
Widening Participation: Challenges Confronting a Research-Intensive University

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges confronting a research-intensive Australian university in responding to the ‘widening participation’ agenda outlined in the recent *Review of Higher Education*. The university argued that it is not possible to respond effectively to this agenda without having a clear understanding of the current status of relevant institutional strategy and practice. Research identified existing widening participation strategies and programs relating to people from low socio-economic backgrounds and explored the challenges currently being faced by those with management and operational responsibilities in this area. Along with research results, a review of associated literature and national and overseas ‘good practice’ studies informed development of a *Widening participation: Student success conceptual framework*. This framework provides direction to the university in responding to the widening participation agenda.

Keywords: widening participation, Australia, research university, outreach, engagement

The Historical Context Relating to Widening Participation in Australian Universities

Scull and Cuthill (2010, p. 60) argue that ‘Two important and interrelated perspectives, social justice and economic prosperity, drive the urgent imperative for more equitable access to higher education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds’. While the link between education opportunities and socio-economic status has long been recognised, both in Australia and overseas (Gewirtz, Dickson, & Powers, 2004; Greenbank, 2006; Tesse & Polesel, 2003; Wyn & Woodman, 2006), higher education remains out of reach for many Australians (Long, 2005). The recent (Australian) *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) has reinvigorated discussion relating to this issue. However, much emphasis had already been directed towards this issue in Australia over the past 20 years, since publication of the *National Equity Framework* in 1990 (Department of Employment Education and Training [DEET], 1990).

This framework identified six key equity groups seen to be disadvantaged in terms of their under-representation in higher education. These were people from a low socio-economic background, people with a disability, people from rural or isolated areas, people from a non-

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English-speaking background, Indigenous people, and women, particularly in non-traditional areas of study and postgraduate degrees.

Implementation of the *National Equity Framework* has been monitored by national performance indicators developed to measure access, participation, retention and success among the six equity groups (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004). During subsequent years a broad range of dedicated programs has been implemented in Australian universities, many of which focus on university–school partnerships. While there have been some increases in higher education participation by particular equity groups, access rates for people from a low socio-economic background remain persistently low, with only a 15% participation rate despite making up 25% of the general population (Bradley, et al., 2008; James, 2007).

Most recently, the *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008) reinforces the need for universities to be more proactive in addressing the interrelated issues of social disadvantage and economic prosperity through improved access for people from under-represented equity groups, in particular those from low socio-economic backgrounds and Indigenous Australians. In view of the somewhat limited success towards a similar goal over the past 20 years, the attainment of such outcomes requires consideration of new approaches to university outreach, engagement and recruitment relating to people from low socio-economic backgrounds. For example, Scull and Cuthill (2010, p. 62) have suggested a move from traditional outreach approaches towards a more *engaged outreach* which looks ‘...towards raising the aspirations of potential students and their families [through] innovative programs...that involve universities and multiple stakeholders working collaboratively within their local context’ (Figure 1).

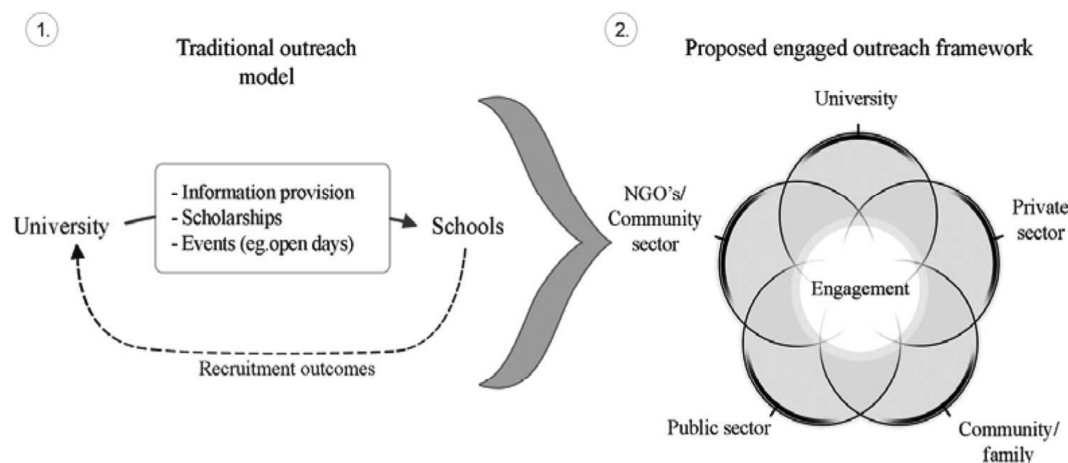


Figure 1

From traditional to engaged outreach (Scull & Cuthill, 2010, p. 63).

This article presents one case study, of a research-intensive university, describing the challenges they face in responding to the widening participation agenda outlined in the *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). The University of Queensland is a member of the ‘Group of 8’ Australian sandstone universities, is acknowledged as one of the top five research universities in Australia, and has approximately 5,300 staff and 40,000 students.

The university has a diverse range of engagement, outreach and recruitment programs operating at school, faculty, campus and/or institutional levels. To varying degrees these programs incorporate some focus on people from low socio-economic backgrounds. At present, many programs appear to be run on a ‘one-off’ basis in response to specific local needs or available funding. As such, links between various programs and associated staff across the university appear to be, at best, tenuous. At the institutional level, it is acknowledged that there is limited understanding of the scope of current widening participation initiatives, nor of good practice examples of what the university might do in addition to current efforts. This article, focusing on challenges in responding to the national agenda, draws from data collected during a widening participation audit and review project undertaken at The University of Queensland (UQ) (Schmidt & Cuthill, 2009).

The rationale for this research argues that it is not possible for the university to respond to this agenda effectively and efficiently without having a clear understanding of the current status of relevant institutional strategy and practice. As such, research focuses on three key questions:

- What widening participation strategies and programs, focusing on people from low socio-economic backgrounds, are currently being implemented?
- What are the challenges relating to programs targeting people from low socio-economic backgrounds?
- How can the university move forward on this national agenda?

Results from this research will inform development of appropriate outreach, engagement and recruitment policy and practice directed towards people from low socio-economic backgrounds. While this article describes one institutional case study, anecdotal information suggests other Australian universities are asking similar questions and facing similar challenges. As such, results described in this article have broader relevance to a national audience.

Research Design

Research was conducted in 2009 and early 2010 under direction of a project steering committee comprising senior academic and administrative staff with management responsibilities in related areas (e.g., outreach, student equity, engagement and student services). The key operational goal for the research was to identify directions for the university regarding widening participation for people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Research design incorporated a literature review; four steering committee meetings that provided direction on research design, implementation and review; thirty key informant interviews; four group workshops; and a review of relevant faculty and university reports, strategies and/or plans. Data was progressively analysed with a final triangulation of the diverse data sources.

A comprehensive literature review included academic literature relating to widening participation and related topics, and national and overseas case studies of ‘good practice’ relating to key topics of ‘widening participation’, ‘raising aspirations’ and ‘higher education access and equity’.

A combination of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques was used to identify interview participants. The project steering committee provided direction in identifying the purposive sample for key informants. This purposive sample included both

senior managers (e.g., Executive Deans or Directors) and operational staff involved in engagement, outreach and recruitment programs. These participants were subsequently asked to identify additional people who could knowledgeably respond to the research questions. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted (14 senior managers and 16 operational staff). Sixty-minute interviews were recorded, transcribed, thematically coded and a preliminary analysis undertaken.

Initially, all primary data was to be collected from key informant interviews. However, four work groups accepted an alternate offer of a facilitated group workshop. The workshop supported their needs for program review and planning, as well as providing information to the research team. Data from workshops was recorded on butcher's paper and in researcher field notes, and a summary report was written. Both interviews and workshops focused on the three key research questions listed previously. Thematic coding of data relating to both current 'challenges' and 'opportunities' identified six interrelated factors that can be viewed as a mirror of each other; the opportunity being the flip side of the challenge:

- external perceptions of university
- communication processes and information provision
- operational resources and capacity
- developing evidence-based responses
- strategic institutional focus and leadership
- developing a broader relationship base.

Relevant reports, strategies and plans relating to people from low socio-economic backgrounds were collected from all faculties and organisational units concurrent to the interview process. In addition, a focused intra-web search was conducted to identify additional written material. A database detailing current activity including staffing, budgets, strategies/plans and evaluation reports was developed.

Diverse data sources were triangulated to provide a final analysis linked to the research questions. This article presents:

- a brief summary of the current context. A detailed internal report (and database) has been compiled describing current strategies and programs (Cuthill & Schmidt, 2009)
- detailed description of the six interrelated challenges and opportunities in working towards the new widening participation agenda
- description of a *Widening participation: Student success conceptual framework* developed to guide the university in responding to these challenges
- conclusions.

The Current Context

The *University of Queensland Strategic Plan 2008–2013* (UQ, 2008) identifies engagement, along with learning and discovery, as the three key priority areas of focus. Arguably, though not explicitly, a broad strategic emphasis on engagement at the university supports the national higher education widening participation agenda.

More explicit attention to widening participation strategy and practice is provided through key organisational units such as the Equity Office, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre, Student Services and the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning).

Each of these units has a varying level of focus on widening participation within their mandate. While there is a long history of commitment to equity within the university, the policy and operational responses within these units are still evolving. In addition to these key institutional-level groups, individual campuses, faculties and/or schools also run specific programs that have varying levels of focus regarding widening participation for people low socio-economic backgrounds.

It is evident that there are currently good examples of outreach, engagement and recruitment directed towards people from low socio-economic backgrounds. However, interview participants identify challenges in moving forward with this agenda.

Challenges in Responding to Emerging Widening Participation Requirements

Analysis of responses from interviews presents a story of interrelated challenges and opportunities relating to the national widening participation agenda. The story begins with concern expressed during interview regarding community perceptions of the university. Perhaps in common with other Group of Eight (G08) ‘sandstone’ universities in Australia, interviewees suggest the prevailing image of this university,

...is one of being unavailable, an elitist, private school. A lot of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds think that they cannot go to UQ... [they say] ‘It’s not my university. Private school kids go, not me’. That is a dangerous image for us to have.

While it is acknowledged that processes are currently being put in place to change that perception, it is argued that new initiatives still predominately target the ‘high flyers’. There is limited communication, information or promotional material that is culturally appropriate and accessible being directed to people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Cuthill and Scull, 2011). As such, there is little conviction that the new messages being marketed will break down the elitist perceptions.

Clearly, this university has traditionally had strong links with many private schools, and it is important to the university that these are maintained. However, responding to the national agenda will require a broadening of focus towards increased engagement with state schools, especially those schools geographically located in low socio-economic areas:

The university needs to be more welcoming to all schools, more inclusive in general. It’s a marketing strategy problem that we have set ourselves up as elite and then how do we change that image to being more inclusive and welcoming when we have worked so hard to be elite? Historically we have set ourselves up to being exclusive. If we are talking about outreach we have to be inclusive.

A strategic, long-term focus on building genuine relationships with a much broader public is required to achieve widening participation objectives:

We don’t have established networks, connections and contacts with rural, regional and isolated communities like we have them with the traditional schools we have contact with. Even if we decided to do this tomorrow we don’t have the contacts in these areas and even if we did, we would be regarded as being a bit hypocritical for doing it. There is a bit of resistance about what our motives are, because historically we have not been open or nurturing of those relationships.

Interviewees argue that such building genuine relationships with diverse external stakeholders—including schools, parents and family, relevant government and community sector agencies and the wider community—will underpin successful long-term outreach, engagement and recruitment directed towards people from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Supportive institutional leadership and clear strategic directions will be required to realise this focus. Currently, various outreach, engagement and recruitment programs focusing on people from low socio-economic backgrounds are managed at institutional, faculty and/or campus levels. Resources are stretched and coordination across current policy, operational and research efforts is lacking. Interviewees highlight the need for this leadership and direction:

The university has to develop and communicate effectively a vision and plan throughout all levels of UQ; it needs definitions and strategic foci.

...an absence of an overarching institutional objective...a lot of ambiguity about what the commitment to funding outreach is...still no clarity on the executive position on outreach... Without clarity and committed funding this will remain a problem.

The battle for resources to implement relevant initiatives presents another challenge in responding to the national agenda. Current funding arrangements appear to have been ad hoc, based on inconsistent faculty priorities and short-term projects. At the institutional level, the capacity to develop ‘new’ initiatives is limited by a tight funding environment, and to date there has been no dedicated government funding allocated to support institutional responses. Without additional support interviewees indicate that it will be difficult to develop and implement meaningful programs. For staff who wish to broaden their core work to include widening participation objectives, competing work demands (e.g., research, teaching and administration), limited funding and a lack of faculty support are seen as key constraints. The ‘extra work’ involved appears to have been informally added on to existing workloads.

Even staff who work full-time on outreach or recruitment programs struggle to achieve a meaningful focus on people from low socio-economic backgrounds:

There are over 600 schools [in the region] and there is one recruitment person here [regional campus] and a team of five centrally so we can’t cover everyone. There is not enough time, staff and money to engage and talk to everyone. It is not possible to do hands-on effort in these areas. I don’t even really understand what is happening with central recruitment initiatives so how can I plan something coordinated? The resources and teachers will be stretched already in these low socio-economic schools, so how will we make these types of engagement work when both parties are stretched? [In addition}, we know little about the state school system as we have been focused on engaging with the private schools in our catchment.

There is a need for dedicated positions and funding to implement this agenda, a move away from this current situation where there are ‘...isolated workers, part-time on multiple campuses... [where] staff are really stretched having to work in many different roles...’.

Interview participants argue the need for a more focused institutional approach towards appropriate resourcing of relevant initiatives. Securing support for new programs or extra resources is difficult. Limited funding for one-off, short-term projects has been the norm, rather than ongoing funding for longer-term programs. For example, Higher Education Equity and Support Program (HEESP) funding underpinned several of the projects described by interviewees, and their frustration with short-term funding is evident:

...how do we maintain funding for initiatives long term? The university expects that these initiatives are run without long-term funding commitment. For the HEESP initiatives that have demonstrated effective outcomes, where do we go within the university for long-term funding? These initiatives need long-term support and profile in the communities and schools. Year-by-year funding is not good at engaging effectively.

A poor information base and lack of communication limits capacity to develop and deliver appropriate outreach and engagement programs to schools and communities. For example, there is little understanding of:

- the widening participation agenda

... [this is] something that the equity office does, something that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit does... [rather than] ...core business for the Executive Deans, Associate Deans, Heads of School...

- what constitutes good practice in this area

Get the experts together, the people out there that are doing it well. Currently what is happening well in this area is happening in spite of the system, not because of the system, through individuals' initiative.

- alternative pathways, programs and existing support services

Staff also want to know more about what services are available to support students and be able to point students in the right direction to get help.

- specific target group/s and more generally of disadvantaged communities

...we have no idea of the communities and people... [as a result] the messages do not work and are not appropriate...

A better evidence base, enhanced information sharing, collaboration among staff, and development of a networked 'community of practice' are all seen as essential in developing institutional capacity to respond.

In addition to this lack of information or understanding, changes in organisational culture are constrained by history and tradition. For example, student recruitment to the university has long focused on the top achievers among high school students,

We are way too rankings and pre-requisites focused...we are meant to be running an alternative entry process. The university is really inflexible on giving entry. For some of [our local] students English is not their first language...we just say they failed English so they can't come.

Reaching out to people from low socio-economic backgrounds can also present unexpected challenges. For example, some potential students have resisted being connected with an equity program, suggesting that there is a certain stigma linked with coming from a poor or disadvantaged background,

...resist being identified as low SES

...do not wish to be marginalised or segmented, [or seen as] holders of an equity place, and even if they have, they haven't wanted to be seen as getting special attention

This raises a quandary as to how to 'sensitively' engage with, and offer support to people from low socio-economic backgrounds so they can move into, and then successfully complete their university studies. Responding to such an issue presents a real challenge to a research-intensive university with limited experience of working in this area.

Finally, in accordance with the ideals of social equity it is important to recognise that people from a low socio-economic background are not one homogenous group. They come from different cultures and contexts, and bring with them many different life experiences and

abilities. As such, they will have different needs requiring informed and culturally sensitive responses focusing on successful academic and social outcomes,

One size will not fit all in a place like UQ. There is a need to focus on improving student experiences—understand student life these days. It's not easy to build communities around students, and community is a big part of student life—social life and social engagement—a lot more than just doing well in studies.

Analysis of interview data from senior managers suggests an overwhelming need for the university to provide institutional direction and support in response to the emerging national widening participation agenda. Clearly, issues such as a history as an 'elitist' university, a traditionally rigid approach to university entry and the current decentralised responses will all challenge this cultural and operational shift.

Working from the results of this research a conceptual framework for widening participation has been developed to guide institutional responses to identified challenges

A Model for Widening Participation

Building on Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman, and Reid's (2007, p. 5) assertion that '... widening participation can be simultaneously an outcome, a process, or a type of student ...', and research undertaken for this article, we have developed a *Widening participation: Student success conceptual framework* (shown in Figure 2).

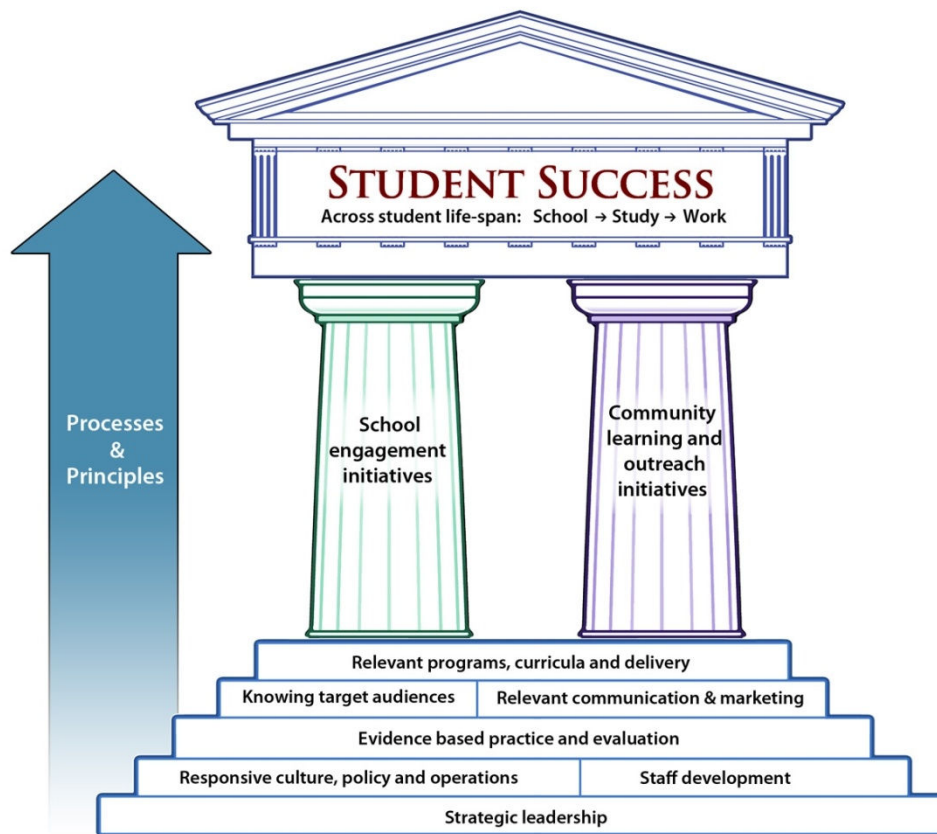


Figure 2

Widening participation: Student success conceptual framework.

The *Widening participation: Student success conceptual framework* takes a student lifespan approach that positions the university within the communities of which it is part. The university will work ‘with’ a diverse range of stakeholders, rather than only providing information or outreach services ‘to’ schools and potential students. The framework comprises four main components:

- a set of *foundation stones* that direct attention to institutional capacity requirements for implementing an effective widening participation agenda
- two *pillars* which bear the main operational focus for achieving widening participation outcomes
- the foundation stones and pillars support the *capstone* of student success from school through appropriate support at university leading to a successful work transition
- a set of outreach and engagement *processes and principles* underpin the planning, implementation and reporting of widening participation responses.

The *foundation stones* include seven focus areas:

1. Strategic leadership provides clear direction for widening participation.
2. Responsive organisational culture, policy and operational framework support effective widening participation operations.
3. Evidence-based program development and evaluation provides a solid base for planning, implementation and reporting.

4. Staff development increases staff understanding of and support for the widening participation agenda, develops relevant staff skills and knowledge, and facilitates collaborative approaches towards operationalising the agenda.
5. Appropriate ‘audience’ research describes target groups, including potential students and their communities, and provides an informed foundation for effective initiatives, marketing and relationship building.
6. The development of appropriate teaching and learning approaches, and delivery of relevant curriculum and programs responds to identified target group needs. A focus on service learning, student civic participation and community engagement is evident.
7. Relevant information provision, communication and marketing provide a strong connection between widening participation programs, higher education courses and target groups.

The seven foundation stones provide a solid base for both school-specific and broader community-based outreach and engagement initiatives, the two *pillars* of the framework. *School engagement initiatives* focus on activities including (but not limited to) information provision; raising aspirations towards higher education; familiarisation with the local university campus, facilities and programs; bridging and access initiatives; scholarship opportunities; and mentoring.

Community learning and outreach initiatives present a broader approach than the traditional schools and student outreach focus, an approach that looks to include a diverse group of stakeholders in the widening participation process (see Figure 1). This might include, for example, parents and family; government and non-government service providers; and church, sporting or other community-based groups. The vision is to develop a community culture that values and supports lifelong learning. Such initiatives might include the establishment of community learning hubs and networks, and program partnerships using community infrastructure such as neighbourhood centres, libraries and youth development centres.

The foundation stones and pillars support the *capstone* of student success. This crosses the student lifespan including pre-enrolment, transition from school to university, the full range of social and academic experiences while at university, and effective career development and guidance resulting in appropriate student employment. Student success will be facilitated through a university culture that is responsive, student-focused, supportive and celebrates diversity.

A set of *processes and principles* underpin the planning, implementation and reporting of widening participation outreach and engagement across the seven foundation stones, the two pillars and the capstone. These processes and principles provide a culturally appropriate basis for this work and include that the university will:

- work collaboratively with diverse stakeholders to facilitate education opportunities to identified equity groups
- look to develop an appropriate understanding of and respect for the needs and cultural context of these equity groups and respond accordingly
- commit resources to enable successful, informed and culturally appropriate responses to the national widening participation agenda.

Conclusions

This article describes the challenges confronting one Australian research-intensive university in responding to the national widening participation agenda outlined in the *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). It draws from data collected during an institutional mapping project, *Student outreach, recruitment and transition* (Cuthill & Schmidt, 2009). Research was implemented in recognition of the need for the university to first have a clear understanding of current institutional policy and practice before developing ‘new’ responses to the national widening participation agenda. Three key questions guided this research:

- What widening participation strategies and programs, focusing on people from low socio-economic backgrounds, are currently being implemented?
- What are the challenges relating to programs targeting people from low socio-economic backgrounds?
- How can the university move forward on this national agenda?

A comprehensive literature review included academic literature relating to widening participation and related topics, and national and overseas case study reviews of ‘good practice’ relating to widening participation. Research results will inform development of appropriate outreach, engagement and recruitment policy and practice in this area.

Interviewees identified key challenges that the university will have to address to effectively respond to the national widening participation agenda, including perceptions of an elitist university; lack of clear strategic directions; poor understanding of the target groups and associated data management issues; an organisational culture and structure slow to respond to new equity requirements; general lack of coordination in policy, planning and practice; lack of appropriate resources and support; and issues regards self-identification by students as disadvantaged. Participant responses suggest the need for institutional leadership and direction-setting, encompassing a strategic long-term commitment and appropriate resource support.

A Widening participation: Student success conceptual framework has been developed to provide direction to the university in responding to the national widening participation agenda. The framework identifies institutional capacity requirements and operational initiatives across the student lifespan. Interview responses and reviewed literature suggest that a set of principles and processes underpin all widening participation responses. In broad terms, these relate to genuine collaboration, understanding and respect for equity groups, and appropriate resourcing of responses.

With respect to operationalising the framework, the literature review identified Australian and overseas ‘good practice’ examples of widening participation responses. These programs and initiatives provide valuable direction to the university in terms of ideas that can be adapted to local historical and cultural contexts. Achieving participation rates of 20% of overall higher education enrolments to be people from low socio-economic backgrounds by 2020, as outlined in the *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008), will require a focus on working together with diverse stakeholders around the widening participation agenda. This is not something that universities can achieve alone. Successful implementation of good practice in this area will rely on development of new partnerships and new ways of working together based on genuine collaboration, mutual respect and reciprocity (Cuthill & Scull, 2011).

Policy directions outlined in the Australian *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008) reflect similar situations in both North America and Great Britain. As such, understanding the challenges confronting one Australian research university and how it is beginning to respond to this agenda is of relevance to both Australian and overseas audiences. While directing attention to people from low socio-economic backgrounds, the widening participation framework presented here may have wider application to a broader set of student contexts. This opportunity should be explored through further research.

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