedagogy practices and is informing theory around the role of a dual sector university in fostering social inclusion in a region. Access and Success is working closely with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, the Smith Family, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, DEECD, Community agencies and other Victorian Universities to develop an initiative that has a partnership focus that will seek to significantly increase the numbers (as per the Bradley Report) of low SES background students in higher education. The aim is to ensure that access to and success in higher education for these students can be a reality and not just a dream.

Keywords
Social Inclusion, Aspirations, Success.

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