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# **Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds:**

Resources for Australian  
higher education

***Final Report 2012***

***<[www.lowses.edu.au](http://www.lowses.edu.au)>***

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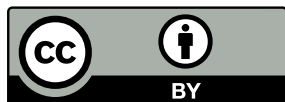
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## Executive Summary

The project found that the sociocultural incongruity that exists between students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds and the institutions in which they study can be bridged through the provision of an empathic institutional context that:

- values and respects all students
- encompasses an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and coordinated through the curriculum
- incorporates inclusive learning environments and strategies
- empowers students by making the implicit, explicit, and
- focuses on student learning outcomes and success.

These characteristics were derived through the project's literature analysis and are supported by the evidence from interviews with 26 experienced staff and 89 successful LSES students conducted as part of this project. Synthesis and analysis of the interview data revealed four key themes to which institutions and staff need to attend to ensure the effective teaching and support of LSES students. The study found that the empathic institutional context:

1. employs inclusive teaching characteristics and strategies
2. enables student agency
3. facilitates life and learning support, and
4. takes into account students' financial challenges.

The project has generated a new integrated national resource, comprising five interrelated sets of materials and exemplars, all of which have been made available to the sector via the project website [\*\*<www.lowses.edu.au>\*\*](http://www.lowses.edu.au)

1. a conceptual framework relevant to the Australian context
2. advice for policy makers and teaching and learning leaders
3. practical guidelines for academic staff
4. materials to support professional development, and
5. a repository of effective policy, programs and practice.



## Key advice for teachers

The key advice to staff teaching students from LSES backgrounds in Australian universities to emerge from this national study is:

### 1. Know and respect your students

Understand LSES students are time poor; communicate with them, embrace and integrate their diversity and enable contributions of their knowledge to everyone's learning.

### 2. Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice

While upholding academic standards, offer LSES students flexibility, choice in assessment and variety in teaching and learning strategies.

### 3. Make expectations clear, using accessible language

Speak and write in plain language to ensure students understand the concepts being taught, your expectations of them and what is required to be a successful student.

### 4. Scaffold your students' learning

Take a step-by-step approach to teaching to ensure students build on what they bring to higher education and are taught the particular discourses necessary to succeed.

### 5. Be available and approachable to guide student learning

In addition to being available, be approachable so that students may make use of your expertise and guidance to improve their learning and performance.

### 6. Be a reflective practitioner

Reflect and seek to act on your own reflections, those from peers and informal feedback from students, to continuously improve your teaching practice and your students' learning.

## Key advice to institutional leaders

The key advice to institutional leaders related to supporting students from LSES backgrounds in Australian universities to emerge from this national study is:

### 1. Enable inclusive curriculum and assessment design

Enable curriculum and assessment design that caters to diversity, integrates and scaffolds opportunities for students to learn tertiary literacies alongside discipline content, and protects academic standards.

### 2. Promote engagement with, and support from, others

Create a sense of belonging for LSES students, ensure there are collaborative learning opportunities and peer-to-peer contact inside and outside the curriculum and provide opportunities for families and communities to engage with the institution.

### 3. Encourage 'help-seeking' by students

Encourage staff to use early feedback and referral, extend and enhance provision of and promote student services, normalise 'help-seeking' and provide infrastructure and resources to allow the monitoring and management of at-risk students.

### 4. Minimise financial challenges for students

Promote financial services and support such as scholarships, facilitate access to government payment options, and minimise student costs through providing loans, hire services, free car parking and the like.

### 5. Resource and support teachers of LSES students

Provide high support and resourcing for teachers of LSES students, taking into account the challenges of inclusive teaching and of providing detailed help, feedback, referral and support, and reward and recognise teaching appropriately.

## Acronyms used in this report

<b>ALL</b>	<b><i>Academic language and learning</i></b>
<b>ALTC</b>	<b><i>Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd</i></b>
<b>COL</b>	<b><i>Colleague</i></b>
<b>DEEWR</b>	<b><i>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations</i></b>
<b>LSES</b>	<b><i>Low socioeconomic status</i></b>
<b>OLT</b>	<b><i>Office for Learning and Teaching</i></b>
<b>STU</b>	<b><i>Student</i></b>
<b>UK</b>	<b><i>United Kingdom</i></b>
<b>US</b>	<b><i>United States</i></b>

## About this project

This project was conducted over 18 months between early 2011 and mid 2012.

## Rationale

There are at least four reasons why this project on effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds is important for Australian higher education. The first is that changes to higher education policy in Australia make this an area in which the sector must be proactive if it is to meet national goals. The second is the need to anticipate and meet the particular needs of students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds in terms of curriculum, teaching and support at university. Third is the need for the sector to use existing and new knowledge on effective teaching and support of LSES students in systemic and embedded ways. Finally, there is a moral responsibility to provide the highest level of teaching and support to students from LSES backgrounds and to all university students. Each of these is discussed in more detail in turn below.

## National policy goals in Australian higher education

The federal government response to the 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) indicates a clear target of an increase in the number and proportion of LSES students participating in higher education within the next decade. The project was underpinned by the view that the sector should be focusing not only on the recruitment, but also on the retention and success of LSES students as we strive to meet the target. As Tinto (2008) has argued, access without support is not opportunity and as Devlin (2010b) notes, it would be 'a moral and economic tragedy' (np) to attract LSES students to university without having made the changes to teaching and support necessary to facilitate their success.

As the federal government identified in *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009a, p. 15):

*Maintaining and improving the quality of teaching, learning and the student experience is a critical factor in the success of universities ... there will also need to be an increased emphasis on improving the student learning experience in order to boost retention, progress and ultimately, completion rates.*

In order to meet the national LSES goal, proactive work towards increasing the retention of and ensuring a high-quality experience for all students is necessary. This project aimed to spearhead that work. The sector needs a considered pedagogical response to the social inclusion agenda. The project makes a contribution toward the urgent need to examine, from a research- and evidence-based perspective, how we might support, include, retain, and graduate LSES student cohorts who are now entering our programs with greater diversity in preparedness and social capital than ever before. In this project, we have begun to consider changing the prevailing character of the student experience to ensure that student success is not left to chance, at least not in those aspects that are within our institutional control (Kift, 2009).

One way to support LSES students is through integrated, intentional, supportive, and inclusive curriculum design and approaches to teaching and learning (Kift, 2009). This is likely to benefit not only LSES students, but all students. The UK research on supporting the widening participation agenda argues persuasively that in addition to the many ways in which student diversity can be harnessed to enrich the educational experience, 'the changes to curriculum provision and learning, teaching and assessment, which have occurred alongside the transition from an elite to a mass participation HE sector, benefit all students and can have a positive impact on higher level and critical thinking skills' (Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman, and Reid, 2007, p. 48). The project makes some recommendations to institutions and to staff about such design and approaches.

## Meeting the particular needs of LSES students

It is critical that the Australian sector prepares itself to teach and support LSES students. Devlin (2010a) points out that students from LSES backgrounds may have particular challenges to overcome in order to succeed at university. For example, she argues that there is a 'higher education student role' that needs to be learnt and mastered and that if a student has no previous or other family member's experience of university study as is the case for many LSES students, the successful student role will be unfamiliar and, therefore, difficult to understand, adjust to, learn, practise and master. She argues further that the tacit expectations of students and the language used within university discourses may also present particular challenges for LSES students.



Devlin (2010a) suggests further that having given LSES students access to university, we have a responsibility to articulate the successful student role and genuinely and proactively facilitate attempts by students to meet the expectations that institutions have of them. The project makes some recommendations to institutions and staff about how to proactively meet the needs of LSES students.

In any case, the Australian Government (2009a) has indicated that it expects the sector to change its practices to assure the successful completion of students from LSES backgrounds. However, the available research shows evidence of some apprehension in the Australian sector around the equity agenda. Griffith's (2010) reports that an Australian participant in her research study commented:

*Our government has put a large agenda in place to increase attendance by more disadvantaged people – but has not provided resources to do so, just a big stick. There is considerable concern as to how we might cope with the extra numbers and that different skills will be needed by staff, as well as additional support for the students. (pp. 4–5)*

This view is supported by anecdotal evidence gathered by the project team. The project has designed and developed a central repository of resources of a practical nature to assist staff to develop the skills they will need to cope with a higher proportion of LSES students and to address the hunger for practical, usable advice for teaching staff, support staff, policy makers and teaching and learning leaders.

### ***The need to use existing and new knowledge appropriately***

The existing international and national expertise and experience in the area of enabling LSES student success is not currently being utilised as effectively as it might be in Australia. While a small number of Australian universities have significant experience with LSES students, the federal government policy targets mean new directions and new emphases for many more, if not most, universities. There is currently no widespread understanding of the impact of LSES students' backgrounds or characteristics on their learning experiences in Australian higher education: institutions and their staff are not ready to respond en masse to the changes we are about

to experience (Devlin, 2010b). This large-scale project is the first of its kind in Australia to begin to collate existing knowledge and to develop new knowledge about the experiences, perspectives and needs of LSES students. The outcomes of the project have informed, and will continue to inform, policy and practice within institutions and across the sector nationally to facilitate LSES student achievement. The outcomes will assist universities to make use of available evidence on the most effective ways to teach and support students from LSES backgrounds.

### ***The moral responsibility of universities***

Universities have a social and moral responsibility to ensure the highest level quality of teaching and support to all students, including those from a LSES background. Given the UK experience has been that inclusive education initiatives benefit all students (Shaw et al., 2007), the project has the potential for wide-reaching change to the quality of teaching and learning overall in Australian higher education.

### ***Theoretical underpinnings of the project***

The team adopted a theoretical approach to this project drawn from constructivism (Bruner, 1996), transition pedagogy (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2009) and inclusive pedagogy (Waterfield and West, 2006), as well as on conceptual work undertaken by Warren (2002) in integrated curriculum design. As Hockings (2010) notes, rather than assuming that non-traditional students have 'special needs' that require attention outside the curriculum in adjunct programs, integrated curriculum design targets all students and assumes that they bring to the learning environment varying resources in the cognitive, linguistic, knowledge and cultural domains. These students draw on what they bring to the higher education context and need to be guided to 'develop the critical and communicative skills and conceptual repertoires that will enable them to deal with academic tasks' (Warren, 2002, p. 87).

The project team commenced the project with a definition of inclusive teaching, adapted from extensive research and related work undertaken in the UK by Griffiths (2010). We modified Griffiths definition to fit the Australian context, to align with the proposed project's focus on LSES students in particular and on the various

aspects of teaching, support, leadership and institutional culture and to harmonise with our own philosophy as a team. For the purposes of this project, inclusive teaching and support are initially conceptualised as incorporating the institutional policy framework and culture, the work of both academic and professional staff and the entire pedagogy, including curriculum design, delivery, evaluation, assessment, learning support and the learning environment. Teaching for inclusion includes teaching technique and also:

*... extends beyond technique, respecting students as individuals who have diverse backgrounds, different learning needs, and a variety of valuable prior experiences. By facilitating learning for inclusion, individual strengths and differences are acknowledged, fostered and maximised to enrich the student's own potential, knowledge, skills and understanding as well as that of others within the learning community. Such an approach is intentionally and thoroughly integrated into every part of an institution and implemented rigorously, vigorously and thoughtfully. (Adapted from Griffiths, 2010)*

The methodology for the project was deliberately 'success-focused' (Devlin, 2009). As explained in detail in the 'Methodology' section below, this meant a focus on articulating success-oriented policy and practice that universities might adopt in relation to LSES students in higher education.

## Conceptual framework for the project

The project has developed a distinctive conceptual framework that avoids adopting either a deficit conception of students from LSES backgrounds or a deficit conception of the institutions in which they study. Rather than being the primary responsibility of solely the student or the institution to change to ensure LSES student success, we argue that the adjustments would be most usefully conceptualised as a 'joint venture' toward bridging sociocultural incongruity.

The notion of sociocultural incongruence is adopted as a way of conceptualising the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and the high socioeconomic status institutions in which they study. The polarised deficit conceptions commonly resorted to for students and institutions, and the conception of sociocultural incongruence which challenges these perceived deficits, are outlined below.

### **The first deficit conception: students are the problem**

The suggestion that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students can presuppose a level playing field in relation to sociocultural and background characteristics. It can be seductive to think that if students from LSES backgrounds are clever enough, or try hard enough, or persevere enough, or believe enough in their own ability, they can engineer their success at university. [Devlin \(2011\)](#) suggests the tacit expectations inherent in university practices are within a sociocultural subset that is peculiar to the upper socioeconomic levels. Unless these implicit expectations are made explicit, they may operate to exclude students from low socioeconomic status who are not familiar with the norms and discourses of universities.

### **The second deficit conception: institutions are the problem**

The other conceptual frame is to problematise the institutions that are responsible for the success and progress of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Some suggest that rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, institutional cultures should be adapted to better fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Zepke and Leach, 2005). Other authors suggest that:

- there are situational and dispositional barriers created by institutional inflexibility (Billingham, 2009)
- '... the role of the educational institution itself in creating and perpetuating inequalities' should be taken into account (Tett, 2004, p. 252)
- it is unfair to expect the burden of change to fall solely on the students and institutions should make changes (Bamber and Tett, 2001), and
- universities should make changes in terms of heralding the expectations they have of students (James, Krause and Jenkins, 2010).

Devlin (2010) argues that to genuinely contribute to the success and achievement of non-traditional students, universities need to do much more than to spell out their expectations for student involvement in learning.

### ***The sociocultural conception: incongruence must be bridged***

The project proposes a conceptual framework of 'sociocultural incongruence' to describe the circumstances in which students from low socioeconomic status attempt to engage with the particular sociocultural discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education. Murphy's (2009) UK study of factors affecting the progress, achievement and outcomes of new students to a particular degree program found a number of characteristics specific to the institution and to individual students that promote progression and achievement. These factors enable the incongruence between students and institutions to be 'bridged'.

Hence – 'bridging sociocultural incongruity'.

This framework underpins all of the outcomes and deliverables from the project.

### **The deliverables**

The project has generated a new integrated national resource, comprising five interrelated sets of materials and exemplars, all of which have been made available to the sector via the project website [www.lowses.edu.au](http://www.lowses.edu.au)

1. a conceptual framework relevant to the Australian context

2. advice for policy makers and teaching and learning leaders
3. practical guidelines for academic staff
4. materials to support professional development, and
5. a repository of effective policy, programs and practice.

Each of these deliverables is outlined in detail below.

Through, and in addition to, these agreed outcomes, the project has also produced:

- A dedicated website that can serve as a central repository for existing and future resources for teaching and supporting students from LSES backgrounds.
- An annotated bibliography of peer-reviewed and other significant literature related to the experiences of LSES students in higher education, which can serve as a basis for researchers, scholars and practitioners in the field and can be readily updated by future researchers.
- A peer-reviewed article in the top-tier journal, *Studies in Higher Education*.
- Numerous presentations, which were given at international, national and institutional conferences, workshops, seminars and other fora.
- Several articles in newspapers and professional magazines.
- The documentation of successful models of improving support for students from LSES backgrounds to facilitate their successful participation in and retention at university.

At the time of writing, there are also a number of articles and book chapters based on the findings of the project in development.

As Zacharias (2010) notes, there are some challenges in relation to defining LSES and identifying such students and there can be an overlap between LSES and other categories of disadvantage, including rural and regional location and being the first in family to attend university. The project was guided by the literature's characterisation of LSES students and what this might mean for institutions teaching and supporting them, while accepting Kift's (2009) caution regarding making assumptions

about cohorts of students. We took the research-informed view that inclusive teaching and support, undertaken with skill and care, benefits all students.

The project deliverables have and will continue to contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning in Australian higher education through the focus on outcomes for a range of levels of institutional leadership and practice. These include contributions to:

- theory and conceptual thinking about supporting LSES students
- relevant institutional policy development and implementation
- the development of institutional leadership to facilitate appropriate changes
- effective curriculum approaches and teaching and learning practices
- the provision of academic and related support for LSES students, and
- the collection of exemplars of effective initiatives now made easily accessible to the sector.

The project has supplemented the emerging body of theoretical and conceptual work around LSES students in Australia by developing and disseminating five interrelated practical resources to assist institutions to provide the appropriate leadership, staff development, teaching and support necessary to facilitate the achievement of LSES and other students.

### **1. A conceptual framework relevant to the Australian context**

Much work has been done on inclusive higher education teaching in the US and the UK. While Australia has learnt, and has much more to learn, from this work, the Australian higher education sector is different structurally and operationally from its international counterparts and operates within a unique policy, regulatory and cultural context. This project has developed a conceptual framework for the provision of effective teaching and support for students from LSES backgrounds that is relevant to the Australian context and that can be adapted to suit various institutional priorities and circumstances.

A summary of the conceptual framework is provided under 'Theoretical underpinnings of the project' above and a full articulation of the framework employed for the project can be found here:

**Devlin, M.** (2011, online). Bridging sociocultural incongruity: Conceptualising students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.613991>>

### **2. Advice for policy makers and leaders**

Effective teaching and learning programs and practices are underpinned by sound policy, by appropriate structural arrangements and by supportive institutional cultures that facilitate uptake and embedding of practice. Addressing the particular needs of LSES students at university requires more than enthusiasts and champions in often-isolated pockets of the university. An institution-wide approach is necessary and a policy framework that incorporates and embeds the components of teaching and learning and assessment-related principles and procedures that facilitate the success of LSES students provides the structure for that institution-wide approach. Drawing on the expertise of both academic and professional staff and leaders, advice on formulating and embedding effective policy has been developed for those charged with such responsibility within institutions.

The guide developed for policy makers and leaders can be found here:

[www.lowses.edu.au/files/leaders.htm](http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/leaders.htm)

### **3. Practical guidelines for academic staff**

Reporting on her large study on inclusive teaching carried out in the UK, Griffiths (2010) observes that, 'many of those interviewed said that they found implementing inclusion the most challenging part of their work and they were hungry for ideas on how to translate the rhetoric of policy into practice' (p. 3) and that they 'often came unstuck when translating an inclusive policy into practice at classroom level' (p. 8). Anecdotally, the team members are aware of the same hunger in Australian higher education. Using the existing expertise – in the literature; among experienced academic and professional staff; among academic and professional practitioner team members; and the advice of successful LSES students – the project has produced practical guidelines for academic staff on how to effectively facilitate the learning of students from LSES backgrounds. Recognising that university staff are busy and have many competing agendas, the central objective of this resource is clear, unambiguous, usable advice.

The guide developed for academic staff can be found here:

[www.lowses.edu.au/files/teachers.htm](http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/teachers.htm)



#### **4. Materials to support professional development**

Improving the quality of teaching, learning and support for LSES students is more than a one-off endeavor. Ongoing high-quality professional development will be critical in ensuring that not only are existing academic and professional staff kept up to date with thinking and developments in the field but that new staff, including sessional staff, are inducted into effective practice in terms of teaching and supporting LSES students. The project has produced materials that can be used for professional development purposes to assist with the in-service programs that will be necessary to ensure the sector is providing the inclusive teaching necessary to facilitate LSES student success.

The resources for professional development can be found here:

**[www.lowses.edu.au/files/pd.htm](http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/pd.htm)**

#### **5. A repository of effective policy, programs and practice**

There is a growing body of Australian-based research, publications, presentations, case studies and other resources focusing on LSES students at university. Awareness of resources aimed specifically at supporting LSES students in particular is variable, access to them is limited and, until now, they have not been available from one central repository that is easily found by busy practitioners, teachers and leaders.

This project has selected and collated high-quality resources available to the higher education sector in Australia that are related to teaching and supporting LSES students. Centralising these materials will enable all stakeholders interested in teaching and supporting LSES students to readily access resources that have been vetted and selected by an expert team. Stakeholders will be able to select resources, materials, programs, policies and initiatives that are relevant for their context and to develop curriculum and other resources based on existing materials of the highest quality. The provision of contact details for all initiatives included will facilitate interaction across the sector as colleagues draw on each other's expertise and knowledge to improve policy and practice.

As new research is conducted and new resources created, the repository can be easily updated and is, therefore, a sustainable resource for the Australian higher education sector.

The repository can be found here:

**[www.lowses.edu.au/files/repository.htm](http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/repository.htm)**

## Project method

As mentioned in the section on the theoretical underpinnings of the project, the methodology of this project was 'success-focused'. Noting that much understanding of the issues facing LSES students has come from research and investigation focused on the barriers to success and the problems LSES students face, this project deliberately adopted an approach focused on success.

As Devlin (2009) argues in relation to another equity student group, Indigenous students, 'Giving prominence to a research-led focus on "what works" in terms of ... student equity in higher education will provide evidence-based guidance for policy and practice' (pp.1–2). She argues further that, 'Through investigating the efficacy of existing programs designed to facilitate ... student recruitment and retention; and leveraging the experience of the many hundreds of successful ... university graduates, it may be possible to articulate some of the ways in which higher education success has been, and can be, achieved, despite the challenges that face ... [these] students' (p. 2). The project team took a similar view in relation to LSES students.

The project recruited 'successful' LSES students. For the purposes of the project, 'successful' was defined as having completed a year of university study and re-enrolled for another year. This means the students in this study could have been in first year (if they had studied part-time in their first year of enrolment), or in second or later years. There are substantial bodies of evidence that confirm that a successful first year is necessary as a foundation for later year success (Kift and Nelson 2005; Kift 2009). An extensive analysis of research undertaken in the Australasian sector (Nelson, Kift, Clarke and Creagh 2011) has confirmed the increasing importance of attention to the first year in higher education, particularly when public policy and funding is focused on social inclusion and widening participation. The project, therefore, sought to capture the experiences of students from LSES backgrounds who had successfully negotiated and completed that first challenging period of their university experience.

The aim in interviewing these students was to uncover aspects of these students' experiences that helped them choose to stay at university, despite the challenges and obstacles they may have faced. Taking a 'success-focused' approach does not suggest that a parallel focus on policy and other systemic challenges to LSES higher education student success should not continue. Rather, the

team's view is that a focus on articulating success-oriented policy and practice that universities might adopt in relation to LSES students in higher education should be developed alongside the continued investigation and management of systemic problems through a range of means. As has been argued in relation to Indigenous students, '... the "success-focused" approach is likely to provide one of a suite of approaches that may be helpful ...' (Devlin 2009, p. 2).

## Data gathering

The project gathered data from a range of sources, both primary and secondary. This allowed the project team to combine different sources of data collection while also drawing on the diverse and relevant expertise of each member of the team. The approach also facilitated a deep and rich explanation of the elements of effective teaching and support of LSES students in Australian universities.

Data for the project was collected from four major sources:

1. A review of peer reviewed and other significant literature in the broad area of the experience of students from LSES backgrounds in higher education.
2. Interviews with 89 students who were from LSES backgrounds and in the first generation of their family to attend university.
3. Interviews with 26 staff known for their expertise in teaching and/or supporting students from LSES backgrounds at university.
4. An environmental scan of effective policy, programs and practice in teaching and/or supporting students from LSES status backgrounds across Australia.

The individual and collective expertise of the current project team members was also used to inform data gathering and to interpret the findings.

A total of 17 Australian universities were involved in providing data for this project. These represented universities with campuses in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The sample included representation from the Australian Technology Network, the Group of Eight, dual-sector universities, regional universities, unaligned universities and post-Dawkins universities.

In addition, members of the reference group and critical friends of the project were consulted throughout the timeline and provided valuable guidance and feedback.

The approach and methodology of the project were aligned with the mission, commitments and objectives of the ALTC and the OLT. Specifically, the project aimed to promote and support strategic change in Australian higher education in relation to teaching and supporting LSES students. A collaborative approach to identifying, developing, disseminating and embedding effective individual and institutional practice in LSES teaching and learning was taken.

The project sought to encourage recognition of the fundamental importance of effective teaching and support of LSES students. It acknowledged institutional and student diversity and focused on providing resources to support new and enhanced systematic approaches to inclusive pedagogical practice. It worked to produce resources that would build institutional capacity to deliver policy, practice and support that will not leave the quality of the LSES student experiences and learning outcomes to chance.

The project comprised a set of considered and coherent strategies embedded in four stages, outlined in detail below. These involved examination of the relevant literature and practice and continual, engaged dissemination through extensive consultation and interaction with the Australian higher education sector. The project incorporated the deep involvement of multiple institutions across three states (Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland), as well as academic and professional staff, staff developers and teaching and learning leaders from these states and from Western Australia, Tasmania, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.

**The first stage** of the project comprised an environmental scan of the available evidence of curricular and co-curricular initiatives, and leadership arrangements that contribute to the effective engagement and learning of students from LSES backgrounds. This stage was built on a solid, existing evidence base, including a qualitative study of the experiences of LSES students at Deakin University in 2010; the annotated bibliography on peer-reviewed and other significant literature related to LSES student achievement at university produced by the project (O'Shea, Onsman and McKay, 2011); and the synthesis of the research on inclusive teaching and learning produced by the UK Higher Education Academy (Hockings, 2010).

Guided by this literature and evidence, expertise and effective practice in teaching and supporting students from LSES backgrounds, including policy, curricula, strategies, exemplars, programs and other initiatives were identified, gathered and documented.

**The second stage** comprised interviews with 115 staff and students at universities, and particular campuses of universities, where there are high proportions of students from LSES backgrounds. The rationale for this approach relates to the success-focused nature of the project. The project sought to learn from staff about existing practices used to successfully teach and support students from LSES backgrounds. It also focused on gathering data about the lived experiences of students from LSES backgrounds who had successfully completed a year at university. Therefore, the student and staff interviews were intentionally conducted at sites where existing expertise within the Australian context was already concentrated.

Staff were interviewed individually to determine their views on 'what works' in teaching and supporting LSES students. Students were also interviewed individually and their views on 'what works' in terms of facilitating their success were sought and documented. All the interviews recorded were later transcribed. The data was subsequently analysed using NVivo and then synthesised with reference to the conceptual framework and a set of principles that emerged from the first stage of the project.

In **the third stage**, the new resources were developed, based on the conceptual framework developed, the expertise gathered from staff and students and the gaps identified in the earlier stages of the project. These new resources were combined with existing resources and expertise to provide an integrated suite of materials for the sector. Expert and independent feedback on draft resources was sought and incorporated into final versions of all outcomes, which are available for the higher education sector via the project website.

A **fourth and final stage** is the formal launch and dissemination of the project resources. The project team recognises that a formal, physical launch is a valuable time and resource-efficient part of a multi-pronged dissemination strategy. As part of the continuous dissemination strategy that has operated throughout the project, the launch will draw together those who have had input into the project as well as senior leaders and staff who will be responsible for adopting the advice contained in the resources.

The project has developed a website that contains information about the project and onto which materials and outcomes have been posted over the 18-month timeline as they became available. The project has produced a set of five inter-related resources, as well as a discussion paper and numerous media and conference papers. A number of refereed outcomes are under review. These have all served to both publicise the resources and direct potential users to them, and assist in raising awareness of the issues around teaching and learning LSES students. Various electronic communication strategies and media relevant to teaching and learning practitioners and leaders have been, and will continue to be, used to advertise the project and its resources. These have included placing information in the HERDSA e-newsletter; and on the First Year in Higher Education virtual centre website.  
<[www.fyhe.edu.au](http://www.fyhe.edu.au)>

Vice-Chancellors from each Australian university have been sent material about the project and invited to send two representatives to the project launch. As part of their ongoing professional work, team members have made, and will continue to make, themselves available for invitational visits to institutions and continuously contribute to a community of practice related to the project foci.

The methodology received ethics approval from the Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group [DUHEAG 2011-081] and subsequently from the partner universities.



## Findings

Based on the literature and primary data collected, the project found that sociocultural incongruity can be bridged through the provision of an empathic institutional context that:

- values and respects all students
- encompasses an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and coordinated through the curriculum
- incorporates inclusive learning environments and strategies
- empowers students by making the implicit, explicit, and
- focuses on student learning outcomes and success.

These characteristics were derived through the project's literature analysis and are supported by the evidence from interviews with staff and LSES students conducted as part of this project. Synthesis and analysis of the interview data revealed four key themes to which institutions and staff need to attend to ensure the effective teaching and support of LSES students. The study found that the empathic institutional context:

1. employs inclusive teaching characteristics and strategies
2. enables student agency
3. facilitates life and learning support, and
4. takes account of students' financial challenges.

The findings have led to the development of materials that incorporate the foci outlined above. The project sought to develop practical advice for two major audiences – teaching academics and institutional leaders. To this end, two guides were produced:

1. *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Practical advice for teaching staff, and*
2. *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Practical advice for institutional policy makers and leaders.*

These guides form part of the major outcomes of the project and can be accessed via the project website. The contents of each appear below in turn as these constitute the major findings of the project.

## Practical advice for teaching staff

The focus of this advice is on the active creation of supportive and inclusive learning environments that enable student agency.

The six pieces of advice focus on practical ways that teachers can contribute to the establishment of an empathetic context within and outside the formal learning environment. These practical suggestions are summarised in the list below and further details are provided in the sections that follow.

### Key advice for teachers

The key advice to staff teaching students from LSES backgrounds in Australian universities to emerge from this national study is:

#### 1. Know and respect your students

Understand LSES students are time poor; communicate with them, embrace and integrate their diversity and enable contributions of their knowledge to everyone's learning.

#### 2. Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice

While upholding academic standards, offer LSES students flexibility, choice in assessment and variety in teaching and learning strategies.

#### 3. Make expectations clear, using accessible language

Speak and write in plain language to ensure students understand the concepts being taught, your expectations of them and what is required to be a successful student.

#### 4. Scaffold your students' learning

Take a step-by-step approach to teaching to ensure students build on what they bring to higher education and are taught the particular discourses necessary to succeed.

#### 5. Be available and approachable to guide student learning

In addition to being available, be approachable so that students may make use of your expertise and guidance to improve their learning and performance.

#### 6. Be a reflective practitioner

Reflect and seek to act on your own reflections, those from peers and informal feedback from students, to continuously improve your teaching practice and your students' learning.

## 1. Know and respect your students

The first piece of practical advice for those who teach LSES students is to know and respect your students. In order to value all of their students, effective teaching staff know their students, understand their contexts and embrace what their students bring and contribute to higher education.

Research clearly demonstrates the importance to students of feeling valued and respected (Grabau 1999; Midobuche 1999) and the impact this has on the development of a greater sense of belonging and a positive self-concept (Midobuche 1999). A significant part of valuing students and facilitating their success lies in knowing them. Erikson and Strommer (1991) argue that to know how to teach students, we must first understand them. According to Fenty (1997), knowing students and the challenges they are facing while studying improves retention rates and the overall success of students. In line with the research, the clearest finding from the 26 staff interviews conducted for the national study was that staff who effectively teach and support LSES students value and respect their students.

As one staff member interviewed for the project put it:

*I always assume that most of my students have some sort of diversity ... be that low SES, be that cultural, generational, gender, sexuality, whatever and I think that the main strategy that I use with my students is to actually get to know who they are ... [COL\_009].*

Experienced and successful staff felt that part of respecting one's students was providing supplementary support to promote and strengthen a level of resource equity. As one staff member explained:

*So they're not like my kids that can come home to academics as parents and say 'Help me with this essay'. For many of them they don't have that support network so we have to be that support network for them [COL\_025].*

Another staff member summed up the importance of knowing, valuing and respecting one's students this way:

*I think that the best advice I could say to anybody is talk to your students, find out*

*about them, make them feel valued, make them feel important, that their knowledge and skills are as important as anybody else's, and to utilise those skills in particular areas, nothing de-values somebody more than being made to feel like their skills aren't important [COL\_011].*

### Time poverty

LSES students are extremely 'time poor' and staff who wish to effectively teach and support these students need to be aware of this factor. The literature shows clearly that as a result of balancing financial pressures, family responsibilities and/or significant hours of employment with study, many LSES students are under greater time constraints than traditional students. The findings from the current project confirmed those in the literature. Both staff and students interviewed referred to the competing pressures facing LSES students. A critical part of knowing one's students is being aware of, and empathic to the impact of, these factors.

Staff interviewed commented:

*... a common one is that in an LSES scenario ... the student has to assume carer duties for other members of their family which typically in ... a non LSES case that's not necessarily a problem for those students [COL\_004].*

*They're very time poor and so unless this is going to improve their learning outcomes, they're not interested. Unless it's going to make it easier to do that assessment task in a timely way, they're not going to engage in it because they are very time poor [COL\_021].*

Student interviewees offered insight into the time pressures they are under:

*You actually have to set aside a really significant portion of your week, in order to succeed at uni, you can't just sort of grab an hour here or there, it doesn't work. You really need to be able to organise your life, so that you have some significant slabs of time to sit down and dedicate to study, and for me, that is three days a week, my son's at school ... my daughter's at pre-school ... so I have three days where I have no children between the hours of nine and three, where I just go hammer and tongs, and that is exclusive study time, and I don't let anything else interfere, or interrupt that time ... [STU\_056].*

This staff member makes clear the impact on study of students being time poor:

*There's a fair few extensions at the end of ... semester ... when all of the assignments are due ... and they've got exams ... they're working, coming to class and then after the family is in bed ... they study. It's really quite difficult [COL\_024].*

It is clearly important for staff to be empathic to LSES students seeking extensions and flexibility (as discussed further below). Such requests are not indicative of poor time management or organisation on the part of students, as can often be assumed. Instead, such requests can be necessary for LSES students because of unexpected work, family or carer responsibilities.

## Getting to know students

Knowing your students, perhaps including their names, backgrounds, needs, learning styles and/or previous experience and/or knowledge, as well as something about their circumstances was recognised by staff as one of the most important factors in the success of LSES students in higher education. Staff explained:

*It's about individual contact and about understanding where people come from [COL\_002].*

*... you've got to go back to the learner. You've got to try to understand the learner. I'm not necessarily saying you have to fully and totally understand a person, but you need to understand them in terms of the context of that knowledge you're trying to teach them [COL\_016].*

As one staff member said:

*... you can't be inclusive unless you know your students ... that is the most important thing [COL\_001].*

Getting to know your students can be very challenging and particularly so in large classes, across multiple smaller classes and online without any face-to-face contact. Staff interviewed for the project shared some of the techniques they use successfully, despite these challenges. Communicating with students, embracing diversity and enabling contributions from LSES and other students were among the strategies recommended by experienced, effective staff to assist in developing some knowledge and understanding of and respect for students. Each is discussed in turn below.

## Communicating with students

While it may sound obvious to some, staff interviewed as part of the project identified listening to, talking to and communicating with students as key strategies in terms of getting to know one's students.

Experienced staff gave the following examples related to listening to students:

*... you need to listen to students. When they are saying things to you, or telling you things, you need to be able to listen to what their stories are, and I think the more you listen to students, and the more they speak up and join in, you can get an overview of their backgrounds, and their weakness [COL\_001].*

*[Make] time to listen to them ... because sometimes they have personal things that are impacting on their lives that are affecting their learning, so sometimes just listening and knowing them and going, 'How are you going today?' [COL\_025].*

Students agreed. When asked what had helped them to succeed, students frequently mentioned the importance of communication between teachers and students:

*Well, one of my lecturers ... she's absolutely brilliant because ... she will communicate with students [STU\_045].*

One student described the impact of a staff member with excellent communication skills:

*... you could answer a question completely wrong and she would not belittle you for it and that in itself is empowering because she won't make you feel like a fool, never. You can go to her with any problem. She will listen. She may not be able to do anything about it, but she will listen. She'll support you if you have a teary eye over something, she is there with a box of tissues. Sometimes she can fix things, sometimes you just need somebody to vent to [STU\_084].*

Communicating with students in the ways outlined above can seem to be time consuming. Staff noted for their effectiveness in teaching and supporting LSES students believe doing so is ultimately an efficient use of time as issues for students that start small do not end up larger and requiring more staff time and effort because of having been ignored. Experienced staff were also of the view that the effort spent in communicating with students, particularly early on, paid dividends in terms of both student engagement and the quality of learning they experienced.

## **Embracing and integrating student diversity**

Many of the staff interviewed recommended inclusivity and embracing and integrating student diversity in the classroom as both a mechanism for getting to know students and as a way to enhance the curriculum and teaching and the learning of all students. Staff outlined strategies such as varying pedagogical delivery practices and designing engaging learning activities as ways of embracing and integrating student diversity:

*... use as much diversity as possible in your pedagogical practices, because there's all sorts of different learners. Don't presume that groups all learn in certain ways, watch out for generalisations [COL\_026].*

*I think that is probably where the teacher should see their role, rather than as kind of causing learning as in 'I teach, you learn' ... [instead as] in trying to design learning activities that will help the students to learn and also possibly recognising that there is expertise elsewhere [COL\_004].*

Students highlighted the importance of teachers recognising the level students are at and embracing the diversity within student cohorts:

*I think that at the very beginning to have somebody there to say, '... we understand that this is new for a lot of you ... but there's no right or wrong way. There's no right or wrong question. The questions are important, because if we don't ask the questions, then we can't help' [COL\_062].*

Some highly experienced staff felt strongly that the deficit conceptions of LSES students commonly held in the sector were erroneous. They argued that all students have contributions to make to curriculum, teaching and learning and that the teacher's role is to enable those contributions as much as possible so that everyone might benefit from the different perceptions, interpretations and experiences in diverse cohorts. Moving from an 'I-teach-you-learn' understanding of teaching and learning to one that recognises 'that there is expertise elsewhere' including among the students can be a difficult and challenging shift for staff to make. It is therefore important that staff make use of professional development opportunities to support them in trying to enhance their teaching.



## Recognising and enabling student contributions

Recognising the valuable and unique contribution that students from LSES backgrounds bring to higher education was identified as central to effective teaching of this cohort of students. Making time and space for student to contribute to class is also one time-efficient way for staff to get to know their students and for students to get to know each other. Contrary to some myths that surround the capability of LSES students, LSES student performance is commensurate with or above average. As one staff member interviewed reported:

*... stats have shown in our course that, generally speaking, our low SES students tend to do better. They're slightly better motivated and probably more capable students [COL\_014]*

As another explained in relation to school leaver students:

*... students who came from public high schools tended to do better and last longer and succeed faster ... have fewer fails in things so progress faster at university, than students who came from private schools or through the religious schools ... simply because ... [the public school students] never had the resources handed to them and they always had to fight for everything and they were much more independent learners [COL\_013].*

One way that teachers might be able to facilitate contributions from LSES students is by integrating the knowledge that the students bring with them to higher education into classroom and online discussions. As mentioned above, this necessitates quite a different approach to one that assumes deficit in LSES students.

As one staff member interviewed explained:

*... being able to pull in people's different experiences because they've come from different areas can actually be really insightful. And when we're talking about developing marketing strategy, it's like we're talking to different groups and we want to know why one group might look at that marketing communication and go 'That's a lie, that's a joke', whereas another group might look at it and go 'It's perfectly believable', and it's because of that diversity in their backgrounds. So I'm very strongly in favour of people just embracing it and trying to get as many different voices coming into the mix as possible [COL\_013].*

As another staff member advised:

*... it's a kind of ... underlying premise I guess, find out what they damn well know before you start battering them. Don't start teaching and expect them to be ignorant. They'll have a rich experience. It mightn't be yours, but spend time finding out what the students know [COL\_029].*

In terms of how to go about enabling such contributions, one staff member suggested:

*... respectful communication ... it's about acknowledging students ... And trying to tap into some little something, you know, some little strength that they might have, some little narrative that they might have that we can all sort of share in in order to build that self worth, if you like, that sense of 'Well, why is it that they're here?' and their contribution is just as valuable [COL\_015].*

Overall, the advice here points to the underpinning qualities of empathy towards and respect for LSES and all students.

## Suggested strategies

- Ask for and use student cohort demographics and other available data to begin to understand who your students are at a broad level.
- As far as possible, learn and use students' names. Use some of the myriad of icebreaker techniques available on the web.
- Review your oral and written communication with students inside and outside formal classes – ask yourself how you might be more inclusive.
- Examine the extent to which you include the student voice and student opinions, views, knowledge and questions in your curricula and classes – ask yourself how you might increase the contribution and presence of students.

## 2. Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice

Both students and teachers saw the provision of flexibility, variety and choice in various aspects of their higher education experience as critical to the overall success of students from LSES backgrounds. The literature on LSES students substantiates the findings of the project that flexibility is a key factor in effectively catering to the learning needs of diverse student cohorts (Yorke and Thomas 2003). Further, students are increasingly demanding flexibility from their institutions (McDonald and Reushle 2002).

Staff interviewed were careful to stress their focus on maintaining appropriate standards and the necessity to enable such flexibility, variety and choice in a transparent, fair and equitable manner. As one staff member explained:

*So to me, to respond to the diverse situations ... it's about flexibility and responsiveness to a person's situation and thinking about what are the contextual factors around them that are impacting on their ability to meet all the demands of the course [COL\_009].*

When asked about the ways in which they teach LSES students effectively, another experienced staff member explained:

*I suppose the first thing that springs to mind is flexibility ... when I'm designing my teaching delivery approaches, I'm quite supportive of not requiring students to be in a particular place at a particular time ... I always tape all my face-to-face lectures ... the key is to be flexible, so to make that learning environment one that is valuable for students if they're there face-to-face, but also if they're listening online [COL\_027].*

Staff did not make assumptions about students attending fixed timetabled classes and instead assumed that students might have individual constraints and/or challenges to following traditional attendance patterns and planned flexibility into their teaching.

### High academic standards

A major question that flexibility, variety and choice raises is around the protection of high academic standards. Staff interviewed were united on the need to maintain academic standards and went to great pains to point out that the common assumptions made about LSES students and standards were unfounded. As several staff pointed out:

*I've found that the low SES kids that we've got here are just very determined. They're very smart and determined people and it takes them a couple of years to nut out the system but if you are halfway welcoming, they can do it very quickly [COL\_007].*

*... we take students who are low socioeconomic and first in their family to go university ... and last year and the year before that we had 25 per cent of them graduated with distinction [COL\_023].*

*I had someone who got high distinctions, who came to see me to be better [COL\_001].*

One teacher offered advice in relation to standards to those teaching and supporting LSES students:

*I think the first thing I would say is don't make assumptions about the students. Even within any kind of category that you'd want to give a student a label, there is a diversity and wealth of experiences within that and what I worry about is that if you have the assumption that students are a particular way, that's how you teach them and I think you should always teach students with the expectation that they can excel and that they are capable and have capacity [COL\_008].*

Finally, one staff member summed the matter up this way:

*... it's not about dumbing things down ... it's [about] clarifying the expectations [COL\_004].*

In terms of how flexibility, variety and choice might be achieved while maintaining appropriate standards, the use of technology, a variety of teaching strategies and choice and flexibility in assessment requirements were suggested. Each is outlined further below.

## Teaching with technology

Teaching with technology was seen as an important way in which to provide students from LSES backgrounds with the flexibility they often require. Both staff and students commented on the role of technology in enhancing the higher education experience for LSES students. The careful and thoughtful use of technology offers students the option to study at times and in places that best suit them as they balance a multitude of competing pressures, including paid employment, family commitments and study.

In response to questions about what helped their LSES students to learn, staff commented:

*... the recordings have been really popular, even with sort of mature-aged students ... [who] you would think wouldn't be as keen on technology. We do get a lot of feedback, good feedback that it just provides flexibility, and they can listen as many times as they want [COL\_030].*

*The uploading of lectures with the PowerPoint slides attached to them, I think, has been a big step. I've had lots of students say that they find that much more involving than reading stuff. Hearing the voice and then seeing the slides at the same time ... I think the impact of that is still quite strong [COL\_002].*

Students similarly commented on some of the benefits when teachers used technology:

*... the online interactive ... presentations ... They've been really good ... I felt that teachers who wanted to use that technology have been probably a little bit more effective [STU\_051].*

*... all the online technology was fantastic and the eLive sessions, I really enjoyed them because you connected with people and the lecturer about the topic [STU\_001].*

*I have to travel a bit further than most people so if I just have a really short day or something it's really inconvenient so sometimes I just go online. The online module ... the lectures ... being recorded ... [and the] online unit ... [are] very useful for me. That's what's made uni a bit easier [STU\_008].*

*I think the most important thing is having a large range of resources available ... to have*

*audio ... podcast and ... video ... and then having ... the lecturers ... tutorials ... a large range of services ... I can access because I particularly enjoy learning by listening to things. So to have those extra ... resources which are ... more catered to me and I can choose to use them. I found that that's beneficial for me [STU\_045].*

One student articulated the benefits of using technology to plan and organise their study around other commitments and to enhance their learning:

*... that whole online concept, where you can email your lecturers, and you nearly feel like you've got 24-hour access to your learning material [is helpful]. There's even learning material put on a couple of weeks in advance, so if I'm on task ... I can look ahead and see what's coming, and ... that's the same with the subject outline. You can see what's coming, rather than just being blind, and try ... to prepare yourself for the semester. I feel like I can lay everything out, I know when my exams are, I know when my assignments are due right from the very beginning, so I can plan everything around the three kids [STU\_054].*

As teaching with technology becomes more commonplace, it will be important for teaching and support staff to continually review their use of technology to ensure it is inclusive and that it supports a wide range of learning preferences and individual circumstances.

## A wide range of teaching strategies

Employing a wide range of teaching strategies was seen by staff as significant in offering diverse student cohorts variety and catering to different learning needs. Staff commented:

*I try to provide resources that meet every learning style ... I think things like that are particularly important, because you need to support in a range of ways, because not everybody learns in the one way [COL\_011].*

*... when students first hit university, and may never have had anything to do with university, they don't want to be hit with a whole lot of text, I've got to read all of this, and I don't know where to go ... I try to provide resources that meet every learning style [COL\_011].*

As one staff member explained:

*... the resources that I would use in a lecture situation would be references to any kind of popular cultural things that are happening, so you use YouTube, or I use a lot of photos or images in my teaching that represent diversity or the experiences to illustrate any of the kinds of content that I teach [COL\_008].*

One staff member conceptualised such variety as 'epistemological equity':

*I guess you could almost see it as an 'epistemological equity' in some ways because it's meeting students where they're at, it's student-centred, you know if a person's unable to figure out how to use the technology, no problem, let's find something else you know [COL\_009].*

One warned of the potential barriers when teaching strategies are not carefully considered for diverse student cohorts:

*... you're giving a lecture on a particular topic, which has great meaning perhaps to the audience, and then suddenly, you throw up a graph to illustrate a point, and there are people in the audience who are not particularly au fait with the reading of graphs. So ... all of the people who are reading the graph have had an understanding of the topic under discussion, when it comes to the presentation of information in certain ways that they're not familiar with, suddenly, their opportunity for learning diminishes. So I think these things need careful consideration any time we're looking at learning [COL\_016].*

## **Interactive teaching and learning**

In particular, interactive teaching and learning was seen by both students and staff as a key strategy to facilitate LSES student success. One staff member pointed to the usefulness of an interactive approach for determining students' current level of understanding and to guide their interaction:

*I use an interactive lecture style too, so 'What do you think about this?' and I'll give them a scenario just to see where they're at. There is no assumed knowledge [COL\_024].*

Another explained the importance of interactive teaching and the benefits of engaging students:

*I think that it's much more useful for students to have a conversation evolving around concepts so that they can explore and unpack things that they don't understand as you're going along [COL\_027].*

Students pointed to the benefits to their learning of interactive strategies in terms of engagement, involvement and concentration:

*... the interactive lectures where they ask questions ... [and] they might have quizzes throughout the lecture, that's helpful ... It gives you the time to sort of draw aside and talk with the people next to you or get out your calculator and work out the quiz question or whatever. That's really good as well to get you involved in the lecture rather than just sitting there, falling asleep [STU\_010].*

*I've found most of the tutorials have been really good where the tutors have been engaging, they've tried to bring all the students involved in the conversation, which is good for people that are quieter ... I thought that was good how they try and encourage students to become involved [STU\_026].*

*I like ones that make it a discussion, that are more interactive than just reading the notes, that makes a big difference because it's easier to stay focused when it's a discussion [STU\_095].*

While there is an argument that interactivity is time consuming and content may need to be cut to accommodate it, the flip side of the argument is that you could cover less content interactively but ensure student engagement and understanding is greater than it would have been through passively listening to a lecture. Arguably, if there is interactivity and it has the benefits to involvement, focus and learning outlined above, students may be motivated to think and learn more about the topic, including outside of class.



## Variety in assessment (mode)

An important part of providing flexibility and variety to students from LSES backgrounds is offering different assessment formats. While noting the importance of comparability of modes or formats of assessment, staff pointed to the importance of variety in promoting inclusivity:

*... clearly if you want everyone to feel they belong and are comfortable in the assessment regime, the first thing you have to have is variety of modes [COL\_026].*

*... assessment at university ... relies too much on the formal written word, and on the traditional types of assessments, like essays and reports, and yes, there definitely is a place for those kinds of assessments. But in this changing world, we need to bring in more variety in modes of assessment, so not just a formal essay, but a variety of ways, to meet the diversity of our students as well [COL\_012].*

Examples of how variety might be achieved were offered:

*... assessment should offer a range of ways ... in which the students can present their work. So [in] many of the assessments, they have been able to do it online, as a report, as an essay ... as a collection of interview information [COL\_001].*

However, not all staff agreed about such flexibility and some thought there might be other approaches. As one explained:

*I think a little flexibility with assessment that allows students to prepare in advance, even students who don't have the core skills [is acceptable]. I don't think that we should be changing our assessment types if it contributes to the academic rigour of the program, just because it might be an alien way of performing academically for some people. But I do think that working with individuals to build their capacity around those sorts of assessments is probably something that we should give a little bit more thought to [COL\_005].*

The issue of staging and scaffolding assessment is discussed in some detail below under '4. Scaffold your students' learning'.

## Flexibility around assessment due dates

As well as variety and/or staging, there is also a clear need for flexibility around assessment due dates at times for LSES students. Both successful LSES students and staff who successfully teach and support LSES students pointed to the need for some flexibility where there was good reason for this.

Many LSES students referred to the need to have flexibility in relation to assessment deadlines because of their other responsibilities:

*I need flexibility because with work arrangements and everything sometimes that all changes and I just need a few days' flexibility here or there [STU\_036].*

*The teachers are probably a big help ... for me, with three kids ... So at times, they have assisted, whether it be extensions, or special consideration ... but I definitely think those things have helped me get through. If they weren't available, I don't know what I would've done [STU\_054].*

Staff were also explicit in comments about the need for flexibility around assessment deadlines:

*I think in the university setting there's a constraint in that people have to pass the course so what I try to do with my assessments is to be as flexible as possible especially around due dates, so I tell everybody they need to let me know for whatever reason when they can't meet the due date ... So for me to respond to the diverse situations that people walk in the door it's about flexibility and responsiveness to a person's situation and thinking about what are the contextual factors around them that are impacting on their ability to meet all the demands of the course [COL\_009].*

This raises the question of fairness. In terms of fairness, there was no suggestion that extensions, special consideration and the like should be applied differentially to students but that the provisions for flexibility allowed in university policies should be used to assist all students to succeed.

## Strategies

- Examine your unconscious assumptions about LSES students and challenge yourself about the potential impacts of any biases you might hold.
- Record your lectures and make recordings and slides/notes available to your students.
- Explore better use of technology to enable greater inclusivity in your teaching online and face-to-face.
- Reflect on your preferences in and utilisation of teaching strategies – ask yourself how the range of these might be widened to encompass more interaction and a greater range of student learning needs.
- Reflect on your preferences in assessment practice – ask yourself how the range of these might be widened to allow improved learning, without compromising standards.

### 3. Make expectations clear, using accessible language

Research shows that many LSES students enter higher education with expectations about teachers, teaching assessment and university culture that are disjunctive with the reality of higher education (Roberts 2011; Brooks 2004). The importance of making expectations clear for LSES students in language they understand emerged as a major finding in the present project.

Using clear and accessible language with students is a significant part of making expectations apparent. The literature suggests that LSES students often enter higher education without a prior acquaintance with academic language and discourse (Priest 2009). Further, students' lack of familiarity and acquaintance with the language of academe can impact on feelings of belonging in higher education (Hutchings 2006). It is, therefore, critical that teachers use clear, accessible language when teaching and supporting students who may be unfamiliar with academic discourse.

The clarity necessary can be achieved through a variety of means. In particular, staff and students pointed to both the benefits of thorough explanations of assessment requirements and criteria and the use of accessible language and examples to ensure student understanding.

Successful students shared what had helped them to understand and learn and many responses related to having clarity about expectations of them:

*... just clear instructions of what they want from an assessment item. It can be daunting to kind of sit down and write your first five thousand word assignment ... so definitely a clear structure ... helps [STU\_057].*

*Because they're the ones marking my assessment ... it's good to know what they want in the assessments or exams [STU\_074].*

*... there are typically hundreds of questions that are then filtered back to the course convenors, and the way that those are then answered, such that everyone can see all of the responses, is critical in demystifying what's being asked of us a lot of the time [STU\_056].*

Staff members highly experienced in teaching LSES students stressed the need for expectations to be made clear to students in ways they can relate to and understand:

*... if you lay the guidelines out ... you say, 'This is what I would like, this is what you can do', they know very clearly what it is you want [COL\_001].*

*... they're told to write these essays and they want to see what an essay looks like ... It's like trying to teach them how to ride a bicycle without the bicycle ... But if you're teaching something, and if you can show an example of it, the students can see the expectation, they can see the level of what is expected of them [COL\_012].*

*... with assessment ... the students need to understand the criteria sheet, or the rubric, if you like ... what the lecturer, or what the tutor is looking for. I think it's very difficult for them to do a piece of assessment if they're not clear on the guidelines of what they're supposed to be doing [COL\_001].*

Experienced higher education teachers are aware of the importance of making expectations clear. However, what is clear to a student who has familiarity with higher education through their family and friends' experiences and what is clear for an LSES student who may have little or no familiarity with university study can be quite different. It is critical that accessible language and examples are used with LSES students so that they are not excluded from understanding by the vagueness of academic language.

#### Accessible language and examples

Both staff and students identified the use of accessible language and examples as central to LSES student success. The use of these enabled clear understanding of expectations, concepts, ideas and assessment requirements and facilitated higher-level understanding and performance by LSES students.

In relation to the importance of the use of accessible, everyday language, students commented:

*... I mean a couple of times I might have listened to lecturers that probably used too many big words so sometimes I didn't understand where they were coming from. So maybe if they can speak in layperson's terms a little bit, that makes it a lot easier [STU\_026].*

*I feel like they're using big words and big sentences when they can say the exact same thing in simple language and half the amount of words ... In other words, 'What does it actually mean?' So I've had a few teachers that I really couldn't understand and they were just so sort of theoretical that I found myself tuning out which was really difficult and it also can get maximally hard to relate to if they're speaking in really high academic language [STU\_035].*

Staff concurred with students about the use of complex and obscure language by staff in their comments:

*... students say to me, 'Our lecturer has given us lectures, and we don't understand their language, what they're saying. They're speaking something like a foreign language, with terms, and different phrases' [COL\_001].*

*So these students that I interviewed ... one of the things that came out is that there would be questions like, 'Do it with depth. Respond with depth and meaning' ... and they go, 'What's depth? What do they mean by depth?' Or critical analysis and, 'What's critical?' 'What's analysis?' So I think that some of the things that have been challenging for these students is really understanding what the language [means] [COL\_021].*

*From the students' perspective ... just trying to de code the assessment criteria is an issue. What does that actually mean, because it's not written in plain English. It's not written in English that first year students, or even second and third year students, can understand [COL\_012].*

The importance of demystifying the content of curriculum and, particularly, the assessment requirements for LSES students cannot be overstated. Current practice in use of 'high academic language' excludes students who are not familiar with that language and puts them at a distinct disadvantage compared to their higher SES peers who are familiar with such language. The challenge is that some academic staff are not aware of their exclusive language use or may believe that it is a sign of intelligence if students understand such language. Of course, it is not – it is a sign of familiarity with the language, nothing more. Students from LSES backgrounds should be given the opportunity to become familiar with the language and plain English should be used in the meantime. If nomenclature is needed, it is best to teach it to the students as it is introduced.

## **Real-life examples**

Students also commented on the benefits of teachers who used 'real-life' examples in their teaching:

*I do like the ones who are more practical, have a more practical approach ... they're actually giving, their life examples or speaking about their experiences and ... I find that more beneficial [STU\_037].*

*And I think with the tutors, they're quite personal, so they'll relate their own experiences, which is really good because you have something to go from rather than it being really abstract ... They have so many stories, which ... really helps me put it into the real world kind of context [STU\_088].*

Students from LSES backgrounds are not alone in appreciating the use of anecdotes, stories and real-life examples in teaching. Like much of the advice offered in this guide, the use of such examples benefits all students and their learning.

## Suggested strategies

- Record a typical class and review your use of language for jargon, acronyms, complex vocabulary, long sentences, the absence of clear explanations and the like.
- Ask a small group of volunteer students to listen to this recording and give you feedback about your use of language and your clarity.
- Ask a colleague from another discipline to critically review your subject guide or other material you give to students for the use of confusing jargon, acronyms, complex vocabulary and the like.
- Actively practise simplifying your oral and written language and using explanations of greater depth.
- Try to include a small number of short anecdotes or stories in each class to engage students and help them understand and remember concepts.



## 4. Scaffold your students' learning

The term 'scaffolded learning' takes its name from the idea of a support structure that is gradually removed as the central entity becomes strong enough to stand on its own. Scaffolded learning refers to learning that is tailored to meet student needs, helps students reach their learning goals and provides the necessary degree of support to assist students in their learning. The literature shows that there are good reasons to scaffold the learning of LSES students, related to their confidence and relevant skill level.

As Devlin and McKay (2011) report, LSES students can be reluctant to seek support from academic staff with subject-related queries because they are often unsure of the validity of their questions and how staff might respond to their queries (Benson et al. 2009; Lawrence 2005). LSES students can lack confidence and self-esteem, which can in turn affect their choices about seeking support (David et al. 2010; Murphy 2009; Christie et al. 2008; Charlesworth 2004).

Further, as Devlin and McKay (2011) point out, LSES students may not be equipped with the skill set that traditional students hold in terms of academic, research, computer, writing and language skills (Kirk 2008; Fitzgibbon and Prior 2006). The academic preparedness for university study of LSES students can sometimes be different to that of traditional students (Murphy 2009; Northedge 2003; Berger 2000). In particular, there can often be a mismatch between their cultural capital and the middle class culture they encounter in higher education (Greenbank 2006, Devlin 2011).

Many students interviewed as part of this project reported feeling under-prepared in terms of their academic, research, computer, writing and/or language skills. Enabling scaffolded learning, that is, explicitly teaching to different levels and using a step-by-step approach toward mastery, was identified by staff as critical in successfully teaching diverse cohorts, particularly those with students from LSES backgrounds who vary in their levels of academic preparedness.

As staff explained:

*... I think we have to recognise that all students are at different levels. They're not all at the same level of learning and understanding [COL\_001].*

*Well how I'd like to design it ... is to make sure that it does actually come from where the students are from, so it's flexible enough that they can actually bring in their world but then it actually challenges them to go beyond that so it's always starting from where they are [COL\_008].*

One staff member explained their approach to scaffolding and the benefit to all students:

*Well what I try to do is find ways in which I can scaffold the information ... I ... try and structure it so that every student has the capacity to look at the task and if they understand it to begin with, then they can move onto the next task ... some students who are finding it perhaps a little bit more difficult ... so ... structuring the task ... allows them to say 'Okay, well, I'm at this point and I'm going to need some help to move into the next one', whereas the other students who are doing better can just go, 'Yeah well I finished that one, let's move onto the next one'. So everybody is sort of still moving [COL\_013].*

Approaching teaching this way can be challenging for those who are new to teaching and for those who are experienced but have taught using the more traditional approach of preparing one set of content for all students. As university populations in Australia continue to diversify, it will be necessary to teach the students in ways that accommodate all of them, rather than just those who prefer and benefit from a traditional approach.

### Teaching and learning the discourses

Particular academic cultures exist within institutions. They are often understood as dominant and specialist discourses of knowledge, communication and practices. In layperson's terms, 'the way we do things around here'. Students must be given the understanding and tools necessary to understand the university culture and participate in its discourses.

As one staff member explained:

*A good example of that is when you might set an essay task, for example, which requires some degree of reflection on literature. Now, a culturally rich student audience will say, 'Essay. Yes, I know essays. I know what they are. I've been doing essays since such-and-such, we learnt how to write an*

*essay this way, and that way. Oh yes, I know how to get hold of literature and review it, and critique it, and so forth'. The students, however, who come from a less well-endowed background may look at you and say, 'You know, I've really not written very many essays, or I haven't written any at all', and they may also be puzzling a little bit about what an essay actually is, and 'What do you mean by critiquing the literature? Do you mean that I can't write a sentence without acknowledging that it was an idea that somebody else wrote? How does this actually work?' So they're not stupid, but the point is that they don't have this cultural knowledge about how you write an essay [COL\_016].*

Another staff member pointed to some of the reasons that LSES students face challenges with discourses:

*... once we do write the assignment ... we need to look at the ones who perform poorly and why they perform poorly. It is usually because they just haven't been trained in that type of academic area ... Usually, they are the first one in the family to go to university and their parents have never been to university and the parents quite often can't assist them with academic writing and all of that, and it comes out very, very quickly [COL\_006].*

Another staff member interviewed highlighted the challenges for some LSES students who may not have the academic literacy of their fellow students:

*... what a student does ... in a lecture ... [is] they try to copy everything down religiously, because they're not looking for the key points, and they have no idea ... what they're expected to do, and seriously, there are so many who have no concept of how to read academically, that it holds them back, so they stop doing it [COL\_001].*

This staff member added:

*I think what we kind of ought to be doing at the beginning ... is teaching students 'chunking', how to do their academic reading, how to do a glossary of words they're not sure of, how to do relevant notes [COL\_001].*

The importance of teaching and learning academic discourse and, in particular, writing skills, was highlighted as part of a scaffolded approach to learning in interview responses.

Students interviewed stressed the need to be taught academic discourse and writing:

*... how to write an essay for instance, the correct format and whatnot – that sort of stuff, that basic stuff which would seem very basic to some or [to] the seasoned university students, but to someone like me, it was invaluable in my learning process [STU\_046].*

*Well I think when I first started I had a really good lecturer who showed you how to format an essay. She told you what type of font to use, what size font, spacing and went through all of that because I wouldn't have known, I'd have just done it with one line spacing and handed it in, so that kind of thing made ... it was just information that you don't know that you need to know [STU\_095].*

The matter of whose responsibility it is to ensure these discourses and skills are taught and learnt by LSES and other students, and how best to ensure they are taught in meaningful ways, is often raised. In terms of responsibility, academic staff sometimes argue that they are too busy teaching the content of the subject to also teach students about how to interact with the discipline and the academic requirements. Academic language and learning (ALL) skills staff sometimes argue that it is not possible to effectively teach the discourses without including content and embedding such teaching in the discipline context. There is also an argument that once they are aware of the need to understand and use them, students themselves have a responsibility to ensure they learn the discourses. The appropriate approach depends on the discipline, the teacher(s), the ways in which the teacher(s) and ALL skills experts might work together and the particular student needs. An initial discussion between the teacher(s) and an ALL expert is advisable to plan and implement an appropriate approach.

## **A developmental approach to assessment**

A developmental, staged approach to assessment, which enables the continual and ongoing maturation of students' learning and development of assessment performance, was seen as important to facilitating the success of students from LSES backgrounds. This allows them to develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in university study.

Students commented on the benefits of a developmental approach to assessment tasks in helping them to succeed:

*We got taken through ... step by step. A lot of time you're sort of just given assignment tasks and then just sort of having to work it out for ourselves ... [this] was really good in kind of easing us into it and telling us not to expect ourselves to know straight away [STU\_007].*

*... probably because we've got smaller numbers, they get to know the students so well and they know where our weaknesses are. They literally can present us in lessons the best way and like their gradual assessments, they often will put so much information on those assessments so that we know where our weak areas are and where we need to build them and they take so much time and effort [STU\_094].*

As this staff member explained:

*... the assessment tasks that I do are incremental ... it's about 'Okay, so what skills do I want the students to have at the end of a particular subject?' and whether they've been able to consolidate and build on those skills [COL\_015].*

ALL expert staff can also assist teaching staff to develop and implement a staged approach to assessment to assist students to gradually build the capabilities they need for success. Once again, a useful approach might start with an initial conversation between a teacher and an ALL expert.

## Peer learning

A significant aspect of scaffolding students' learning is providing adequate support to ensure students achieve the desired learning outcomes. The project identified peer learning as a key support strategy for successful LSES students. This applied to formal peer learning within the classroom and online and informal peer learning organised outside class by students. Several staff noted the quality of such learning. As one put it:

*... you know that they learn from each other, half the time better than from you [COL\_029].*

This staff member explained how peer learning is important to student success in terms of its contribution to supporting transition into university:

*My tutorials are basically all about group work and interaction and everybody in the group gets a say ... and it is very, very important we do that, because that binds them together with the other students and it also gets them to settle into the university in the first five or six weeks, and that is critical [COL\_006].*

Students explained why peer learning opportunities were helpful from their point of view in terms of social and academic outcomes:

*Well, I found that if you get out and mingle with other people – you make friends and then you can learn from them as well, so you don't have to be sort of alone and solitary in your learning. I find it easy, personally, if I can learn off other people as well [STU\_044].*

*The thing that really does help me learn is having study groups with other people in my course because I can get their perspective on the topic. And it motivates me to study as well because they're studying too. And if I don't understand something, they can help explain it or I can help them as well, which helps me remember it, to explain it to them [STU\_074].*

*... I think learning from each other also helps. With group work, it's really interesting to know what other people know as well 'cause we're all learning, and I think we can all help each other learn more [STU\_044].*

Designing and implementing peer learning in class or online as activities and/or as part of the assessment strategy for a subject can be extremely beneficial for students. Not only can the inclusion of such activities increase student engagement and enjoyment through greater social interaction, this interaction can impact positively on learning. In addition, students sometimes make better teachers than the teachers themselves – if there are concerns about displaying a lack of understanding to teachers, for example, students may not feel comfortable asking teachers the necessary questions to clarify their understanding and may instead prefer to approach a peer for clarification. Peer learning opportunities can be a formal part of the curriculum or they can be an informal option, encouraged by staff who understand the potential benefits of peer learning.

## Suggested strategies

- Consider the ways in which you might be able to better scaffold LSES and other student learning through the subjects you teach. Ask yourself what extra or different resources you might use to supplement your teaching and how you might include activities at different levels in class or within assessment tasks.
- Talk to an ALL expert within your university about the best ways to approach teaching your LSES and other students the discourses they need to learn to be successful.
- Design and implement peer learning activities inside and outside class and ask students to provide feedback to you on their usefulness to their understanding and learning.
- Provide feedback through formative assessment opportunities.

## 5. Be available and approachable to guide student learning

A fifth key piece of practical advice for teaching staff to emerge from this project was to be both available and approachable to students. These are interlinked, yet distinguishable, characteristics of a teacher that emerged as clear factors contributing to LSES student success.

While 'office hours' and an online presence are common among university teachers, students in particular noted the value of teacher availability to assist them in understanding what was required of them and in supporting their attempts to perform appropriately in assessment. Research supports the importance of teacher availability and its impact on improved outcomes for students (Kearney et al. 1991; Mottet et al. 2005; Shin 2003).

Over and above availability, a teacher's 'approachability' was noted by numerous students as one of the keys to student success. When a student knew their query would be welcomed and appropriately addressed, when they knew a teacher would be friendly and when they knew the interaction they were seeking would be pleasant and helpful to their learning, they were much more likely to take the risk of exposing their lack of understanding and seek help. These findings are supported in the literature on effective teaching, which maintains that 'approachability' is a key teacher attribute from the students' point of view (Sander et al. 2000; Reid and Johnston 1999).

It is important to note that students did not expect help '24/7' or in an unlimited way. That said, however, the issue of staff workload did arise. This is discussed below, following an outline of characteristics of teachers that were found to help LSES students succeed.

### Teachers who are available

The importance of teachers simply being available is a factor in facilitating success of students from LSES backgrounds. As staff experienced in facilitating LSES student success explained:

*It doesn't matter how many fancy electronic resources you've got. If you haven't got time for them, you've got problems [COL\_011].*

*I think it's just time. I think I would spend the most time with them. Isn't that one of the most valuable resources that you can really give, is time? [COL\_025].*

In relation to the availability of staff members and how helpful they found this, students commented:

*It was always clear to us that if we needed support we could just go talk to the coordinator or our lecturers or anyone really ... that's a big benefit of coming here that they're very accessible [STU\_092].*

*I think having a lecturer available for help and to ask questions – like you can easily email them ... or organise a time to meet up with them for help. I think that's really helpful [STU\_074].*

*Support from the lecturers ... or the tutors [helped me succeed]. When they make themselves available, where they make appointments with you to discuss things that you're not clear about, that's the best help that I've had actually [STU\_009].*

### Teachers who are approachable

Teachers being perceived as approachable was seen by both staff and students as critical to student success.

Staff commented:

*You know I just like to make myself approachable to students so that if they've got a difficulty they can come and tell me and I will understand [COL\_009].*

*I guess it's just having the door open and trying to have as accessible an approach as possible. So where you are encouraging students to talk to you if something's not right [COL\_027].*

Students commented about teacher approachability as opposed to simple availability through office or contact hours. As one summed it up:

*I find some lecturers are really approachable if you've got a question and some aren't at all. So you've just got to pick which ones are and ... you can sort of tell by their mannerism and how they answer a question in the classroom whether they're approachable in their contact time [STU\_095].*



## Teachers who are helpful

Teachers' helpfulness was identified by the majority of student interviewees as having contributed to their success. So as well as being available and approachable, the quality of interaction between students and staff was seen as critically important, as was the outcome of the interaction. When asked what had helped them succeed in their study to date, 60 out of 89 LSES students interviewed for this project (67 per cent) specifically commented on the helpfulness of teachers having facilitated and supported their success in their studies.

Typical examples of comments included:

*... there are some people who are more helpful than others ... there's one fellow ... who was just terrific in the last practicum subject, because you could actually go to him with various other questions or concerns, and he'd help you get those sorted out, even outside of his own subject, so there are some people like that who are just really, really keen to help ... [STU\_056].*

*... there was a lot of assignments where I really had no idea what I was supposed to do. So I'd go to him ... he would give up a lot of his spare time to help me get on track and stuff and get me really thinking about it. And ... he made himself available whenever I needed him. There was multiple times where I would send him an email, and he'd just say, 'Look, come into my office, and I'll discuss it with you.' And every time I walked in his office – he just seemed like he was the busiest man in the world – but he'd sit there with me for an hour and a half to two hours sometimes, just telling me other things and telling me what I need to do and stuff like that. He ... led me in the right direction [STU\_004]*

Staff indicated some of the ways in which they tried to be helpful:

*I will offer them the opportunity to post online the example question where they will write on a forum ... So that's using the online tools [COL\_015].*

*Recently a student who has a mental health disability ... she hadn't handed anything in all year and I'd sent her a couple of emails saying that 'I've noticed that we haven't got anything. Is there anything, do you need extra help?' and she came up to me and she burst into tears and just described what had been happening and then together we planned how she was going to manage her work and she's done it [COL\_009].*

## Staff workload

The characteristics of availability, approachability and helpfulness together raise the issue of time and workload for teachers of LSES students. Experienced staff frequently commented on the extra time they spent with LSES students assisting them to come to terms with university requirements and develop the skills and confidence they needed to perform appropriately in assessment tasks.

Some universities have arrangements where academic and language skills support and development are embedded in curriculum. Alternatively or in addition, support staff may work closely with academic staff to provide necessary support and advice on discourses, skills, assessment requirements and the like to students. Where they exist, these arrangements work well to ensure students are supported toward success without the sole responsibility for this support falling to academic teaching staff.

No university, to our knowledge, has yet formally acknowledged the extra time required to teach LSES students in workload models. This may be an area that requires further investigation in the future.

The project has developed advice on resourcing and supporting those who teach and support LSES students and this is contained in a companion guide for institutional and policy leaders.

## Feedback/feed forward

Another factor in facilitating LSES student success is the provision of feedback and 'feed forward'. As one staff member explained:

*Basically, I think the philosophy is allow them to make mistakes and then improve on it ... Education ... should be about taking risks, trying things out and having a journey whereby you're not trying to guess what someone else wants or what the right thing is before you really know [COL\_003].*

Another agreed:

*I think constant information going back and forth between the students and the lecturer about how they're performing ... make ... it [as] straightforward [an] experience as possible transitioning from where they've been before into university [COL\_014].*

A third outlined the approach taken to providing feedback:

*We give lots of formative feedback, so all of my tutors and lecturers, we take drafts so they can hand in a draft assignment and we all give one lot of feedback ... Obviously we deconstruct the assignments for them but it's also about the learning. It shouldn't be just about the assessment, it really has to be about the learning [COL\_025].*

In relation to feedback, students were clear about its positive impact on their success:

*... feedback ... helped [me] to see where you were and improve the next semester. Although it wasn't the same subject but you could still apply it to different areas and different assignments [STU\_003].*

*I think that the feedback's there when you want it ... and ... the systems are in place to provide feedback ... it's formative feedback, it's learning, assessment for learning sort of thing. Your learning grows [STU\_101].*

## Suggested strategies

- Ensure your 'office hours' and other availability online are clear to students, along with details of how to contact you and expected response times.
- Review the style and content of your oral and written communication to ensure you appear approachable to assist students with their learning.
- Use time efficient methods of providing feedback/feed forward, including:
  - using generalised written summaries of general strengths and weaknesses to groups of students
  - using pre-prepared feedback/feed forward templates that match the assessment criteria
  - using the learning management system or appropriate software to communicate with all students
  - via carefully trained, briefed and supported tutors or other casual staff.

## 6. Be a reflective practitioner

Finally, the findings from the project point clearly to the importance of teachers reflecting on their practice and making adjustments to ensure they are teaching all of the students in their charge as well as possible. 'Reflective practice' on the part of teachers of students from LSES backgrounds is critical. Drawing on the work of Loughran (2002), reflective practice is understood as the need for teachers to 'develop their understanding about the way they conduct their work, and to be skilled practitioners through their work ... By doing so, the knowledge base of the profession is developed and refined in ways that help the practitioner to be an effective and informed professional' (p. 34). The need for reflective practice in teaching is widely upheld and promoted in the literature (Brookfield 1995; Valli 1993; Osterman and Kottkamp 1993; Russell and Munby 1992; Richert 1990; Schön 1987; Smyth 1992).

Staff who are committed to offering effective teaching and support of students from not only LSES but all backgrounds will necessarily be reflective in their practice. One of the major findings to emerge from the project was that staff members known for their expertise in teaching and supporting LSES students shared reflective practice as a common trait.

As staff explained:

*... it's about I suppose helping adults to learn, I mean that's my philosophy ... the philosophy comes from an andragogical background which is the science of helping adults to learn. So that means always looking at my practice ... and saying, 'Well, how can I do this better?' [COL\_015].*

*... I found ... that I was teaching them all these things and they weren't even sort of remembering from the exam and I thought 'Well, this is just a waste of everyone's time' ... I stepped back and said, 'Well, what do they need to know from this unit? What are the core skills? What are the really valuable things that I can give them in the short time I've got with them that are going to be lasting?' ... [T]hen [I'd] focus on that [COL\_003].*

*... in terms of the need of making inherent expectations explicit and even some of the hidden cultural assumptions that are in the way I'm marking, judging and assessing, I've really had to soul-search about why I prioritise the fact that having a linear argument that's written in a direct and rational way is superior to somebody who might write in metaphor in a circular way [COL\_009].*

Reflection does not necessarily lead to immediate solutions, as this last comment above in particular shows. However, it can lead to important questions, which in time may find responses that enhance teaching and learning for all students. Involving colleagues in reflection may be one way to support critical examination of your practice.

One staff member suggested reciprocal peer review as one way to reflect and learn from others simultaneously:

*You get somebody to review what you're doing and that's always beneficial. But also you get to see what others are doing and you know you adapt what's appropriate to your own student group from that [COL\_005].*

The challenges of reflective practice were acknowledged:

*... the immediate effort in trying to sort of step back and look at what you're doing is quite difficult, particularly when you're engaging yourself in other people's minds all the time, to then step back and look at your own is another jump [COL\_003].*

Some staff suggested other creative ways to inform reflective practice, for example:

*... we ... check for understanding of their learning and then we always have an honesty box that I take with me and they can, if they're not understanding something but they're too nervous to come and explain or if I'm not teaching well or they're not getting something, they put that in the honesty box and then at the end of the week I check out the honesty box and I think 'Oh, so next week, I need to do these things', so it's feedback to me, how I could be better in supporting their needs ... [COL\_025].*

## Suggested strategies

- Reflect on each class to determine what worked well and what might be missing and what might be improved in terms of teaching.
- Consider how you know to what extent students understand what you are teaching. Determine how you might better understand this.
- Ask your students for informal feedback on your teaching and their learning.
- Review your online interaction in terms of the learning objectives you have for your students and determine your strengths and weaknesses and identify opportunities for enhancing future interactions.
- Reflect and act on formal feedback on your teaching.
- Ask a peer to review your teaching and provide constructive comment.

## Practical advice for institutional leaders and policy makers

The focus of this advice is on the active creation of institution-wide supportive and inclusive learning environments that enable LSES students to concentrate on their learning.

The five pieces of advice give practical ways that institutions can further develop an empathic context. These practical suggestions are summarised in the list below and further details are provided in the sections that follow.

### Key advice to institutional leaders

The key advice to institutional leaders related to supporting students from LSES backgrounds in Australian universities to emerge from this national study is:

#### 1. Enable inclusive curriculum and assessment design

Enable curriculum and assessment design that caters to diversity, integrates and scaffolds opportunities for students to learn tertiary literacies alongside discipline content, and protects academic standards.

#### 2. Promote engagement with, and support from, others

Create a sense of belonging for LSES students, ensure there are collaborative learning opportunities and peer-to-peer contact inside and outside the curriculum and provide opportunities for families and communities to engage with the institution.

#### 3. Encourage 'help-seeking' by students

Encourage staff to use early feedback and referral, extend and enhance provision of and promote student services, normalise 'help-seeking' and provide infrastructure and resources to allow the monitoring and management of at-risk students.

#### 4. Minimise financial challenges for students

Promote financial services and support such as scholarships, facilitate access to government payment options, and minimise student costs through providing loans, hire services, free car parking and the like.

#### 5. Resource and support teachers of LSES students

Provide high support and resourcing for teachers of LSES students, taking into account the challenges of inclusive teaching and of providing detailed help, feedback, referral and support, and reward and recognise teaching appropriately.



# 1. Enable inclusive curriculum and assessment design

Institutions need to pay particular attention to the critical role of the curriculum as a key mechanism for supporting LSES learners. Kift and Field (2009) argue that 'in all their diversity, and acknowledging their multiple identities and changing patterns of engagement, it is within the first year curriculum that commencing students must be engaged, supported, and realise their sense of belonging. In this way, the curriculum has an important role to play in first year transition and retention' (p. 2). And the centrality of the curriculum extends beyond first year. The importance of curriculum design in meeting LSES student needs is captured by one staff interviewee this way:

*... how I'd like to design – if I had power over design – is to make sure [the curriculum] ... actually comes from where the students are from, so it is flexible enough that they can bring in their world but then it actually challenges them to go beyond that [COL\_008].*

## Knowing the students

Staff experienced with LSES students indicated the value of knowing something about the students for whom you are designing and implementing curriculum. As one senior staff member put it:

*... it's trying to make data available and visible to folk in terms of understanding ... what is the cohort that is coming into your course or unit; trying to link that with strategies both in terms of longer-term curriculum design ... [and] short-term strategies in the classroom ... So trying to make that all visible and not overwhelming for folk [COL\_028].*

Senior leaders have an important role to play in ensuring that relevant data on student demographics is provided at the appropriate times in usable formats to the staff who need it. However, it is critical that approaches to curriculum and assessment development do not position LSES students as a 'problem' and that institutional actions should focus on good practice for **all** students. As one staff member put it:

*... the philosophical approach is that we shouldn't isolate the low SES students, but it's just good practice that what we provide is provided for all students [COL\_021].*

The importance of a curriculum designed to cater to diverse cohorts of students emerged clearly from the interview data. Staff comments included:

*... all students are at different levels of learning and understanding [COL\_001].*

*... every student has [to have] the capacity to look at the task and if they understand it ... move on to the next task [COL\_013].*

Senior and other leaders need to ensure that the policies and practices that underpin curriculum design and implementation enable and encourage inclusiveness to be embedded and woven in, rather than 'bolted on' or considered as an afterthought.

## Taking a course level perspective

Many staff interviewed referred to the importance of taking a course (program) level perspective in curriculum review and development:

*... we need to take a bigger picture course approach to assessment ... we've got a lot of our subjects and the assessment of those subjects is done in isolation to the other ... [we need to be] liaising with colleagues and ... [focusing on] the skills that we want our students to develop ... throughout their degree ... [to avoid] gaps and duplications [COL\_014].*

As one staff member pointed out:

*... we do need to be aware that our student cohorts are changing ... and not assume that they've got the skills to tackle first year university ... and that means we do need to adjust our assessment, our communications, how we design our curriculum, how it all hangs together so that the students can see a clear, common sense, plain English path for their studies [COL\_014].*

Senior and other leaders can work to ensure the processes of curriculum review and reform employ a course focus. Course and program teams should be adequately supported to come together with any necessary information and support, to conceptualise curriculum that facilitates the development of appropriate learning outcomes.

Such curricula should be student-centred, be infused with academic and other literacies alongside discipline content, incorporate appropriate scaffolding and ensure academic standards. Each of these components is discussed below, alongside the importance of staff development.

### **Student-centredness**

Student- or learner-centredness simply places students at the centre of the learning process. Students are active participants in their learning and, wherever possible and feasible, they learn at their own pace in whatever ways suit them best. While this might be difficult in a mass higher education context, it is an ideal that many staff work towards. The majority of staff indicated the need for the curriculum to cater to diversity. Student-centredness was a common theme in interviews with staff highly experienced in effective teaching of LSES students, one of whom explained:

*Well it's not just flexibility just to pull people through, it's flexibility to help people to reach their potential ... it's ensuring that people meet the learning outcomes but in a way that they can [do] so ... you could almost see it as an 'epistemological equity' in some ways because it's meeting students where they're at, it's student-centred [COL\_009].*

### **Academic and tertiary literacies**

Another clear finding from the project is the need to embed the development of academic and tertiary literacies alongside discipline content in curricula. Experienced staff recognised the importance of doing so:

*... somebody needs to teach the students how to write academically, how to do research, how to access libraries, how to do all of that type of thing [COL\_006].*

*I try to examine the subject, see what I need to teach content-wise, and then look to see what strategies we can do to support students in their study, skills that they need to be able to 'do' the content [COL\_011].*

A number of staff referred to a widespread and incorrect assumption that teaching academic and tertiary literacies equates to 'dumbing down' curricula. One staff member explained the matter this way:

*... what we do need to do ... is ... be aware [of] ... how we communicate with our students and not just expect ... that they will be able to decipher all the academic language in our subject outline ... we're not dumbing things down, we're just making things readable in plain English and now that's going to benefit all students whether they're from a diverse background or not because there are very few that really get ... impressed with impenetrable language in subject outlines [COL\_014].*

Successful LSES students also commented on the importance of being taught academic and tertiary literacies:

*... it's such a different writing style from everything I've ever written, and I thought I was quite a good writer. Then I got a bit of a shock the first assignment I got back ... And you think, oh dear, OK, I need some help with that [STU\_057].*

*... I had one particular unit last trimester, which was a research essay, which was nothing I've ever done before so it was a completely different approach and format. So I had no idea where to start [STU\_010].*

Assistance and support from language and academic skills experts for academic staff undertaking curriculum development should be enabled by institutional leaders. This would enhance the likelihood that academic literacies were appropriately embedded in the curriculum and assessed.

## Scaffolding

The term ‘scaffolded learning’ takes its name from the idea of a support structure that is gradually removed as the central entity becomes strong enough to stand on its own. Scaffolded learning refers to learning that is tailored to meet student needs, helps students reach their learning goals and provides the necessary degree of support to assist students in their learning. The literature shows that there are good reasons to scaffold the learning of LSES students, related to their confidence and relevant skill level (Sharpe 2006; Sharpe 2001; Puntambekar and Hubscher 2005; Werth, Southey and Lynch 2009).

The importance of scaffolding learning was emphasised by many experienced staff:

*I think ... the most important thing is ... to ensure that there are adequate opportunities for the students to build their skills ... [and] adequate opportunities for the students to be able to gauge how they're ... progressing with their skill development [COL\_016].*

Scaffolded learning was identified by staff as an important way in which to facilitate the success of students from LSES backgrounds. Staged teaching approaches and scaffolded learning should be promoted within institutions. These pedagogical practices are an effective means of teaching diverse student cohorts, particularly students from LSES backgrounds.

As staff explained:

*... I think we have to recognise that all students are at different levels. They're not all at the same level of learning and understanding [COL\_001].*

*... we need to prepare them well to tackle those assessment tasks so whatever we expect in an assessment task we need to ensure that that's been provided in the lead up [COL\_014].*

## Involving colleagues in curriculum design

Far from being protective about their curriculum development and teaching roles, teaching and other staff interviewed recognised that expertise can be found in many places. Curriculum design, approval and enactment activities should ideally involve professional educators as key team members. Opportunities for students to learn, develop and practice tertiary literacies and desired

graduate capabilities should be integrated into the curriculum and their development scaffolded alongside the development of discipline skills and knowledge. Along with language and academic skills experts, such team members might include careers staff and library staff:

*I think incorporating the learning skills advisors and the library people ... [is important] say you're going to talk about your assessment, because ... what students really want to know [is]: 'How am I going to get my marks in a subject?' ... you could bring the library skills, and the learning skills advisors in ... and if you say, 'Your assessment this session will be due here, this is what you have to do, and here are the people who can help you,' and you're putting the scaffolding in to support them [COL\_011].*

And as one staff member pointed out:

*... incorporating the library skills into the curriculum, supports every student, including the low SES [COL\_011].*

## Staff development

Senior and other leaders have an important role to play in resourcing and promoting staff development that is focused on learning and teaching.

Staff development opportunities that include education around inclusive curriculum and assessment design are critical if LSES students' needs are to be effectively catered for at university. Such opportunities would ideally include initial programs for those new to teaching as well as ongoing programs for experienced staff who may wish to learn more about effective teaching of diverse cohorts.

Many staff interviewed saw professional development as a valuable component in ensuring effective teaching and support of students from LSES backgrounds:

*... just being aware ourselves of what's out there [is important]. I didn't even know what was out there until I went to a widening participation workshop [COL\_024].*

In terms of the format of such development opportunities for staff, many staff interviewed

noted the potential of peer review, and constructive feedback, for developing teaching strategies for non-traditional students, including LSES students:

*... any dialogue between teachers of good practice, of best practice for what they're doing and how, and how it works, and this sort of intellectual discussion is really good [COL\_001].*

Informal peer review of teaching initiatives is relatively inexpensive for institutions to set up and has myriad benefits as the following comments suggest:

*You get somebody to review what you're doing and that's always beneficial. But also you get to see what others are doing and you know you adapt what's appropriate to your own student group from that [COL\_005].*

Overall, the need for staff to be enabled through professional development to design and embed inclusive curriculum for LSES students was clear. Senior and other leaders need to ensure that professional development opportunities are provided but must also promote the importance and value of staff investing their time in participating in development initiatives and programs designed to assist them to better teach and support LSES students.

### **Protecting academic standards**

Staff made it clear that increasing numbers of diverse students did not negatively impact on academic standards. In relation to LSES students, they commented:

*I think the first thing I would say is don't make assumptions about the students ... I think you should always teach students with the expectation that they can excel and that they are capable and have capacity [COL\_008].*

*We take students who are low socioeconomic and first in their family to go to university and all those sorts of things and last year and the year before that we had 25 per cent of them graduate with distinction. For those that are resilient enough to stick it out they are doing okay [COL\_023].*

Many had very high expectations of LSES and other students:

*... I have high standards. I want them to go well. I don't want mediocre stuff. I want really good stuff. I mean, they won't all get HDs, but someone who's perhaps a pass might get to a credit, and you've got to look at little increases [COL\_001].*

Contrary to misconceptions about the participation of LSES students contributing to decreased standards in higher education, when asked what had helped them succeed, LSES students clearly indicated the importance of holding very high aspirations and having high standards:

*... I have been quite dedicated and trying to achieve high results [STU\_041].*

*... I love anything to do with the science subjects. I excel at them and love them ... they're very challenging, I mean, don't get me wrong, it's not that I think that they're easy, but I think that's part of their attraction – they're not easy [STU\_082].*

*I guess just my attitude. I have so many of my friends say, 'Oh, yeah. All I need is a pass and I just want to get a pass.' But I want more than that ... So I ... work hard to get the marks [STU\_022].*

*I always had in my mind that paying money to go to university, that I wasn't just going to be there just to get a pass. That would have been pointless if I was paying hundreds of dollars to attend these classes. I was going to give it my best shot and get the best marks that I possibly could [STU\_035].*

*... my lowest grade I have received overall so far has been a credit, so it's been mainly high distinctions, distinctions, and credits [STU\_064].*

Senior and other leaders must communicate both ongoing expectations of continuing high standards and the necessity that staff not make erroneous assumptions about LSES students on the basis of their backgrounds. An important part of this role is to continually challenge misconceptions that link the participation of LSES students in higher education to a lowering of standards.

## Suggested strategies

- Use data analytics to provide cohort information to those who design and implement curricula for, and teach LSES students, so that their decisions can be evidence-based.
- Highlight the importance of, and facilitate the development of, inclusive curriculum design in course development and review policies and processes.
- Engage appropriate professional staff, including careers staff, library staff and language and academic skills experts in the processes of curriculum review, renewal and redevelopment.
- Provide and promote staff development opportunities in inclusive curriculum and assessment design.
- Implement informal peer review of teaching initiatives that focus on assisting staff to enhance inclusive curriculum development and teaching.



## 2. Promote engagement with, and support from, others

The support provided by people in LSES students' lives was clearly indicated as a major factor in their success. People who provide support include friends and peers but in particular, family. While supportive interactions are important for all students, they are particularly important for LSES students, as indicated by the strength of this finding in the data from the project.

In stressing the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging, Kift and Nelson (2005) maintain that students who do not have a sense of 'institutional fit' are less likely to be able to fully engage with their learning. They argue that regardless of how engaging the pedagogical elements of the curriculum may be, if LSES students do not experience a sense of belonging more broadly, they are less likely to engage.

Institutional leaders must work with staff to ensure that opportunities for students to engage with each other, their teachers and, wherever possible, their families and communities are integrated into their university experience.

### **Collaborative learning**

Students and staff interviewed for this project saw providing intentional opportunities for learning with and from peers and experienced students as particularly important.

To provide the peer support that LSES students say they need to be successful, institutions should provide opportunities for, and promote the value of, collaborative learning. These opportunities could include ensuring that purposeful group learning, learning communities and/or opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, are designed as part of course and classroom activities.

Institutional leaders should also aim to provide collaborative spaces/places for students to meet and learn with friends outside of the classroom. Fostering the establishment and sustainability of peer learning communities is one way in which institutions might contribute to collaborative interactions between students.

Peer learning, whether inside or outside the classroom or online, was seen by experienced staff as important to the success of LSES students. As one staff member noted:

*... students learn a lot of things from each other and from engaging in learning activities quite independently of anything you can say or do [COL\_004].*

Another explained the rationale for ensuring students have peer learning opportunities:

*My tutorials are basically all about group work and interaction and everybody in the group gets a say, and it is very, very important that they do that ... because that binds them together with the other students and it also gets them to settle into the university ... and that is critical [COL\_006].*

However, a number of staff cautioned against a view that peer learning or group work was a panacea for LSES students:

*... put them in groups where you think it will empower them ... [but] not all groups are empowering ... if someone has really low self-esteem and there was someone who kind of [went] 'Oh I'm so brilliant' all the time, that could make them feel even worse [COL\_025].*

This staff member recommended monitoring how peers react to each other and work together and considering grouping students rather than allowing them to self-select group membership. Opportunities to learn from colleagues and experts about the best ways to facilitate peer and group work should be part of institutions' ongoing professional development programs.

### **Mentoring programs**

Mentoring programs are a potentially beneficial strategy that institutions can use to promote a sense of belonging. While such programs are common in universities, the data from the project suggests strongly that they might be increased in number and reach. Their value to LSES students' success was extremely high.

Successful students reported:

*If I would give advice to a student, it would be talk to someone who has already done some distance [study] ... If there [are] past students who would be willing to speak to prospective students to give them the overall view of just how they found the experience ... and what strategies they used ... [that] would be beneficial [STU\_064].*

*Mentors were a wonderful idea. Having another student that was in second year talking to the first years, saying things ... what facilities are in the library that will help you ... There are a lot of little things that ... can make life so much easier and I did find that was more helpful than some of the lecturers [STU\_094].*

Students outlined some of the benefits of peer and collaborative learning:

*... the most learning I have achieved is through discussions with other students [STU\_049].*

*I probably did better on the subjects where I had lots more social interaction with people doing the same subject [STU\_072].*

*... I'll send an email to someone and they'll send an email to me. I'll check theirs, they'll check mine and it's collaborative and I think if you've got a learning community, it's a lot better [STU\_087].*

Students were well aware of the value to their learning that these sorts of opportunities provide. With respect to the role of friends in learning outside the classroom, students said:

*I think it's good explaining something to someone else because it shows your understanding [STU\_097].*

*I found that if you get out and mingle with other people, you make friends and then you can learn from them as well, so you don't have to be sort of alone and solitary in your learning. I find it easy, personally, if I can learn off other people as well [STU\_044].*

Staff also identified peer mentoring as a key institutional strategy to support students from LSES backgrounds, pointing to the particular value of involving peers:

*... students from low SES backgrounds traditionally will come with ... no role models, nobody necessarily who can support them academically. And so we've developed some peer mentoring programs that we run [COL\_005].*

*... if you are wanting to support your students who are struggling then you will provide some kind of peer-led initiatives [COL\_021].*

Senior and other leaders can contribute to ensuring connections between LSES and other students through enabling mentoring programs and ensuring they are widespread, resourced and promoted.

## ***Spaces/places to meet and study***

An important question is one around where students can meet and share with and support each other outside class. Staff emphasised the need to create a sense of belonging for LSES students through the provision of appropriate spaces, particularly for those who lived far from campus:

*... I would prefer to see an inclusive and welcoming and supportive and interested personalised learning environment for all students ... our research showed [that] students perceive institutional comfort as a proxy for respect [COL\_007].*

One staff member stressed that creating learning spaces and environments for students ultimately makes students feel valued in the institution:

*... we think that if you make the institution welcoming and supportive then people who need a little bit more support will be able to make use of it if they need to and that may be first in family or non-traditional students, it may be students with mental health issues ... we don't think it will hurt them to be welcomed [COL\_007].*

Students commented on the availability of designated learning spaces for students and their usefulness for study and related purposes:

*Another thing that I didn't mention to you earlier is there's this study space ... I don't know if you've been up there, but it's like a really good place to study. Like I go there almost all the time ... It's very big. So what it's like is it's got its own little kitchen thing ... So if you're planning to study there for a long day ... you can just have your lunch there ... and study as well [STU\_097].*

Institutional leaders need to recognise the importance of students having comfortable spaces and places to meet and work with other students. They also need to ensure appropriate spaces within departments/faculties as well as in more informal areas are accessible to students.

## Encouraging external support networks

To assist students develop a sense of belonging to the institution, fellow students, staff, their course and their future careers, institutions should actively foster opportunities for students' families and communities to engage with the institution.

When asked what had helped them succeed at university, typical comments from LSES students referred to the support of others:

*I am lucky to have such a good family to support me ... it has definitely been a huge part in my success [STU\_003].*

*... the biggest thing that's helped me has been my friends, the people who I've met while I've been at uni and studying my course [STU\_019].*

Students reported that the support provided by families and friends, which included emotional and financial support, as well as an understanding of what students were trying to achieve, helped sustain their engagement with university. Typical comments included:

*... it helps to have a really good support network otherwise I really don't know if I'd have the drive to continue doing it [STU\_092].*

*... just knowing that I could talk to [my family] and discuss problems or any issues that I was having with funding or not being able to understand certain topics, that helped greatly [STU\_023].*

*... having family support is very important, people appreciating and supporting what you are trying to achieve [STU\_051].*

While the extent of family support available to individual students may be largely outside the influence of universities, enabling family connections with the institution through various means is something on which universities could focus. For example, universities might provide regular information evenings and award nights to which family could be invited. Universities might also consider providing relevant information and advice for family and friends of students such as through hard copy and online guides, a website and/or online fora.

One staff member, from a LSES background themselves, explained why demystifying university for the families of first in family LSES students is so important:

*... when I was a kid, there was no previous university direction in my family at all, no university experience whatsoever, and the idea of going to university in fact was looked askance at. It was a place in the 1970s full of rat bags with long hair, in street marches, so you wouldn't want to go there, anyway, and in any case, most people I could refer to in my own family were highly suspicious about what it is you actually do there [COL\_016].*

Another staff member spoke more broadly about communicating and engaging with the communities in low socioeconomic areas:

*... we're directly targeting strategies that we think will address the needs of students and communities in low SES areas in terms of just providing information about university and filling in the gaps, if there are any gaps in knowledge about university or questions that need to be answered or services that might be offered [COL\_010].*

Family members being involved in the students' university experience was recognised by staff and students alike as an important facet of student retention and overall success.

## Online engagement

Online forums are another strategy that institutions can use to promote a sense of belonging for LSES students, their families and friends.

As one student recalled when reflecting on what had helped them succeed:

*I remember during my first year before I started university, I looked at the website ... some students [were] giving their experiences of university and what to expect [STU\_097].*

Engaging students who were studying off campus or undertaking online units was identified by staff and students as pivotal to facilitating LSES student success. Students commented on the need for teachers to have an active online presence in order to engage students:

*I found the subjects where the teachers are far more interactive on the forum and where there was a chat room for the subject, were easy to feel a part of and easier to feel connected and therefore assisted with the learning [STU\_051].*

*I suppose all the online technology was fantastic and the eLive sessions, I really enjoyed them because you connected with people and the lecturer about the topic [STU\_001].*

One staff member outlined efforts by their institution to enable genuine connection and interaction with students:

*We've decided to embrace a social media model. So we've created a range of tools that allow students, irrespective of where they are, to communicate how they're feeling about their studies and any issues of concern. Those tools are based on web 2 technologies. And they model social media in the sense that they all have 140 characters of free text. So students can tell us at any given time how they're feeling about their current engagement with the institution and with their studies [COL\_002].*

However, staff members did raise the issue of accessibility to online technology by students from LSES backgrounds:

*... we get asked to provide a lot of online material specifically in the form of video files, which is fine but if you're low SES and you don't have access to a computer at home or you don't have broadband so you're using the dial-up, a lot of those videos and things are either inaccessible or they just take so long that it's just frustrating for the students. So I think there's a serious issue there in terms of inequality [COL\_013].*

Institutional policymakers and other leaders need to consider the availability of appropriate technology and connectivity for LSES students. Policy and other decisions should not exclude LSES students from learning and other experiences and opportunities.

## Suggested strategies

- Promote the value of collaborative learning for all students.
- Enable the provision of opportunities for collaborative learning within the curriculum and as extra-curricular options.
- Resource and promote student-to-student mentoring and peer-led programs.
- Provide access to spaces and places for LSES students to meet and work with other students.
- Include student meeting places in the design of new, and the refurbishment of existing, learning and other spaces on campus.
- Design and implement programs and initiatives to enable students' families and communities to connect with the institution, in person or online.
- Design and facilitate online fora where students can share experiences and seek advice and support.



### 3. Encourage 'help-seeking' by students

A clear finding from the project was the need for institutions to encourage and support 'help-seeking' behaviours among LSES students. These include asking questions in class and online of teaching staff and using adjunct and other learning support services and facilities.

The literature on help-seeking suggests there are many potential barriers to such behaviour by students (Grayson, Miller and Clarke 1998; Easton and Van Laar 1995; Karabenick and Knapp 1991). Clegg, Bradley and Smith (2006) argue that when students first enter university, they often protect their self-esteem by **not** seeking assistance from formal support services. To ensure students feel more comfortable seeking help, Clegg et al. (2006) maintain that seeking help should be normalised.

Part of the rationale for encouraging help-seeking behaviours among students is that such behaviours are part of independent learning, an objective for all tertiary students (Spiro, Henderson and Clifford 2012; Gibbs 1999). In addition, LSES students in particular are likely to have specific needs in relation to interpreting and understanding just what is required of them in terms of independent learning. Institutions have an important role to play in both ensuring staff are adequately educated about the adjunct support services available and what they offer students, and about the need to encourage independence in students by pointing them to appropriate services.

#### **Provide information and development opportunities to staff**

Through professional development, staff should be encouraged to provide early feedback to LSES students. This is both a useful end in itself and an early identification mechanism through which students can be referred to specialist services such as academic skills and English language development services and library skills training.

One member of staff explained:

*... once we do write the assignment ... then we need to look at the ones who perform poorly and why they perform poorly. It is usually because they just haven't been trained in that type of academic [work] ... Usually, they are the first one in the family to go to university and their parents have never been to university and the parents quite often can't assist them with academic writing [COL\_006].*

#### **Early feedback**

Providing early feedback was identified by students as crucial to helping them succeed in their studies. Such provision is strongly supported by the literature. As one student explained:

*... if have a lecturer that you can give them a draft and just say 'Am I on the track here?' then that's really helpful [STU\_095].*

The benefits of early feedback were clearly articulated:

*... the lecturers give really good feedback on your assignments ... so that you know why you got your marks that you got. They also write the gaps and how you could improve, not that you get a second chance but for the next semester you can look back at a lab report and go, 'Actually yeah, I can see their point' so next semester I go, 'Now what did they say about that report? I'll just have a look' and then that helped me to write the next one for the next unit [STU\_001].*

*So feedback's really important as well to succeed. And I've got a high distinction for that one too and I think that was because of that feedback [STU\_101].*

*Occasionally, you can take it to your tutor and say, 'I don't want you to mark it but just am I heading in the right direction, am I on track or have I missed the mark?' And sometimes you do miss the mark and – but if you do it early in the assessment – when you are writing the assessment piece, it's easier to go, 'Oh, okay,' and correct it then [STU\_084].*



The rationale for providing early feedback to LSES students was clear from staff interviews:

*... what we do need to do I think is that as lecturers [we need to] be aware that there will be numbers from a non-traditional background who ... maybe the first student in their family to attend tertiary education and there are ... ways that we can ... help with the transition so I think constant information going back and forth between the students and the lecturer about how they're performing is ... how we make it as straight forward experience as possible [COL\_014].*

*Basically, I think the philosophy is allow them to make mistakes and then improve on it. Don't have this idea that – and it's ridiculous anyway that you have to get something right the first time off – [that] you write an essay and you hand it in and that's it ... I mean that seems to me entirely inappropriate for any education, which should be about taking risks, trying things out and having a journey whereby you're not trying to guess what someone else wants or what the right thing is before you really know [COL\_003].*

Staff also pointed to the benefits of early feedback being provided to LSES students:

*I will offer them the opportunity to post online the example question where they will write on a forum, '... can you check this, is this the way to answer a question about such and such?' And I will do it in real time on the spot, edit that, send it back so everyone can see ... using the online tools [COL\_015].*

Professional development opportunities offered to staff need to make very clear the particular value of early feedback to all students but especially to LSES students. Mechanisms for providing such feedback and for building it into assessment regimes should be included in professional development programs for new staff and for experienced staff less accustomed to teaching diverse student cohorts.

Further, institutional assessment policies should include guidance on the use of formative assessment to assist students to adjust to university expectations.

## **Extending and enhancing support service provision**

Important to the success of students from LSES backgrounds is the provision of institutional services to alleviate some of the intractable and inherent challenges they face.

Some staff spoke of the importance of providing new support services or extending hours of existing services to LSES students:

*We have an issue with library opening hours ... [The students] work, they study and then the library is closed on weekends [COL\_024].*

*I think the institution should be providing those sorts of cheap breakfasts weekly and sleeping spaces, those sorts of things [COL\_007].*

It is important for institutions to consider extending and enhancing the provision of services (for example, online, weekends and 'after-hours') to recognise changing patterns of student engagement. This should be done in consultation with students to ensure changes are appropriate and helpful to students.

## **Support services being made explicit**

Experienced staff suggested many ways to encourage 'help-seeking' behaviours by LSES students. This included making support services explicit and normalising their use. In terms of making them explicit, one staff member suggested that staff should:

*... work closely with the library staff and the Academic Support Team in the library and make sure that ... [the students] know how to contact the welfare officer, the counsellor. They need to know [about] the food bank and text book loan schemes and all those sorts of things that are there to support the students [COL\_025].*

As one explained:

*I think the thing is, you can hope that by putting the message out, the ones who particularly need help will come along [COL\_001].*

Another suggested:

*... if you could bring the library skills, and the learning skills advisors in, right at the beginning of session ... 'This is what you have to do, and here are the people who can help you', and you're putting the scaffolding in to support them, then they know who to go to, but they know the ways that they can get help [COL\_011].*

Less experienced staff may not be aware of the importance of both making support services explicit and, in particular, normalising the use of them. It is critical that senior and other institutional leaders model appropriate attitudes and behaviours in relation to support services.

One staff member described an innovative and thorough approach to advertising support services to students:

*Well I guess we go for high visibility and we call on networks for support ... we've run campaigns like Tell a Friend About Scholarships where we've asked students to get another student to fill out the form ... lecturers have put slides up in their lecture theatres, we've got low income contact offers in every faculty so we've tried to make it normal business both from academics and support staff to make sure kids are referred to that, and [now] ... we get 2,500 applications a year [COL\_026].*

These are mechanisms all institutions might consider.

More than half the students interviewed for the study made reference to the availability and importance of utilising student services. Typical comments included:

*... it really comes down to making students aware that there are services out there [STU\_103].*

*In my first year I actually did want to join a lot of clubs and stuff and I couldn't find any, so I didn't do any. I really did want to join them, which I found was disappointing just 'cause I didn't know where to look for them. No one told me [STU\_100].*

While individual staff can do their best to ensure services are made explicit, institution-wide efforts to advertise and promote the value of services will have greater reach and impact.

## Normalising help-seeking behaviour

Staff were very clear on the need to normalise help-seeking behaviours among students, particularly LSES students, who may prefer not to be perceived as 'needy':

*They have got the computer borrowing but I've found that students have said 'Oh, I don't like to ask'. I suppose there's that self-perception ... that they don't want to be seen to be needy [COL\_024].*

*What the challenges really are, are these students don't perceive themselves as the kind of person who would access that service ... [using] the support service indicates to them that they're not succeeding at university and probably they've got learning deficits [COL\_021].*

This matter is critical for institutional leaders to note and address. To avoid adoption of a deficit conception around students, it is critical that seeking and using help for learning and life matters is portrayed and perceived as 'normal' and not as indicative of deficit.

Staff interviewed suggested some ways in which students' help seeking might be normalised. These related to the manner and tone in which support services were discussed and linking the seeking of help to students' current frames of reference:

*So some of that's about direct provision and we make sure it's practical, we make, we try our best to make sure it's not stigmatised even though it might be targeted at groups with a shared attribute and we just do that by making it as normal and open and friendly and ordinary as possible [COL\_026].*

*... you've got to try ... to normalise that help-seeking behaviour, that proactive patterns of going out and looking for activities, the support kind of activities that are there [COL\_021].*

*In support services, I really emphasise ... the counsellors ... I talk about the food bank and normalise getting support. It's quite okay because a lot of them are identifying as 'I'm getting out of this lifestyle, I'm changing, this is my ticket to freedom', and so we say 'This is okay, this is helping your ticket to freedom' [COL\_024].*

## Identifying and managing at-risk students

Staff were particularly emphatic about the need to assist at-risk students. Some institutions take a cohort approach to this issue. One staff member commented:

*... if there are particular cohorts that are having some difficulties, you want to try and spot them as early as possible [COL\_028].*

Telephone calls were the most frequently reported means of contacting students thought to be at risk.

One staff member reported:

*... we ... did welcome calls to every one of those [students on a particular campus] ... [while in] the faculties, we might only do welcome calls to those who did not attend their faculty orientation [COL\_022].*

Another described how welcome calls could be used to promote adjunct services:

*I manage the Student Success Program, so we employ the students to speak to the students who are at risk ... in the early stages, so welcome calls and we ... emphasise access to scholarships, finances, food bank, emergency loan schemes [COL\_022].*

A number of staff reported using different strategies at different times of the student life-cycle:

*... we do welcome back calls to the students coming back in semester two, and just to make sure that they're progressing ... [and] they know where to access the resources and support [COL\_022].*

*In the first trimester, I put out another flier saying, 'Are you feeling stuck?' ... By stuck, I mean stuck in their work, stuck in their organisation, stuck in whatever. The second trimester, I know that they haven't always been successful in units, so I put out another blurb: 'Do you want to be better off in trimester two?' [COL\_001].*

Many institutions use systems through which students can either indicate they need help or are identified as needing help. Automatically collected data can highlight particular students who need help and subsequently trigger action by the institution. One staff member described an institution-wide approach:

*So students can tell us at any given time how they're feeling about their current engagement ... We have a series of emoticons which we've embedded in the student portal ... [These] are linked to a unit of study, and a student can advise the student support team that they're feeling unhappy or very unhappy ... with an aspect of their current engagement with their study. And they have a guarantee that within 24 hours a staff member will be in touch with them [COL\_005].*

Other staff members described approaches where data is automatically generated and then collated and acted upon:

*... it's an early engagement trigger. Have the students engaged in it? There's a little bit of performance in there. How well have they done in a quick quiz or a very short written assignment? Are they attending tutorials, have they accessed their subject outlines? Are they participating in the forum and accessing their subject sites and things like that, so that we can pick up any at-risk students early on in the session [COL\_012].*

*... the cornerstone of all of the tools we've developed is our early alert program ... bearing in mind that all of our student have to transact on line ... we've utilised the power of the systems to ... identify students who are not fulfilling certain transactional types. So they haven't been into the electronic library, they haven't been online, they haven't been into the portal, they've asked for extensions at times ... So we contact the top 200 students at risk every day [COL\_005].*

However, a caveat in the use of system approaches to identifying at risk students was offered by a number of staff:

*I think taking an individual approach to the issues, asking the students ... [means] they're not stereotyping or making assumptions ... we've developed some predictive programs where we can identify things that might place a student at risk. But they're not based on demographics ... [and] I think there's a real danger in saying every student from a regional centre or a disadvantaged background, low SES or whatever, will suffer the same impediments. So I think allowing students to feel empowered to express what the support is they need ... And being responsive to the things that they tell us [COL\_005].*

*We are capturing everybody who has, say, submitted an assessment late, is failing – got a below pass grade in an assessment or is not participating in group work or in tutorial exercises, so we’re basically getting a list of the data from students and they’re not identified by their demographic characteristics [COL\_022].*

A combination of a cohort and an individual approach is probably best to meet students’ needs without causing unmanageable workloads for coalface staff. Institutional leaders should consider carefully how best to monitor and respond to students at risk within their particular institutional contexts and resource initiatives and programs appropriately.

## Suggested strategies

- Provide a range of information and professional development opportunities to assist staff in their work with diverse cohorts of students.
- Ensure university assessment policies include a requirement for formative assessment, particularly in students’ first year of university study.
- Examine the opening hours of student services and consider extending these at peak and other useful times.
- Examine the possibility of offering online services for students who cannot, or choose not to, come on campus.
- Ensure that support services are promoted to all students in positive, non-deficit language and as useful to enhancing their study and wider university experience.
- Design and implement systems to proactively manage students at risk of dropping out and ensure these are resourced to do the necessary follow-up work.



## 4. Minimise financial challenges for students

Students from LSES backgrounds can face significant financial challenges. Many work part-time or full-time while studying. Many have financial responsibilities for themselves and for others in their care. Despite doing their best to cope financially, many find it difficult. As one student said:

*I have three jobs and I still can't manage [STU\_104].*

Financial pressure can have a direct impact on the quality of student learning:

*I work night shift to put me through uni so that part-time job can be tiring when I go to uni [after] finishing at 2:30 or 3 in the morning and then getting up for uni can be taxing on not only my body but mentally as well, trying to remember information [STU\_037].*

The literature on students from LSES backgrounds points to the positive impact that financial assistance has on their retention rates and overall success. [Hatt et al. \(2005\)](#) found that students who were provided with financial assistance were more likely to continue and succeed than LSES students who are not recipients of financial assistance. Many researchers have explored the financial burdens LSES students experience in higher education and argue for action by institutions to help alleviate financial pressures on these students (Hornak, Farrell and Jackson 2010; Shallcross and Hartley 2009; Stater 2009; Titus 2006; Aitken, Skuja and Schapper 2004; Allen et al. 2005).

Staff experienced with supporting LSES students were keenly aware of student circumstances and the impact these had on students' learning:

*... our observation is that there are a significant number of students who are cut out of the learning experience because they can't afford internet connection, broadband and they can't afford a computer [COL\_009].*

*As a student counsellor here, I see a lot of students who are really struggling, and I think maybe that's half the reason why a lot of students drop out is because of their financial situation [STU\_064].*

Staff were also cognisant of the longer term impact that financial difficulties can have on LSES students:

*... the issue that's come up for me in Honours ... many people have chosen not to apply. I've just done a shoulder tapping exercise of people who did excellent proposals for their previous research unit, and I've rung them all up and said, 'Look I'd like you to apply for Honours' and they've all said no, and the reason for them saying no is because that would mean that their placement would have to be extended which means they miss out on paid work and they can't afford to miss out on paid work so it means that learning opportunity is not available for these extremely gifted, intelligent students [COL\_009].*

Institutions that provide a suite of financial services and support for students that are promoted and a visible part of the institutional culture provide both valuable support to LSES students and remove barriers to high-quality student learning outcomes. These services include equity scholarship programs, financial advice and financial and equipment loans. Each of these are discussed in turn below.

### Scholarships

Scholarships for LSES students should be one of the financial support options available to these students. The value of institutions providing direct financial assistance in the form of scholarships for students from LSES backgrounds goes far beyond its monetary value as these staff comments indicate:

*... [an equity scholarship] look[s] like ... charity, but it's actually a learning program, in that it attends to the cluster of issues that go with poverty and [they] have impact because the cluster has been attended to ... [Students] can buy books that they otherwise wouldn't have, but they are less stressed because they don't have to worry about juggling the money so much. Fifty per cent of [students] use the money to buy time, which is a big issue if you've got a complicated life. So [students] reduce their paid work hours and put that time into study [COL\_026].*

*... we know that the reason that there is an attrition impact which is a good impact from people who get scholarships is not just because we give them money and they buy things with the money ... [and] are less stressed ... but ... that being chosen to get the money has a psychological impact in that it makes them feel special, wanted, connected and motivated [COL\_026].*



While all universities have scholarship programs, there are not always extensive scholarships for LSES students and even where there are, students are often not aware of them or are put off applying for them because of complex application processes. One staff member pointed to the importance of promoting scholarships and making them accessible and the challenges in a large and diverse organisation of doing so:

*So of those three levels that I mentioned, the central scholarships, the central loans, grants, and I think the hardest one to organise is the ... disbursed because ... they're all a bit different and faculties come and go in their energies and attention [COL\_026].*

Every effort should be made to promote scholarships for LSES students through multiple channels. Students should also be offered assistance to complete scholarship application forms, which can be complex and hard to understand.

## Government payments

Students articulated the value of accessing government funding (Centrelink for Youth Allowance, child support payments and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme<sup>1</sup>) as this can be particularly important in alleviating constraints on learning. As students explained:

*... Youth Allowance – so I have been on that the entire time I've been at uni and to tell you the truth, I don't know if I would have been able to go to uni if I didn't have that [STU\_035].*

*... Youth Allowance got me through uni, essentially [STU\_019].*

*I've had that financial assistance with childcare, so having that kind of support as backup as well has been really helpful [STU\_026].*

*... HECS<sup>2</sup> has also allowed me to come to uni because I wouldn't be able to pay upfront ... I can pay it back when I'm working later and earning money. So it makes it less stressful as well so I can actually concentrate on studying instead of worrying about money and stuff [STU\_074].*

Institutional provision of advice services to assist students to access government funding can be enormously helpful in demystifying, and supporting, the process of application.

## Financial loans

Financial loans from institutions are common, and useful for some students, particularly in emergencies:

*I've had other students who haven't been able to pay the mortgage or haven't been able to meet their bills and I've organised them to see somebody for emergency funds [COL\_023].*

However, many staff commented on the drawbacks of loans for LSES students:

*I know that there's this sort of loan program where people can borrow money to purchase a computer but the reality is our students, they're not in a financial position to be able to pay it back so it really ... doesn't help the people who really need it [COL\_009].*

*I know there's some support for students but maybe more food banks and even the loan system is not quite viable because if some of these single mums, and I'm thinking of them particularly, it's not quite viable for them to take a loan and then have to pay it back because they see that as another bill [COL\_024].*

While loans should be an option for LSES students, these should be part of a suite of other options that enable students to have greater choice about how to manage their individual situations.

## Equipment loans

As well as providing financial loans, institutions increasingly make study-related equipment available for loan to LSES and other students. Provisions for borrowing equipment range from informal arrangements with individual staff to more systemic institutional approaches.

Staff experienced in teaching LSES students and who understand the impact of financial strain on the quality of learning had a number of strategies for providing subtle support in the form of equipment loans:

<sup>1</sup> The Higher Education Contribution Scheme was originally developed in 1989 to offer students government supported places at university. In 2005, HECS became known as HECS-HELP and it is a loan program to help eligible students to pay their student contribution amounts. See <http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/help/payingmyfees/hecs-help/pages/hecs-help-welcome>

<sup>2</sup> HECS is the acronym for the Higher Education Contribution Scheme.

*... if I noticed that there were students who either couldn't afford a text book or couldn't afford something I would ... make sure ... a spare copy ... would be made available to them [COL\_008].*

*... one of the things that I have done is ... to purchase items that students can borrow. For example little net books and internet data sticks ... [COL\_009].*

Staff also referred to more systemic arrangements for loaning students materials and equipment:

*... the campus has a textbook hire system, so the ability to be able to access textbooks should they need them [COL\_023].*

*... I've also purchased for Honours students ... a digital recorder ... and a transcribing set and for some students who are doing the practice skills, we've got a video camera that can be loaned out ... we'll build up a library, we'll lend it out to students in good faith and hopefully that will enable more people to participate [COL\_009].*

*... Equity has provided recommissioned computers for them all, and so if a low SES student wants a computer, it's there [COL\_021].*

*They have to come for compulsory ... labs, so we're thinking of getting some spare shoes too, like when they come to labs and they come in thongs, and there is a uniform option that they can borrow uniforms to go out on labs [COL\_024].*

Borrowing arrangements are highly valued by LSES students because they relieve the need to purchase equipment that may be expensive and/or have a limited timeline of usefulness. A relatively small outlay by institutions on setting up equipment loan schemes can have enormous benefit for LSES students who may only need equipment for one study period of 12 weeks.

## **Free goods and services**

When asked what had helped them succeed in their study to date, LSES students often referred to goods and services that were offered free of

charge. Experienced staff also offered suggestions about free goods and services that help LSES students. These included parking, food/groceries, heat, places to sit/meet/study, wireless internet, first aid courses, online textbooks, travel support and book vouchers.

When asked what aspects of their financial situation had helped them succeed, one student said:

*The free parking. If I had to pay for parking then that would be the straw. It might [only] be something like \$5 a day, but that would be the end of [uni for] me, so the free parking is huge [STU\_085].*

Another said:

*I think the online library and free postage has been monumentally helpful. Without them, I would be struggling [STU\_066].*

Staff also referred to the need for LSES students to be provided with financial services and support that go beyond scholarships and bursaries and advice about government payments:

*... for low SES students you need to provide them with the stuff that they can't provide, that is expensive for them to provide at home and that's things like some food, some heat, places to sit, wireless, all that sort of stuff [COL\_007].*

*There is ... a welfare cupboard ... [with] bags of groceries [COL\_023].*

Numerous other strategies were recommended by staff experienced in effectively supporting LSES students, for example:

*Last year we initiated getting free first aid training for them which is compulsory for their course [COL\_024].*

*... a lot of the stuff I use is actually freely available online and I tend not to set ... text books at all because of that [COL\_008].*

*I've had a student who lives on Bribie who didn't have a car or didn't have a way of getting to clinical practice ... we ... arranged through Indigenous support to be able to have a taxi home for her in the evenings if she was finishing late. So travel support [COL\_023].*

*... but we try to make sure and it is true that every faculty has something for their low income students that isn't catered for by scholarships and isn't catered for by loans and grants and it's typically book vouchers [COL\_026].*

Free goods and services assist LSES students to address their financial challenges and save their time and energy for their study and learning. Minimising additional expenses by subsidising printing costs and providing free short-term childcare were some of the other practical strategies that LSES students and experienced staff recommended institutions adopt. Prioritising opportunities for paid work on campus for students might be another approach to assisting LSES and other students struggling to balance on-campus time with paid work commitments.

## Suggested strategies

- Provide and promote a suite of financial services and support for students that include short- and long-term loans, scholarships and advice on accessing government funding.
- Implement an institution-wide loan scheme for commonly required equipment including but not limited to textbooks, computers, laboratory and other specialised clothing.
- Where feasible and affordable, provide free or subsidised goods and services for LSES students.

## 5. Resource and support teachers of LSES students

The importance of providing staff with support, professional development opportunities and the resources they require to teach to increasingly diverse student cohorts is a prominent theme in the literature (Mulryan-Kyne 2010). Many researchers have explored the most effective ways to support staff in dealing with diverse student cohorts, including through peer coaching (Swafford 1998), training programs (Tucker et al. 2005) or through institutional policy (Darling-Hammond 1999). While they argue for different approaches, there is broad consensus that staff require greater support as demands on their time and workload increase.

Staff experienced in teaching and supporting LSES students interviewed for this project made frequent reference to the extra time and work involved in providing careful attention to a wider range of students and to the particular needs of LSES students who are unfamiliar with university practices.

As staff explained in relation to questions about how best to help LSES students succeed:

*You need a unit of interaction where at least some individual engagement and attention can occur [COL\_026].*

*I think it's just time. I think I would spend the most time with them. Isn't that one of the most valuable resources that you can really give, is time? [COL\_025].*

As others explained, LSES students have particular needs in terms of being taught about university culture and understanding the discourses:

*... we need to spend that extra time with them, they are more one-on-one ... I think it has a greater impact on the students here because they're finding their feet, [I'm] trying to enculturate them into the university system ... no-one has been to uni before in their family [COL\_024].*

*I can recognise fairly quickly which ones are not understanding the language of business, if you like, or management and I can recognise it. I have strategies to just say 'Right, let's get you in, let's have a chat.' 'How are you going; have you been doing this?' ... Look, it is very labour intensive, but it is very effective, from my point of view [COL\_006].*

### Using large-scale mechanisms

While there may be more efficient methods of addressing LSES student needs, these are not yet commonplace in Australian higher education. What is evident is the urgent need to design and implement large-scale, embedded mechanisms to ensure that the learning needs of LSES and other students can be proactively met. One example might be the employment of academic language and learning (ALL) experts to work with particular cohorts of students in a coordinated and cohesive way.

Another might be the use of a sessional staff coordinator to relieve academic teaching staff of the administrative burdens associated with managing large numbers of casual staff. A third might be the formal engagement of later year LSES and other students to work with newer LSES students to assist them to understand and meet assessment and other requirements. Such mechanisms would not only offer efficiency, they would also provide potential peer learning opportunities for students and relieve teaching staff of some of their current significant time and work burdens.

The extent of academics' time spent on administration, particularly, but not only, in relation to large classes, at the expense of teaching time, was clear:

*... you might have 600 or 700 students. The lecturer because of all of the admin work, mightn't even do all of the lectures because their workload is taken up with admin, so ... you don't get that bonding [COL\_006].*

*... you can afford to keep going back to somebody with re-draft after re-draft after re-draft when you've only got a handful of them. I mean, if you've got 200 undergraduate students, are you going to do it with them, and to be honest ... I actually did try this, with 120 undergraduate students I taught at the time, and it was only a portion of them that I was actually going through the reiterative process with, but it nearly killed me [COL\_016].*

Technology was referred to by staff as one potential solution to the seemingly intractable issue of workload. However, it was also noted that no matter how effective the technology, it is not a magic bullet in terms of supporting LSES students. As one staff member put it:

*... you've got first year students who've never been there before, you have to put more time in to them. It doesn't matter how many fancy electronic resources you've got. If you haven't got time for them, you've got problems [COL\_011].*

If institutions are serious about teaching and supporting students from LSES backgrounds in sustainable ways, institutional leaders need to attend to significant workload issues that staff report as challenges to effectively teaching and supporting LSES students.

One staff member commented:

*I think there's a problem with workload [systems] – it's just a feeling that you're kind of used and abused by the system. Because you're in a lectorial type environment and then students choose your unit, then you end up having a more significant workload. And the head of school will say to you, 'Well then, just get some sessionals to help you with the marking'. Well ... that's not always appropriate ... you just can't get them, they just don't exist, the bodies aren't there [COL\_027].*

The matter of potential staff burnout among those who work with very diverse cohorts was often close to the surface in interviews. To ensure staff wellbeing and the continuity of their effective work with LSES students, institutional leaders need to look closely at support for staff. In particular, leaders need to consider designing and implementing new approaches to staffing teaching, and the related support, that will accommodate the increasing number and proportion of LSES students in Australian higher education.

When commenting on what would help them to continue to effectively teach and support LSES students well, staff said:

*Oh you know, the usual – resources, resources, resources [COL\_005].*

*I know it probably sounds really clichéd but I guess more time and access to sessional support. I mean I've ... had a funding grant so I could buy out a lot of my marking and that really helped me ... have headspace and time to be able to be more flexible to students ... really, your ability to be flexible is really marred because you just don't have time ... I think that ... [if we were] more responsive, we'd be able to get better outcomes [COL\_009].*

## Policy responses

Further, aspects of institutional policy and practice in relation to LSES students were identified as being in need of immediate attention. For example, current promotion policies across the higher education sector tend to favour research performance over teaching performance. The institutions that will best support and retain effective teachers of LSES students will be those that appropriately recognise and reward their teaching work.

One staff comment summarised the dilemma for staff who choose to put their time and effort into supporting LSES and other students' learning:

*... if you have the choice between spending a couple of hours on supporting a couple of students, versus if you spend a couple of hours reviewing, modifying the last paper you wrote in accordance with the reviews you got. In career terms, is a bit bigger pay off from reviewing the paper that you just wrote and having it accepted, rather than looking after the next couple of students who are having difficulties? [COL\_004].*

Some staff suggested policy approaches that might help with this issue. For example, one staff member said:

*... [one] strategy ... at the institutional level ... [is] bringing back a higher percentage of the workload for teachers who are teaching first year students, so that they can spend the time, and making that policy [COL\_012].*

As another pointed out:

*... unless there are some kind of career-related incentives, then it will always be the troupers who are kind of, I guess, carrying the world on their shoulders then [COL\_004].*

These are serious matters that warrant immediate consideration by institutional leaders. Without due consideration and the development and implementation of appropriate policy and strategies, significant staff dissatisfaction and turnover may become an issue. If this were to occur, this might threaten the quality of teaching and learning and academic standards.



## Suggested strategies

- Formally recognise the workload associated with providing high-quality teaching and support of high numbers and/or proportions of LSES students.
- Ensure reward and recognition systems and, in particular, academic promotion criteria and processes, acknowledge the valuable contributions of staff who teach and support LSES students.
- Consider employing academic or professional staff to proactively address student queries about studying, assessment and learning as a means of supporting staff who teach LSES students.
- Consider employing academic or professional staff to manage and coordinate sessional staff as a means of supporting staff who coordinate subjects with high numbers of LSES and other students.

## Dissemination

Our approach to the development and dissemination of the project resources aimed to promote and support strategic change in Australian higher education institutions in teaching and learning, including curriculum development and assessment. Drawing on the literature and the expertise of leaders, academics and those with significant experience working with LSES students, including professional staff in support roles (for example, language and academic skills advisors, counsellors, student advisors, library staff, student administration staff and others), we sought to identify effective institutional and individual practice through the engagement of existing experts in the field throughout the project.

We also used snowball sampling for staff, a dedicated project website, formal and informal conference and other presentations across Australia and overseas, discussion papers, media articles, interviews with various media, journal articles and chapters, alongside a formal launch and wide distribution of project resources in hard and soft copy. In this way, we embedded our dissemination strategy into all project activities, continuously supporting and assisting institutions to take up and embed effective practice for teaching and supporting LSES students throughout the 18-month project timeline and beyond.

The dissemination strategy integrated a range of approaches, as summarised above and outlined below, to raise awareness of the project as it progressed, encourage engagement in the development of and contributions to knowledge and to share findings as they emerged.

## Website



Support for this website has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

The views expressed in the project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

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The launch of the website in August 2011 provided ongoing and multiple opportunities for dissemination to colleagues across the sector nationally and internationally. Each page asked interested colleagues to contact us with suggested contributions and many did this. The website enabled engagement with colleagues, who have had access to the project findings as they have emerged.

## Media articles

Devlin, M. (2012). Practical help for the disadvantaged. *Campus Review*, 28 May: <http://www.campusreview.com.au/blog/analysis/comment/practical-help-for-the-disadvantaged/>

Devlin, M. (2011). Targeting effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status. *HERDSA News* 32 (3) ISSN 0157-1826, p. 16.

Devlin, M. (2011). 'Call for policy change on low-SES students', *Campus Review*, 28 November 2011

Devlin, M. (2011). 'Keys found to success by the less privileged', *The Australian*, 16 November 2011

## Media interviews

Professor Karen Nelson: On retention and at-risk students, 28 February, 2012 in *The Age*: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/tuning-in-to-those-dropping-out-20120227-1tyk8.html>

Professor Marcia Devlin: On drop out rates for disadvantaged students, 1 September, 2011, in *The Australian*: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/bradley-targets-threatened-by-high-drop-out-rates-among-disadvantaged-students/story-e6frgcjx-1226136074420>

Professor Marcia Devlin: On location as a measure of equity, 5 July, 2011, in *The Australian*: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/location-a-blunt-measure-of-equity-researchers/story-e6frgcjx-1226079507190>

Professor Marcia Devlin: On DEEWR statistics on applications from students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, 2 May, 2011, in *Campus Review* 21(8), p. 8: <http://www.campusreview.com.au/pages/section/article.php?s=News&idArticle=20755>

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Professor Marcia Devlin: On the LSES project on teaching and supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds generally, in *ALTC News*, 1 May, 2011.

Professor Marcia Devlin: On student poverty, 8 February, 2011, in *Campus Review*, p. 13.

Professor Marcia Devlin: On being awarded the national grant to examine teaching and supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds at university, 8 December, 2010 in *The Australian*: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/no-student-ought-to-be-left-behind/story-e6frgcjx-1225967194805>

## Discussion papers

Devlin, M. and McKay, J. (2011). *Inclusive teaching and support of university students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: A brief discussion paper*. Higher Education Research Group, Deakin University, Australia:  
<[www.lowses.edu.au/files/resources.htm](http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/resources.htm)>

## Chapters

Devlin, M. and McKay, J. (under review). Reframing the problem: Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds transitioning to university. In Brook, H., Fergie, D., Maeorg, M. and Michell, D. *Universities in Transition: Foregrounding Social Contexts of Knowledge in the First Year Experience*.

## Journal articles

Devlin, M. (2011, online). Bridging sociocultural incongruity: Conceptualising students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.613991>

McKay, J. and Devlin, M. (in preparation). Demystifying higher education culture for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research and Development*.

## Conference presentations

McKay, J. and Ryan, J. (2012, July). *A bridge less far: facilitating university success for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds*. Showcase presentation at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) conference, 2–5 July 2012, Hobart, Tasmania.

Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., McKay, J. and Devlin, M. (2012, June). *Principles for the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds*. Nuts and bolts presentation at the First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) conference, 26–29 June 2012, Brisbane, Queensland.

Devlin, M. (2012, May). *Effective teaching of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Findings from a national Australian study*. Paper presented at the Athens Institute for Education and Research Human Development Research Division, Research Unit of Education 14<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Education, 21–24 May 2012, Athens, Greece.

Kift, S. (2012, April). *A Transition Pedagogy: Taking student success seriously in the first year*. Invited Keynote address. Widening Participation Scholars' Network, University of Sydney, 4 April, 2012, Sydney.

Kift, S. (2012, March). *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education*. Invited Keynote address: What Works? Student Retention and Success Conference, University of York, March, 2012, UK.

Devlin, M. (2012, May). Practical strategies for engaging non-traditional students. Invited Workshop: Informa Student Satisfaction Conference, May 7, 2012, Sydney.

Devlin, M. (2012, May). *Inclusivity@Deakin: Education where you are*. Invited workshop for the Equity and Diversity Consultative Fora (live streamed), Deakin University, May 4, 2012, Melbourne.

Devlin, M. (2012, April). *Teaching Diverse Students*. Workshop Chair and Host. Joint event between the Teaching and Learning Forum, Deakin University and HERDSA Vic, April 17, 2012, Melbourne.

Devlin, M. (2012, March). *Ensuring retention and success of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds*. Invited Presentation: Interconnected Tertiary Education conference, March 28, 2012, Melbourne.

Devlin, M. (2012, February). *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education*. Invited Presentation: Victorian/Tasmanian-Based Promoting Excellence Network Workshop, Monash University, February 8, 2012 [with Juliana Ryan], Melbourne.

Devlin, M. (2011, November). *Facilitating success for non-traditional students: Possible futures for academic language and learning*. Invited Keynote Address: Association of Academic Language and Learning, University of South Australia, Adelaide.

Devlin, M. and McKay, J. (2011, November). *Teaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: New pedagogies or just good teaching?* Paper presented at the Deakin Teaching and Learning conference, Deakin University, 2–3 November, 2011, Melbourne.

Devlin, M. (2011, September). *Tertiary education: Where are we headed?* Invited Keynote Address: Trinity College, The University of Melbourne, September 2011, Melbourne.

Kift, S. (2011). Examining first year experience of students from low SES groups. *3rd annual Social Inclusion in Education Conference: Promoting cross-institutional collaborations and evidence-based strategies to achieve equity targets*, 7–8 September, Brisbane.

Devlin, M. and McKay, J. (2011, September). ***Teaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: transformation or just good teaching?*** Paper presented at the Education Research Group of Adelaide (ERGA) conference, The University of Adelaide, 27-28 September, 2011, Adelaide.

Devlin, M. (2011, August). ***The principles of inclusive teaching.*** Invited presentation and workshop at the Inclusive Teaching and Learning Forum, 9 August, Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria.

Smith, L. Kift, S. Nelson, K. Nagy, J. and Devlin, M. (2011, July). ***Effective teaching and support of low socioeconomic students.*** Nuts and bolts presentation at the First Year in Higher Education Conference, July 2011, Fremantle.

Devlin, M. (2011, June). ***Effective university teaching and student success: Views of Australian university students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.*** Paper presented at the Critical Discussions on Social Inclusion forum, June 10, 2011, Wollongong.

Devlin, M. (2010, November). ***Widening participation and facilitating success: Policy and practice in Australian higher education.*** Keynote address, E-portfolio Australia Conference, 3-4 November, Melbourne.

### ***Upcoming conference presentations***

Devlin, M. (2012, August). ***At the coalface: The teachers' role in enabling LSES student success.*** Invited presentation at the Higher Education Base Funding Forum, 7 August, Melbourne.

Devlin, M. (2012, August). ***Effective teaching and support of Australian university students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Findings from a national study.*** Invited address to the Social Inclusion Network, University of Sydney, 8 August, 2012, Sydney.

Devlin, M. (2012, August). ***Inclusive teaching.*** Invited seminar at RMIT, 28 August, 2012, Melbourne.

(Subject to acceptance). Devlin, M. (2012, December). ***Higher education learning for all, or just for those 'in the know'? Sociocultural knowing and success for Australian students from low socioeconomic status.*** Paper at the Society for Research in Higher Education international Conference, 14-17 December, 2012, Wales.



## Dates and details of presentations

Date	Event & Location	Purpose (presentation title)	Attendees (approx)	HE institutions	Other institutions
November 2010	E-Portfolio Australia Conference, Melbourne.	Closing keynote address. <u>Widening participation and facilitating success: Policy and practice in Australian higher education</u>	130	20	3
March 2011	Interconnected Tertiary Education conference	<u>Ensuring retention and success for students from low socioeconomic status</u> Paper presented. Conference held in Melbourne.	55	18	6
June 2011	Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion forum	National workshop held at Wollongong University. <u>Effective university teaching and student success: Views of Australian university students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.</u>	100	15–20	-
July 2011	First Year in Higher Education conference	International conference. <u>Effective teaching and support of low socioeconomic students.</u>	400+	Most Australian and several international universities	-
July 2011	Transition Pedagogy workshop	National forum, held at University of Sunshine Coast Mooloolaba.	100+	Most Australian universities	-
August 2011	Inclusive teaching and learning forum, Deakin University, Melbourne	Invited presentation and workshop. Teaching Leaders Forum, Deakin University. Institutional forum. <u>The principles of inclusive teaching.</u>	27	1	-
September 2011	Informa Social Inclusion in Education conference	International conference, held in Brisbane. <u>Examining first year experience of students from low SES groups.</u>	100+	15-20	-
September 2011	Education Research Group of Adelaide (ERGA) conference	National conference, held in Adelaide, panel presentation	50	5+	-
September 2011	Trinity College, University of Melbourne	Invited Keynote address. <u>Tertiary education: where are we headed?</u>	100	1	-

Date	Event & Location	Purpose ( <u>presentation title</u> )	Attendees (approx)	HE institutions	Other institutions
October 2011	Deakin University Social Inclusion conference, Geelong, Victoria	Keynote address <u>Thinking and talking about students from low socioeconomic status in Australian higher education: What's in a name?</u>	120	1	-
November 2011	Deakin University Teaching and Learning conference	Institutional conference. <u>Teaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: new pedagogies or just good teaching?</u>	200	1	-
November 2011	Association of Academic Language and Learning, University of South Australia, Adelaide.	Invited keynote address. <u>Facilitating success for non-traditional students: Possible futures for academic language and learning.</u>	-	-	-
February 2012	Victorian/Tasmanian-Based Promoting Excellence Network workshop. Monash University.	Invited presentation. <u>Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: resources for Australian higher education.</u>	50	8	-
March 2012	What Works? Student Retention and Success Conference	Keynote address, University of York, UK <u>Student Engagement for Retention and Success: A Transition Pedagogy for Widening Participation.</u>	300	67+ international universities	-
March 2012	Interconnected tertiary education conference	Invited presentation. <u>Ensuring retention and success of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.</u>	60	40	10
April 2012	Widening Participation Scholars' Network	University of Sydney Keynote address. <u>A Transition Pedagogy: Taking student success seriously in the first year.</u>	50	1	-

Date	Event & Location	Purpose (presentation title)	Attendees (approx)	HE institutions	Other institutions
April 2012	Teaching and Learning Forum, Deakin University and Higher Education Research Group	Internal Deakin University event/workshop <u>Teaching Diverse Students.</u>	72	1	-
May 2012	Equity and Diversity Unit Consultative Forum Workshop	Internal Deakin University event – 50 staff attended face-to-face and 30 via live streaming.	80	1	-
May 2012	Informa student satisfaction conference	International conference	60	40	5
May 2012	Athens Institute for Education and Research Human Development Research Division, Research Unit of Education 14 <sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Education	<u>Effective teaching of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Findings from a national Australian study.</u> Paper presented, Athens, Greece.	114	80+	-
June 2012	15th International First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) Conference	<u>Principles for the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds</u> Nuts and Bolts workshop. Brisbane, QLD.	-	-	-
July 2012	HERDSA Conference.	<u>A bridge less far: Facilitating university success for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.</u> Showcase presentation	-	-	-

Notification of completion of the project outcomes and an invitation to access via the website were sent to 58 'Friends of the LSES project', a list of interested colleagues collected and updated throughout the project. Numerous informal opportunities for dissemination were also leveraged through team members' institutional and national networks.

## Conclusion

This project has delivered new understandings and resources for Australian higher education related to the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

Focusing on what helps students from LSES backgrounds to succeed at Australian universities, this project has developed a distinctive conceptual framework and new principles. It has also focused on practical application and developed eleven key pieces of advice – six for teaching staff and five for institutional leaders.

As outlined in detail in this report and the guides for teachers and leaders, this key advice relates to knowing and respecting students; offering flexibility, variety and choice; making expectations clear in accessible language; scaffolding learning; teachers being accessible and approachable; reflective practice; enabling inclusive curriculum design; promoting engagement with and support from others for students; encouraging help-seeking behaviours by students; actively minimising financial challenges and resourcing and otherwise supporting teachers of LSES students.

As mentioned in the introduction, recent changes to higher education policy in Australia make this an area in which the sector must be proactive if it is to meet national goals. The resources and outcomes from this project can assist all higher education providers in Australia to take the proactive steps necessary to work towards these goals.

The resources from this project can also assist universities and other higher education providers to anticipate and meet the particular needs of students from LSES backgrounds in terms of curriculum, teaching and support at university.

The project makes use of existing and new knowledge on effective teaching and support of LSES students and provides advice to help higher education providers to make positive changes in systemic and embedded ways. Finally, the project outcomes seek to assist providers to provide the highest level of teaching and support to students from LSES backgrounds and to all university students.

As we outlined in our initial application for this project, the project team recognises that it is not possible to address all matters relevant to LSES student learning and support in one 18-month project. For example, the sector would be likely to benefit from consideration of methods and frameworks to evaluate initiatives designed to

assist the transition, progress and experiences of LSES students. Reflecting on the work we have done, we believe that there would be value in further investigation of such methods and frameworks.

We also note that greater breadth and depth of investigation might have been possible if the project timeline had been longer. For example, in an age of technology ubiquity, a greater focus on findings related to technology and effective teaching and support of LSES students is likely to be beneficial to the ever-increasing number studying online in Australia and beyond.

Finally, findings that were gathered but that the team were unable to synthesise and publish could have been shared had there been more project time. One example is that students were asked for, and offered, advice to other similar students on succeeding at university that could be extremely helpful to LSES and all new university students. While student advice derived from an earlier study has been made available via the project website, we see value in further analysis, interpretation and summarising of the rich data gathered in the present work.

All of that said, it is hoped that the findings on effective teaching and support gathered and synthesised during this project will provide valuable guidance to the Australian higher education sector in their efforts with LSES students. This would ensure that the significant effort being made by the government and institutions to build aspirations and attract more LSES students to higher education is not wasted through unnecessary and avoidable attrition once those students reach university.

It is critical to understand and learn from 'what works' in ensuring the success of LSES students in Australian higher education. Such understanding is particularly important in a context where resources are shrinking and there is a 'growing list of change forces in the environment that are challenging universities with ferocious intensity' (Fullan and Scott, 2009, p.1).

As these change forces continue to intensify, further research will be necessary to ensure that teaching and supporting LSES students evolves and develops to accommodate the changing external and internal contexts in which it takes place.

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## Project Evaluation

The project reference group was invited to provide feedback at a number of project milestones; for example, when the team were refining the project principles.

Project team meetings (and internal reports on the survey results and interview data) provided critical points for reflection by the team and evaluator on emergent project findings. Monitoring the ongoing relevance of the work being undertaken in the project and project progress were key foci of the several full day and numerous teleconference project team meetings held over the course of the project.

Of particular note was the role played by the external evaluator. A thorough evaluation plan was developed by the project's evaluation consultant and refined through discussion with the project leader. The agreed evaluation methodology uses a process/outcomes approach. This has included detailed feedback on draft resources by the evaluator and her attendance and input at a small number of team meetings.

Following telephone interviews with team members and the project leader, a reference group member survey and inspection of project artefacts including the website, minutes of meetings and draft resources, the evaluation consultant provided an interim evaluation report for the period February–October 2011 (project Stages 1 and 2). The report found that 'team leadership is effective and collaborative and all team members are committed and supportive' and noted that initial 'substantial administrative difficulties' had been overcome although these had led to 'unavoidable delays in the early stages of the project with consequent impact on the timeline for deliverables'. In conclusion the report found that the project is 'critical and timely' and 'will offer valuable, high quality resources to the sector'.

Ongoing evaluation of the project occurred throughout the project individually and collectively via regular teleconference and face-to-face team meetings supplemented as necessary by strategic updates to the team on progress, as well as direct communication as necessary among team members. In addition, the project team

individually and collectively employ reflective practice to monitor and facilitate progress.

The interim evaluation report was very useful in confirming both the project's excellent progress despite early challenges as well as some suggested administrative refinements to consolidate further progress and the successful and timely production of quality project deliverables. Adaptations include streamlining project management staffing and project communications as well as planning around consultation with the project reference group.

The project Evaluation Report prepared by Dr Bell is provided in **Appendix 5**.

## **Appendices**

- 1. Outline of annotated bibliography**
- 2. Student interview schedule**
- 3. Staff interview schedule**
- 4. Environmental scan template**
- 5. Evaluation Report**



## Appendix 1: Outline of annotated bibliography

A review of recent literature (2000–2011) in the broad area of the experience of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in higher education was undertaken and presented as an annotated bibliography. The format was designed to provide an entry to the vast literature in the area and thereby enable widespread access and use. The literature in this bibliography was used as the literature base for the current project.

The annotated bibliography built on one originally developed by Dr Helen O'Shea in 2010 as a contribution to the literature base for the research project, 'Focusing on their success: Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds at Deakin University', funded by the Strategic Teaching and Learning Grants Scheme (STALGS) at Deakin University. In 2011, this original work was developed and updated by Associate Professor Andrys Onsman and Dr Jade McKay as part of the current project.

The bibliography focuses on the experiences of LSES students in universities from around the world. It includes articles about the theory of these students' experiences as well as those concerning the practical aspects of their experiences. These peer-reviewed articles include reports on research studies, conceptual papers, and commentaries. Additionally, relevant government reports and policy papers have been included as well as a selection of key conference papers, addresses, books and book chapters.

### Focus and content

The primary focus is on peer-reviewed journal articles. Journals consulted in the first instance were the following – the number of articles included in this bibliography appears in brackets following the title:

- *Journal of College Student Development* (16)
- *Studies in Higher Education* (16)
- *Higher Education Research and Development* (11)
- *Higher Education* (12)
- *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* (8)
- *Teaching in Higher Education* (7)
- *Research in Higher Education* (5)
- *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (2)
- *Journal of Higher Education* (2)
- *American Education Research Journal* (2)
- *Higher Education Quarterly* (3)
- *Innovative Higher Education* (1)
- *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (0)
- *The Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* (0)
- *Review of Educational Research* (0)
- *Journal of Educational Psychology* (0)
- *Review of Educational Research* (0)
- *Journal of Educational Research* (0)
- *Educational Research* (0)
- *Educational Researcher* (0)
- *Review of Research in Education* (0)
- *Higher Education Review*. (0)

Numerous other journals are cited. Those found to be particularly useful included the following:

- *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* (16)
- *Research Papers in Education* (3)
- *Journal of Education Policy* (2)
- *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* (2)
- *British Journal of Sociology and Education* (2)
- *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (2)
- *International Studies of Sociology of Education Sociology* (1)
- *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning* (1)
- *Tertiary Education and Management* (1)
- *Open Learning: The Journal of Open Distance and E-Learning* (1)
- *Social Justice Research*. (1)

In the first stage of the development of this annotated bibliography, titles and abstracts of all articles in the listed journals between 2000 and 2010 were scanned and selected articles were then examined in more detail to ascertain their relevance to the experiences of LSES students. In addition, a search of journal websites was conducted using the terms 'socioeconomic' (and its alternative spelling 'socio-economic') and 'SES' with 'higher education'. This was followed by searches for the relevant policy documents relating to the broadening of participation in higher education, particularly in the UK and Australia. This led to searches of publications from related research centres. These included research reports and in some cases books. Finally, the bibliographies of articles selected for inclusion were searched and further relevant articles and documents were added, as in the case of Vincent Tinto's seminal work on retention. In the second stage, literature up to May 2011 was canvassed and the bibliography was updated accordingly.

### **A diversity of definitions**

People who are under-represented among higher education students are identified in many different ways: as non-traditional, of low socioeconomic status, from ethnic minorities, working class, or simply as 'under-represented'. Students from minority ethnic groups, for example, might be identified in the literature via the term 'diversity', reflecting the generalisations or euphemisms of past anti-discrimination legislation, notably in the USA and also in Australia and the UK. In both cases, the broadest term as a keyword (diversity and socioeconomic status) has been employed to simplify searching. The term 'non-traditional student' is a third catch-all term referring to mature students, those with non-standard admission status, and women in male-dominated courses, in addition to students from ethnic minorities and low socioeconomic status.

### **Themes**

The themes of the research reported on in the bibliography are reflected in the keywords listed above. As a consequence of the varying ways of identifying under-represented students and conceiving of their paths into and through higher education, some of the literature included in the bibliography may appear to be somewhat obliquely related to the experience of LSES students. Selection has been governed by the estimated usefulness of the research to the unfolding situation in Australian higher education. The bibliography contains reports on interventions among various populations of students, varying approaches to gathering and analysing the data and, in particular, commentary on policy and practice, on ways of understanding diversity, retention and attrition, student learning, the academic culture and student experience.

## **A diversity of focus and methodology**

Higher education policy and funding of under-represented groups has a very different history in the USA from that of the UK and also Australia. In the USA, the policy emphasis is on race (as a result of anti-discrimination and affirmative action legislation with regard to Latino and Black students in particular) and the funding emphasis is on student financial aid. Research from the USA is focused on the performance of identified student groups (ethnic minorities, first-generation students, etc.) compared to other students and on evaluating initiatives to overcome their academic and cultural disadvantage. Much of the American research is quantitative.

By contrast, over the past decade, a large body of research has emerged from the UK that is specifically concerned with the former Labour Government's policy, Widening Participation in Higher Education. This work comprises research reports and commentary directed at advocating and justifying the legislation and a vast number of descriptive and evaluative studies of initiatives directed at widening participation. The initial thrust of this progressive policy was to initiate local schemes to increase motivation, preparedness and access to higher education among under-represented groups. From around 2005, the emphasis of research moved to the experience and success of these students once they gained higher education places. It is this more recent research that has most relevance to Australian policy on increasing participation of LSES students, to understanding their experience at university and to making adaptations to admissions, teaching and institutional environments that will support their success.

An important shift is noticeable in research reports and commentaries from a number of UK 'think tanks' set up to work specifically in the area of widening participation (for example, Action on Access). This change, evident in the work of Gorard, Thomas and others (and summarised in Billingham 2009) is twofold: a shift away from a 'deficit' model of student difference to one of inclusion, and the advocacy of 'mainstreaming' or embedding of wider participation policy within higher education institutional culture. Another outcome of the intensive research on widening participation in the UK has been a change in the conception of higher education as a process, from one of 'access + intervention = participation + intervention = graduation' to that of 'lifelong learning' (also referred to as the 'student life-cycle'), which maintains that 'drop-outs' is an inadequate characterisation of the strategic moves students make across institutions and courses, and in and out of higher education, over the course of a life.

## **Limitations**

The bibliography is not exhaustive, both because of the time constraints in compiling it and its confinement to 12 years of published research. It should be regarded as an entry point and a historical background to ongoing research on the experience of LSES students in higher education. A further limitation, as discussed above, is the overlap between LSES students and other groups under-represented in higher education.

The full annotated bibliography can be found at:  
<http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/resources.htm>

## Appendix 2: Student interview schedule

### ALTC LSES: Student Interview Schedule

**You will need:** recorder, spare batteries, pens, tissues, voucher, code sheet, the student's code number (to use instead of their name), spare copies of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form.

#### Welcome

*Hello [insert interviewee name], my name is [insert interviewer name].*

#### Rapport building

Make the student feel welcome and relaxed.

#### Overview

I'd like to start by just reminding you about the research project that you have kindly agreed to participate in. The purpose of the project is to find out what strategies successful students such as you use to achieve success in their studies. Successful students are those who have finished at least one year of (full-time or part-time) study, just as you have done. We are interested in students who have home addresses in areas that are under-represented at university. We want to find out what has worked for you at uni, what and who has helped you to succeed and why. We also want to know what advice we could give to future students about succeeding and to university staff about how best to teach and support students so they succeed.

We are just seeking your opinion on these issues, so there is no right or wrong answer.

#### Informed Consent

As you know, participation in this research is voluntary. You've been sent this statement about the project before and here it is again [indicate plain language statement]. Before we start, do you have any questions? Okay, I need to ask you to sign this [indicate informed consent form] and leave it with me as proof that you have agreed to be interviewed and be part of the project.

#### Set up and test the recorder

Once the recorder is on, the interviewer should speak into the recorder indicating the student's code number plus date and time of interview to identify student, not their name. For example: *"This is [insert interviewer's name] interviewing [insert interviewee code]."*

#### Interview identification

Record your name, interviewee's first name, data and place. For example, "This is Marcia Devlin interviewing Kylie on 20 May 2011. The code for this interviewee is \_\_\_\_\_"

#### Additional prompts

What else? Is there anything else?

Who else? Is there anyone else?

Can you tell me more about that?

Can you give an example?

### **To redirect the focus to what has helped them be successful**

"It sounds like you have had a lot to deal with yet despite this, you have been successful. Can you tell me more about how you succeeded in your circumstances?"

"It sounds like you have successfully managed some significant challenges yet despite this, you have been successful. Can you tell me more about how you have succeeded in your study despite your difficulties?"

### **Questions to be asked**

1. What has helped you to learn while you have been a student at university?
2. Were there any particular aspects of your experience at uni that helped you pass subjects (courses/units)?
3. What else do you think has helped you succeed at university?
4. Are there particular teachers or teaching styles that have been more helpful than others?
5. What has helped you do well in assessment tasks?
6. Are there people in your life who have been helpful? Who (full names not needed)? How have they been helpful?
7. Are there aspects of your financial arrangements or circumstances that have made things easier for you to study?
8. Were there any particular services that assisted you to succeed at uni?
9. If you had to give an award to a person, service or thing that has helped you most as a student at university, who or what would it be?
10. If you had to give advice to a student (from your old school/home town/suburb/area) coming to university about succeeding as you have done, what would you suggest to them?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about how you have succeeded as a student at university?

### **Additional prompts**

- What else? Is there anything else?
- Who else? Is there anyone else?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Can you give an example?

### **To redirect the focus to what has helped them be successful**

"It sounds like you have had a lot to deal with yet despite this, you have been successful. Can you tell me more about how you succeeded in your circumstances?"

"It sounds like you have successfully managed some significant challenges yet despite this, you have been successful. Can you tell me more about how you have succeeded in your study despite your difficulties?"

### **Finalise the interview**

1. Thank the student for their time.
2. Issue them with an itunes voucher. If it is a phone interview, ask them for their address and inform them that their voucher will be posted to them this week.
3. Whether the voucher is issued in person, or posted out, keep a record of the code of the voucher being issued on the voucher coding sheet.



**After the interview:**

---

1. As soon as is practicable, the audio files from the interview should be uploaded to a password protected computer and appropriately labeled according to the code e.g. DEK/Stu/001. The audio files should preferably be MP3 files.
2. The consent form, coding sheet, and audio file are to be uploaded to Dropbox (detailed instructions are forthcoming) at your earliest convenience with all documents appropriately labeled with the interviewee's code.

## Appendix 3: Staff interview schedule

**You will need:** recorder, spare batteries, pens, code sheet, Plain Language Statement (PLS) and the Environmental Scan PLS and template (in case you wish to collect resources).

### Overview

*I'd like to start by just reminding you about the research project that you have kindly agreed to participate in. This project is about effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds. You have been invited to participate in the research because of your involvement and experience in the effective engagement and learning of students from LSES backgrounds.*

*We understand that while it is necessary to define students from low SES backgrounds at a policy level, and for measuring performance and allocating funds, it is very difficult, and potentially undesirable, to target students from low SES backgrounds individually for teaching and learning or support purposes. We also recognise that good practice in teaching and supporting LSES students benefits all students, so your responses need not be restricted to your experience with any particular student cohort.*

### Informed Consent

Interviewer to ensure that informed consent has been received or will be received.

### Set up and test the recorder

### Interview identification c

Record your name, interviewee's first name, data and place. For example, "This is Marcia Devlin interviewing Kylie on 20 May 2011. The code for this interviewee is \_\_\_\_\_"

### Questions to be asked

1. What particular strategies do you employ for teaching and/or supporting students from diverse backgrounds?
2. Could you tell me about any resources that you use to support these teaching strategies? May we please have copies of these resources?
3. Could you tell me about your approach to assessment?
4. How do you design assessment to accommodate the needs of the students from diverse backgrounds?
5. Do you do anything in particular to support LSES students?
6. What advice would you provide for colleagues about how they could enhance their practice in teaching and supporting students from diverse backgrounds?
7. Can you identify any particular assistance you need to enhance your teaching and/or support practices?

---

### After the interview:

1. As soon as is practicable, the audio files from the interview should be uploaded to a password protected computer and appropriately labeled according to the code e.g. DEK/COL<sup>3</sup>/001 or CSU/COL/011. The audio files should preferably be MP3 files.
2. The consent form/s, coding sheet, audio file and resources (see Question 2) are to be uploaded to Dropbox (detailed instructions to be advised) with all documents appropriately labeled with the interviewee's code.

---

<sup>3</sup> COL = short for 'colleague'

## Appendix 4: Environmental scan template

### Environmental Scan

1. **Institution**
2. **Contact Person (and contact details)**
3. **Name of Program/Initiative**
  - 3.1 URL:
  - 3.2 Start Date/Duration:
4. **Brief outline of program**
5. **Purpose/Aims**
6. **Breadth of program** (is it in a particular subject, program, school, faculty, across the institution, campus, with a particular cohort, etc)
7. **Category (please select all that apply and provide explanation where necessary)**

Category	Y?	Explanation
Policy		
Curriculum		
Program		
Other (please specify)		

8. **Outcomes**
  - 8.1 Uptake:
  - 8.2 Evaluation(s) conducted to date – (Informal or formal) – and details of findings:
  - 8.3 Evidence of success:
  - 8.4 Evaluation(s) planned (and dates for this/these):
  - 8.5 Major challenges:
  - 8.6 Other (Please specify):
9. **Publications/Reports (including links to those publicly available)**

**Effective teaching and support  
of students from low socioeconomic  
backgrounds:  
Resources for Australian higher education**

**Evaluation Report**

**Prepared by Dr Maureen Bell  
July 2012**

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## Purpose of the Report

This report provides a summative commentary on the project processes and achievement of outcomes and deliverables of the *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (LSES)* project.

## Project background

This is a collaborative project between Deakin University, Charles Sturt University and Queensland University of Technology and was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

## Project aims

The project aims to contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning in Australian higher education through effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Expected deliverables

The project proposal has outlined the following expected deliverables:

1. A conceptual framework relevant to the Australian context
2. Advice for policy makers and teaching and learning leaders
3. Practical guidelines for academic staff
4. Materials to support professional development
5. A repository of effective policy, programs and practice.

## Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation methodology uses a process/outcomes approach. The overarching questions that drive this summative evaluation are:

1. To what extent have the project aims been met?
2. To what extent have the proposed deliverables been achieved?
3. What were the helping and hindering factors of the project?
4. What has been learned that might inform future OLT projects?

Evaluation data were gathered through project team member phone interviews (7), project manager interview (1); advisory group online survey (1); team meeting participation (1) and document, website and materials review.

# Discussion

## 1. Meeting the project aims

The project aimed to contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning in Australian higher education through effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Inspection of the project website reveals the aim has been met through a suite of resources dedicated to enhanced teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall the project team and Reference Group (RG) members are satisfied that the project has achieved its aims.

Five members of the reference group commented on the project overall. All were positive indicating that this was an important project for the sector and has produced a valuable outcome which is expected to have a positive impact, for example:

A timely project with strong outcomes that will be useful to many institutions and teachers to advance the interests and outcomes of students from these cohorts.

Other positive comments related to: the high level of project publicity achieved in the press by the team leader; the process; information sharing; project conceptualization and management; and relevance to teaching students from LSES backgrounds, the importance of the project for the sector, and the expected positive impact.

One RG member commented on the way the project successfully bridged theory and practice thus:

A really valuable piece of work that attempts to bridge the theory and practice relevant to teaching students from LSES backgrounds. It is not easy to meet the sometimes contested demands of rigorous academic research with the production of tangible outcomes relevant to practitioners. The project has tackled this and provides a valuable model for further development of similar approaches in contexts beyond Australia.

One team member commented that “tremendously rich” data were gathered while another noted the importance of the inclusion of the Australian student voice to move collegial practice forward. The team leader and team members report that there has already been significant interest and requests for copies of materials from senior people in the sector.

It should be noted here that the project time frame was 18 months rather than the typical 2 year ALTC/OLT project. The delays and challenges related in particular to the number of unavoidable personnel changes (project manager and research assistant) would inevitably have had a greater impact than on a two year project and limited the possibility of incorporating feedback on the key documents.

## 2. Achievement of deliverables

### 2.1 A conceptual framework relevant to the Australian context for the provision of effective teaching and support to students from LSES backgrounds

The conceptual framework was developed from the work of an earlier project also led by the current project leader. As reported in the formative evaluation, the conceptual framework has been published in a peak higher education journal and all team members expressed satisfaction with the utility and scholarly basis of the framework.

Five members of the reference group indicated that this deliverable had been achieved and one that it was partly achieved. Various comments suggest the framework has been helpful in: modeling; offering a fresh way of conceptualising approaches for diverse students; articulating some of the hidden assumptions underpinning deficit models; and having utility across the sector and possibly in more broadly, for example:

The framework is useful in that it ... helps with establishing a collective responsibility ...

and:

[The framework is] an important counter to [the] default position.

Minor reservations were mentioned by two RG members, with one proposing that the framework did not highlight the issue of the dominant culture and its power, while another commented that they I found it hard to see how the conceptual framework could be used to guide and inform practice.

## **2.2 Practical advice for institutional policy makers and leaders**

Five RG members reported that the deliverable was achieved and one that it was partly achieved. Various comments refer to the materials as: very promising; practical and relevant; clear and accessible; sound; well presented and accessible to the reader; offering a way forward for institutions and institutional leaders, for example:

The way the framework, etc were presented and organised made this easier and was very accessible.

and

Presents a series of research informed ideas and challenges to established practices ... The advice in the guide makes some simple yet relevant propositions that should encourage institutional leaders to reflect on practice and, indeed, culture in relation to effective teaching and support.

One RG member commented that:

I thought the section on curriculum pgs 4-8 was a bit weak in terms of direction for leaders - but then later in the document the advice gets much more specific and directional, which is great.

Improvements suggested included:

more focus on assisting teams rather than the lone academic undertaking all the work

and:

In section 1 I thought the leaders needed to get some advice about their responsibility in enabling team-based curriculum reform supported by central agencies/resources.

One team member commented that there could be more detail on strategies but emphasised that “it was a small project and individual institutions can add that detail”.

In general, the project team and RG members see the policy document as both practical and relevant.

### **2.3 Practical advice for teaching staff**

Five members of the RG indicated that the deliverable was achieved and one indicated it was partly achieved. Materials were variously described as well devised and thought through, useful, sound, well presented, accessible, beneficial and generally applicable. The scholarly platform on which the information rests was seen as a strength, for example:

It is important to present counter arguments and the fact that the advice is derived from research evidence will be an important step in taking the debate forward.

One RG member commented that the materials:

[they] challenge ... orthodoxy directly - urging teaching staff to examine their 'unconscious assumptions about LSES students and challenge yourself about the potential impacts of any impacts of any biases you might hold.' This is good stuff ...

One RG member commented on the methodology:

A small point, but I don't quite agree with the emphasis on data analytics ... It's better to imagine every class as being diverse (which it is) and strategise from there.

It was not made clear, however, just how a focus on data analysis might necessarily negate strategies for diversity.

### **2.4 Materials to support professional development**

One RG member indicated that this was achieved, three that it was partly achieved and two that it was not achieved. One of these six respondents commented that they were unable to access this resource set although there was a dropbox set up for this purpose. It is not known why there was a problem as no RG members contacted the project manager to report this problem at the time.

One commented on the difficulties for staff in accessing professional development support and noted with approval that:

The ways these are organised makes this task easier.

One RG member commented that the resources appeared to be “a bit thin” however they did not expand on this point. Another commented that this section of the website did “not appear to hold any significant content” however it is not known if this comment related to the quality or amount of content on the site. One RG member requested that this resource might be augmented with:

a little more on how to organise support services for the benefit of low-SES, and how to join this up with the academic enterprise.

Again, one of the team members noted that the professional development materials need to be contextualised by each institution. The shape of these professional development resources was not detailed in the deliverables and it may be that expectations of the shape and form of this deliverable have varied.

### **2.5 A repository of effective policy, programs and practice**

One member of the RG indicated that the deliverable was achieved, four that it was partly achieved and one that this deliverable was not achieved. One RG member commented: “I have not really looked at

this repository”. Two of these respondents commented that they had “problems accessing the website” however it is not known what caused the problem or if the negative response came from one of these. One was overseas at the time and using internet café facilities but again it is not known if this person was one of those finding access difficult. Inspection of the website has revealed no problems in accessing the site or the various links within the site so any problems raised by these comments are not, as yet, well understood.

The remaining RG member comments on the repository were:

Policy, framework and practice as well as materials on website were well designed, presented logically and potentially of huge benefit to institutions like ours where there are many low SES students ...

and:

... the aim of enabling stakeholders to select resources and materials relevant for their context is welcome ...

and:

... the idea of having a common template summarising various initiatives etc should make it easy for those interested to be informed about the key elements of projects and to be guided to further information ...

One member commented that while they did not consider this a replete repository:

the resources are quite wholesome and complete and it would seem that most users would not have much need to go elsewhere for information and support.

One RG member offered some detailed suggestions for improvement to the organization of the website. These improvements refer to layout, thematic directional guide, and top level summaries.

One member of the reference group commented on what they referred to as “a common issue with ‘good practice’ websites”:

although there is a repository of effective practice and policies, there seems to be no evidence there on whether the examples given are effective (or how they were chosen).

The evaluator reports that at the time of evaluation, access to the website and materials was functional. In summary the repository is reported as useful, practical and well designed.

## **2.6 Aims and deliverables in summary**

There is consensus among the five reference group members who commented on the program overall that this has been an important project that has produced a repository of materials offering institutional and teaching support for the teaching of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Five out of six respondents reported that the deliverables: 1. Conceptual framework; 2. Practical advice for institutional policy makers and leaders; and 3. Practical advice for teaching staff; have been achieved and one respondents that these had been partly achieved.

Reference group members reported that deliverables: 4. Materials to support professional development; and 5. A repository of effective policy, programs and practice, were not so well achieved as deliverables 1, 2, and 3. It is not known which comments were posted by the respondent/s who reported problems



accessing the professional development materials. It is not clear that reference group members expectations of the professional development materials matched those of the project team.

In general the first three deliverables are resources that are soundly based in research and strike a balance of scholarly rigour and practicality, deliverable four offers a generic set of information based professional development materials that can be adapted for use by institutions, and deliverable five offers an accessible and broad set of useful, research-based information. It can be concluded that the project has achieved its stated deliverables within the 18 month time-frame.

### **3. Effectiveness of the LSES process**

The LSES development process involved a significant research project involving the collection of qualitative data by interview, development of an annotated bibliography, development of materials and the creation of a website repository. This process has resulted in materials reported as scholarly and significant by RO members. One RO member commented, for example:

Despite staffing changes and Marcia's job change the project has been well conceptualised, implemented and managed.

#### **3.1 Delays and difficulties**

Team members and RG members have noted that the project leader has been able to overcome substantial administrative difficulties and delays caused by restructure at the project leader's institution. In addition there were a number of unavoidable staff changes to project managers and research assistant positions, and the team leader and one team member moved to new positions at different organizations within the project timeframe. These unsettling changes were dealt with by the team leader who took a proactive approach to completion of the deliverables and shouldered much of the work of the project officer and team, particularly as the project deadline approached. It was noted that at the formative evaluation stage completion of deliverables was seen as the main challenge by the team leader, not only because of setbacks but because project team members were not seeing their way clear to be able to complete expected tasks on time. This challenge was taken up by the leader who focused on seeing the deliverables through to completion.

Team members reported that they had felt some confusion at the outset of the project. Their expectations of involvement did not match the reality. When the project officer left the project, the team leader saw that interviewing and other investigations needed to be completed to the timeline if the project deliverables were to be achieved. It fell to the team members to carry out the work. Team members were not happy with the arrangement commenting, for example:

We did a fair bit of the interviewing, making contacts, identifying resources.

and:

There was disagreement was about who would do that work ... It was not resolved but the decision was that it would be done by us. Consequently because of that disagreement, that work hasn't been [completed] by us ... still there are a tremendous number of resources there. It happened, I'm not sure how it happened.

One team member mentioned the difficulties in fitting in project work with a sudden family crisis. Another team member explained the problems faced by her as a regional team member:

The time commitment needs to be clear from both perspectives. The regional location means a 3 day trip is required to attend a one-day meeting in Melbourne.

### **3.2 Team leadership**

At the time of the formative evaluation the team reported the leadership was effective and collaborative. The project manager who joined in the final phase and saw the project to its completion reported that she worked very closely with the team leader who was “a huge support”. She referred to the team leader as giving clear directives, having clear requirements, and seeking a close working relationship with the project officer. The team leader set up a system of processes in place such that she felt comfortable stepping into the role at the handover from the previous project officer.

The need to complete a research project in order to produce resources became a stress on the project team. In order to see the project completed on time the team leader made some tough decisions that team members were not always happy with. One team member commented on the difficulties she found working within the 18 month time frame in that she would have preferred a longer research phase for the project so that she had more time to get a good understanding of the data. However she also recognized the imperatives of time commenting:

... I understand why there was a need to get the data.... The project leader has to make decisions that people don't like.

The difficulties of leading a team of high level experts is highlighted by one of the team members who referred to her own feelings of needing to contribute to the leadership as a team member:

People to sign up as equal partners ... As equal partners you feel responsible for contributing to the leadership. But there should never be more than one leader.

### **3.3 Function of the Reference Group**

The role of the reference group as outlined in the project application is to provide expert advice at the commencement of the project and feedback on draft resources during the development stage.

At formative evaluation the team members expressed appreciation of the advisory group's support and input. The project team considered the members of the group to have provided helpful feedback and ideas, often through individual contact. The group was seen as a “sounding board” for ideas and the expertise of various individual members was utilised at different times. The group was described as a space to articulate project process and activities, bounce ideas and get feedback, provide new ideas and disseminate information to host universities.

At summative evaluation the team leader referred to the very varied involvement of members, each providing input in different ways at different times. For example, an internationally placed member often provided materials from the UK, another focused on giving feedback on the resources. The feeling was that the group was supportive and a safety net should the project go off track.

The team felt the RG were provided with plenty of opportunities to comment. One explained that they felt the start-up difficulties inhibited full involvement by the RG and that the 18 month timeline did not

provide outcomes to them in time to get feedback. One noted the difficulties of international phone conferencing. It was generally felt by team members, however, that more teleconference discussion and more regular updates would have been useful.

Members of the RG were asked to indicate their level of involvement in the project. At the formative evaluation five of the six responded and only one of these indicated they would prefer more involvement however it is not known if this was a result of the respondent's motivation or the project team's contact.

At summative evaluation four RG members reported appropriate levels of involvement in (a) providing advice, guidance and feedback on project progress; (b) sharing relevant reading material or information about other projects and policy directions; (c) providing feedback on materials developed by the team; and three reported appropriate levels of involvement in dissemination of information about the project. All reported at least some involvement in providing feedback on materials developed by the team and providing advice, guidance and feedback on project progress.

Comments from three RG members indicate that their own professional situation led to difficulties in being fully connected with the project, for example:

I have been sent information at various times but unfortunately haven't felt any great connection with the project. This is probably because I had difficulty connecting to the first teleconference ... the latter stages coincided with my moving universities to commence a new and demanding job unfortunately.

As a reference group member in a different state, it was difficult to stay on top of developments, and at times I felt quite distanced from the project. I think I missed one teleconference, which didn't help. However I read everything as it was being developed and followed the progress, but I'm not sure I added much value to the big picture.

One RG member pointed out a list of reasons for low involvement however suggested that s/he might have been brought into the project more fully:

My involvement has been limited by my workload, distance necessitating participation in meetings by phone and difficulties matching time zones. I have not actively engaged myself in the project having recently moved to the UK and taken up a new position but there has also been no effort on the part of the project team to encourage my engagement or utilise my expertise. I also think that the potential for international comparisons has not been realised however I recognise the difficulties of scope creep and Marcia has done well to keep the project tightly focussed.

The other RG members who commented noted that:

The team provided us with excellent opportunities to provide feedback

Appropriate involvement was encouraged and sought

It was a pleasure to be involved in the reference group as the whole process was well devised, and produced. We were kept informed by the leadership by both teleconferences and papers. I would like to congratulate all involved.

### 3.4 Dissemination

The project dissemination strategy was to embed a variety of approaches into the project including: selection of reference group members; presentations; discussion papers; media articles; interviews; and scholarly publications. The website has been developed through the project which provides easy access to information and it is expected that the formal launch will complete the strategy by providing expert discussion and distribution of project resources.

Some RO members noted dissemination and uptake as key challenges for all such projects, for example:

The key challenge for ensuring the effectiveness of this project ... is to ensure that the useful resources are disseminated and actually used by academics in the real world.

and:

Marcia has been effective at getting good publicity in the press for its outcomes.

The project leader has implemented an aggressive media strategy, publishing articles in the Higher Education Supplement of *The Australian* newspaper. Team and media releases to scholarly newsletters. Team members have made presentations and workshops at national conferences/fora, have successfully built the profile of the project. The planned launch will provide further dissemination and publicity opportunities combining a diverse scholarly panel and explication of the materials.

### 3.5 Formative evaluation

The formative evaluation indicated that the project processes were working effectively through a combination of team enthusiasm, commitment, and focused leadership. The team members reported a positive, collaborative relationship with all members. Key suggestions from the formative evaluation were to re-visit the tasks required and discuss how these will be completed; discussion the option of a launch as part of the dissemination strategy; provide more detail about key discussions and decisions from meetings; ensure completion of actions listed against project team members. These suggestions were acted upon by the project leader. Team members reported the formative evaluation as useful in that it validated the project and was both reassuring that the project was on track and assisted the team to move forward, for example:

Areas were opened up for discussion and change, we saw some activities change as a result.

### 3.6 Process in summary

Various unforeseen and unavoidable changes in personnel and structures, the shorter-than-usual 18 month time frame, and the disagreement by some team members as to their level of required involvement in project work led to difficulties in management of the project and achievement of deliverables. Personnel and structural issues included (a) the team leader's change of institution and position early in the project; (b) restructuring at that institution; (c) changes to one team member's institution and position late in the project; and (d) changes to support personnel at various stages of the project. To overcome these difficulties the team leader, at various stages, took on a large part of the tasks that would normally be the responsibility of the project manager and research officer. When team members expressed concern about the time required of them to complete shared writing tasks and found difficulty in finding that time, the team leader took on the task, thus pushing the project to completion.

Formative evaluation reported that the team members described the team leader as well organized, detailed, taking on a large proportion of the work, consultative, collaborative, inclusive, and willing to be involved in discussion. One team member noted, this kind of project requires a leadership style that takes responsibility and directs action. In this project, this proved to be the case. These qualities saw the project to fruition and at summative evaluation there was also recognition by the team that strong leadership was needed if the project was to be completed, with one member commenting:

In the end [Prof Devlin] guided the project to a worthwhile place.

At completion of the project all team members acknowledged that a directive approach had been needed by the leader in order to complete the task.

#### **4. Sustainability of the project's focus and outcomes**

At this stage the website is available and provides all of the project materials with guidance and relevant links.

#### **5. Comments to assist other institutions**

The following comments are made to assist other institutions. These comments are gathered from (a) what worked well over the course of the project and in the achievement of deliverables; (b) what might have been improved; and (c) the evaluation data and the evaluator's observations of the project processes.

- Utilise the expertise of the reference group early and throughout the project in support of the development of deliverables. In addition to keeping the RG informed and being open to comment, request specific input, involvement and support, eg to review materials, to advise on process.
- From the beginning ensure a focus on team structure, process and agreement on distribution of tasks and deadlines. Team leaders discuss and document discussion and agreements about team processes. There is a possibility that leadership style preferences may emerge in high level teams where each team member might potentially be a leader and may have experience in leadership.
- Strike a balance between a collaborative approach and the provision of strong direction and clear decision making at appropriate times. From the beginning seek clarity of roles, commitment to tasks and time frames, clear agreement on distribution of tasks, the extent and scope of work to be completed, ownership of materials and how they will be developed and discussion of the allocation of budget and teaching relief. Revisit these decisions at appropriate stages of the project. Even with the provision of relief from face to face teaching academics may discover it is difficult to find time to devote to the project. Discuss the high level of time commitment that will be required by team members and the project leader in particular.
- The dissemination strategy is a key focus and a number of presentations and workshops at national conferences/fora and media releases to scholarly newsletters, websites, and where possible the mainstream press (eg The Australian Higher Education supplement) to build the profile of the project should be planned early in the project.
- Changing circumstances may occur for team members and advisory group members, eg change of employment, family issues, that may have an unforeseen impact on the project and delivery. Consider a risk management strategy.



- The selection of an experienced and effective project manager is a great asset to a collaborative project.
- Keep the project team and reference group size manageable. Consider the reference group as experts and critical friends at the coal face while seeking input from critical friends beyond these groups.
- Make sure your time frame is feasible and don't underestimate the time it will take to carry out research prior to the use of the findings for resource development.
- Make use of the formative evaluation process and outcomes and seek ongoing external advice from the evaluator.
- Be aware that travel for a team member from a regional area (given limited connecting flights) is often problematic adding an extra day either side of meetings.

## 6. Conclusions

The comments in this report are formed from a consideration of the key strengths and challenges observed from the qualitative data gathered from the project team telephone interviews, reference group member surveys, and various artifacts. It is hoped the discussion will prove informative to the project leader and team as well as to the OLT.

The project focus has been on the development of a suite of materials for the enhancement of teaching and learning in Australian higher education through effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These materials have been delivered and in general reviewed favourably by the expert Reference Group members. The materials, relevant resources and outcomes have been posted on a functional and attractive website. Thus the project team has been able to meet the stated aims and deliverables within an 18 month time frame. It is expected by RG members that the full set of materials, if taken up across the sector, will provide the opportunity to enhance the possibilities for further development of teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

It is possible that the expertise of the advisory group could have been more fully utilised, however it is also recognised that time constraints eventuating from early unavoidable delays and difficulties and the project time frame made this more difficult. These delays and difficulties are outlined in the project report and formative evaluation report.

It is also the case that that team members were unprepared for the workload that was required of them when the need to fill the gap left by the project officer arose, a gap which needed to be filled if research outcomes, and thus deliverables, were to be achieved, and for the time commitment required of them in finalizing the deliverables. The team leader has been able to overcome a number of unavoidable difficulties to lead this project to completion with the support of team members.

Feedback on the materials from the RG was not able to be incorporated into the final documents. This again was related to the time frame which included the need to develop the research findings as a base for the materials in the first phase. Nevertheless the evaluator considers these suggested changes to be minor matters that do not affect the quality and relevance of the documents. Evaluation comments have been provided to the project leader and it is suggested that one RG member's comments regarding website organization may be considered prior to the launch. Comments on materials may be considered if/when the materials go into second edition.

Overall this project has achieved the stated aims and deliverables, is noted as both timely and critical, and offers a set of practical and scholarly resources to the sector for effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

I would be delighted to discuss any aspect of this document.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maureen Bell'.

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