

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

The Journal of Academic Librarianship



Providing Enhanced Information Skills Support to Students From Disadvantaged Backgrounds: Western Sydney University Library Outreach Program

Judy Reading¹

Macquarie University Library, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 June 2016

Received in revised form 31 July 2016

Accepted 1 August 2016

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Information skills

Low SES students

'At risk' and struggling students

Disadvantaged students

Widening participation

Transition to university

First year experience

Academic and information skills in higher education in Australia

ABSTRACT

Widening higher education participation is a key priority for government and universities around the world because improving the education level and skills of the population as a whole is seen as key for national and individual economic wellbeing and as a key tool in achieving a more equitable society. Can addressing information literacy skills improve the chances of academic success for students who might in the past not have had the opportunity to attend university? Who are these students and what do they need? The Outreach Program at Western Sydney University was established to develop enhanced Library support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The 18 month pilot project was initially funded by the Australian Government HEPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships) Program (2010 – 11) and the next 3 years (2011–15) were supported by Western Sydney University Strategic Initiatives funding. This article will outline what was learnt from the Program about the skill support needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the needs of students struggling with academic demands in their first year of university study. An important lesson was that the two are not synonymous. Low socioeconomic status (LSES) students at Western Sydney University, at least based on the HEPPP 'postcode' measure of disadvantage, are not particularly associated with academic failure. However many students, particularly those coming to University with low levels of prior academic achievement and those with English as a second language, do struggle to achieve a passing grade. This article will review the strategies used by the Outreach Program to identify and address the difficulties of struggling students, for evaluating the effectiveness of Library skills support and for embedding sustainable enhanced skills programs. It is envisaged that this article will be of interest to the many academic librarians grappling with the important task of supporting widening participation.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

"The goal of access policies should be successful participation in higher education, as access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty promise" ([International Association of Universities, 2008](#) p. 1).

The recent Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 called for "inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all" ([UNESCO, 2015](#), p. ii) recognising access to education, including post-secondary education, as a fundamental human right and key to sustainable international economic development. The Declaration also specifically calls for a focus on the disadvantaged to ensure "no one is left behind" (p. iii and 13). Widening participation in higher education benefits the individual and also the national economy. The latest [OECD \(2015\)](#) Education indicators quantify the benefits to individuals in

terms of increased earnings and security of employment as well as other benefits such as better health and civic engagement. Those individual benefits translate directly into national prosperity through increased productivity and income. The [OECD \(2015, p. 35\)](#) has also identified a strongly positive link between tertiary education and the level of individual "ICT and problem solving skills" necessary for knowledge-based employment and the ability to adapt to a rapidly changing global economy. [Deloitte Access Economics \(2015\)](#), in a recent report for Universities Australia, quantify the economic and social benefits to individuals and to Australia from higher education, suggesting increased wages alone were worth 24 billion Australian dollars in 2014 (see p. 21).

In 2008 the influential 'Bradley Report', commissioned by the then Australian Federal Labour Minister for Education Julia Gillard, found that Australia faced a "critical moment" ([Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008](#), p. xi) in higher education history, falling behind other developed countries in investment just as it needed to expand provision to face the competitive challenges of the "new globalised economy". The

¹ Formerly Outreach Librarian, Western Sydney University, Australia.

Report called for action to expand the proportion of the population with university qualifications and to ensure that the opportunities afforded by higher education were available to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It recommended a target of 40% of all 25–34 years old to have a university qualification by 2020 (up from 29%) and 20% of undergraduate enrolments to be from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds (up from 15%; parity level being 25%) and that specific funding be made available for university outreach activities to encourage student enrolment in areas of disadvantage as well as “academic and personal support services” (p. 42) for students once enrolled. The Government responded positively with a “quantum leap in resourcing” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 5) providing additional billions for higher education and linking 4% of the total higher education teaching and learning grants to low SES participation.

Western Sydney University Library was successful in 2011 in a bid to the University for a share of HEPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships) funding to develop enhanced Library support for students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds. HEPP funding is the mechanism used by the Government to support the widening participation programs called for by the Bradley Review (Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 2010). The funding permitted the creation of a dedicated Outreach Librarian post with a remit to:

1. Determine relevant skill competencies within individual disciplines and the support needs of LSES students,
2. Develop appropriate, engaging and effective skills programs in order to offer transitional support to commencing LSES students,
3. Facilitate roll-out by the Library of successful strategies in particular by mentoring and training Library staff, and;
4. Develop robust evaluation of outcomes for target students.

This paper will discuss what can be learnt from the Outreach Program in relation to the information literacy support needs of commencing students in the context of widening participation in higher education.

CONTEXT

The widening participation agenda has particular resonance for Western Sydney University which identifies very strongly with the region it serves. “As the largest education provider in Greater Western Sydney, Western will lead the economic, social and cultural development of the region in partnership with industry, business, government and community organisations” (WSU, 2015 p. 2). Western Sydney is an area of relative disadvantage with four of Sydney’s five most socio-economically disadvantaged local government areas but at the same time it is the third biggest economy in Australia contributing 95 billion dollars a year to national GDP and is rapidly expanding (WSROC, 2016a). Greater Western Sydney is home to 1.9 million people and is expected to grow by another million over the next 20 years (WSROC, 2016b).

The area is characterised by cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. The 2011 census data for Greater Western Sydney (compiled and presented by the Centre for Western Sydney, Western Sydney University, 2016) revealed that 35.3% of the population of GWS were born overseas (compared with 24.6% in Australia), 29.8% speak a language other than English at home (compared with 15.7% in Australia) and 140,000 (7.3%) of GWS inhabitants do not speak English at all or well. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014) figures outline the pattern of settlement of migrants and the concentration in Sydney (and Melbourne) of people coming from China, India, Somalia, Sudan, Vietnam, Lebanon and indeed all over the world. Western Sydney has also a significant proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well as lower income Australians of English and Irish descent. This diversity is reflected at Western Sydney University where students are drawn from more than 160 ethnic backgrounds (Western Sydney University, 2015) and over 60% of students are of the first generation in their family to attend university (Universities Australia, 2016). Western Sydney University has one of the highest rates of participation of students from low SES

Table 1

The proportion of low SES students at Western Sydney University compared with Sydney University and Australian Universities as a whole.

% LSES by census data ^a	2008	2011	2014
Western Sydney University	21.11	23.10	24.55
Australian Universities	15.92	16.86	17.89
Sydney University	7.06	6.96	7.36

^a Australian Government, Department of Education and Training (2015). Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2014 Student Data. Appendix 2: Equity Groups. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2014-student-data>.

backgrounds (as defined by the census ‘postcode’ SEIFA measure of disadvantage) compared with other Australian universities, especially compared to the universities in the east and north of (Table 1).

Offering students opportunities through education is core to the University mission: “The University will expand opportunities for all students with the capability and commitment to attend university, irrespective of their economic circumstances or background” (WSU, 2015 p. 2).

NEEDS OF LOW SES STUDENTS

Statistics relating to Australian LSES students are usually calculated using SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas) by counting how many students gave home postcodes which are located in local areas categorised as disadvantaged according to an Australian Bureau of Statistics formula which takes account of 2006 or 2011 census data such as lower rates of income, educational attainment and skilled employment and higher rates of welfare dependency and unemployment. This formula, although widely used, has been criticised because it cannot be used as a measure of individual socioeconomic status and also because students are often mobile (Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

People from low SES backgrounds (as per postcode measure) are much less likely to go to university but once enrolled have only slightly lower retention rates than other students. The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE, 2008) reviewed participation of low SES and Indigenous people in Australian higher education. This report informed an action paper by Universities Australia (2008). Both publications identified a clear imbalance of opportunity with high SES students being “three times more likely to go to university” (Universities Australia, 2008 p. 2) than low SES students. However they found that once at university low SES students (with the exception of rural low SES students) “do almost as well as other groups in retention, success and completion” (p. 2). O’Shea and McKay (2011) came to the same conclusion (see p. 4). The following tables are extracted from statistics published by the Australian Government and Department of Education and Training (2015) and show that LSES student rates of retention and success are lower but similar to other students (Table 2).

Table 2

A comparison between the retention and success rates of LSES students and other students.

Retention	2008		2011		2013	
	All students	LSES	All	LSES	All	LSES
Australia	81.09	79.88	80.29	79.2	79.7	77.78
Western Sydney University	80.9	84.88	80.19	83.14	79.52	80.62
Sydney University	87.31	90.49	87.28	90.58	85.17	86.48
Success	2008		2011		2014	
	All students	LSES	All	LSES	All	LSES
Australia	88.24	85.7	87.61	84.79	87.03	83.53
Western Sydney University	83.48	83.01	82.84	81.65	81.96	80.56
Sydney University	92.37	91.67	92.55	91.61	92.04	90.34

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4938878>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4938878>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)