Widening Participation in University Learning

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Keywords

Higher education, widening participation, secondary education, socio-economic disadvantage, student equity, benefits, barriers, workload, university and school partnership

Introduction

Globally, there has been a focus on widening participation of people from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds in university education. With fairer access to higher education, there is an expectation of graduation into professional employment and social mobility, "rather than re-inscribing social stratification" (David 2009, p61). Additional benefits include higher levels of health and wellbeing (World Health Organization 2008), community, political and social engagement (Dwyer 2008), personal income and payment of government taxes, conforming to vote, blood donation, lower levels of imprisonment and higher levels of tolerance for the opinions of others (Baum & Ma 2007). In recent decades, increased awareness of the social and educational disadvantage perpetuated by "elite institutions for the few" has seen a shift in education policy towards "higher education as a birthright of the many" (Gidley et al. 2010, p126). Currently in Australia, however, students from advantaged backgrounds are still three times more likely to attend university than those from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). Fundamental to embarking on reform for a fairer Australia that supports improved employment and social mobility is the implementation of programs that reduce barriers to accessing higher education for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009). According to the 2008 Graduate Pathways Survey conducted by the Federal Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), such individuals may be from Indigenous, regional, remote or low socio-economic backgrounds, or from families whose parents have "non-professional" occupations; also, they may well be the first-in-the-family (Gillard 2008, pix) or the first generation of their family to attend university (Devlin & O'Shea 2011).

According to Collier and Morgan (2008), first-in-the-family students attending university cannot "rely on parental advice" about expectations, academic demands or the "college student" role (p425), and thus have less capacity to "build existing knowledge into genuine expertise"; this hinders their transition and adjustment to a higher learning environment (p442). On the other hand, students with university-specific know-how possess a valuable resource for understanding the student role and academic requirements. Gale (2011) sheds light on a new approach to the widening participation agenda and student equity by shifting focus from the negative connotations often attached to marginalised and under-represented groups to the deliberate underscoring of the wealth and cultural capacities that such groups bring to the higher education environment. Mobility, aspiration and voice are the new drivers of participation in higher education, and the support needs of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, once regarded as special, are now being considered as "varying resources in the cognitive, linguistic, knowledge and cultural domains" (Warren 2002, p85). Universities are realising that these resources must be cultivated and refined through courses that accommodate a more diverse student body and facilitate the task-orientation demands of academic teaching and learning. Kift (2009) expands these views to include an integrated, intentional, supportive and inclusive curriculum not only as a means of supporting LSES students, but as a way of developing the "higher level and critical thinking skills" of all students (p3).

Until recent years, individual differences in cultural capital and know-how have not been "equalised", but rather "exacerbated" in the tertiary environment (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). While students entering university come with varying amounts of cultural capital, Bourdieu argues that the culturally endowed student from a dominant-culture background is better equipped with cultural and social resources built over a lifetime to interpret "existing structures and expectations"

of the academic environment, and to resolve problems as they arise (Devlin 2011, p6). In contrast, students from an LSES background may not have any such toolbox of skills; for these students, the university culture may be "incongruous with the cultures with which they are familiar and comfortable" (p7).

Factors believed to underpin student transition to and retention in higher education include: sufficient preparation to make the transition to higher education; support once study begins; a curriculum that is designed and delivered to promote success for all students; formal and informal extra-curricular activities that support students and promote engagement; and learning experiences that are coordinated and managed to promote success (Thomas 2009). Rather than simply "incorporating remedial support within existing teaching programs" to cater for diverse student populations, Northedge (2003) proposes an emphasis on the socio-cultural aspects of teaching and learning in a bid to promote social and academic inclusion for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. To do this, Lawrence (2005) reports a need for reconceptualisation of the university culture to one that encompasses "a multiplicity of sub-cultures, each with its own discourse or literacy" that requires perseverance and mastery on the part of the student to "achieve this engagement" (p243). An essential skill needed for integration and educational equity, says Wortham (2006), is for academics to develop a positive classroom culture towards diversity and a willingness to engage in open discussions about difference (Rissman 2007). Lawrence recommends that universities encourage staff to actively pursue reflective, socio-cultural and critical practices with students to help them realise and acknowledge the existence of multiple assumptions, values and beliefs within diverse populations, all equally significant and valid to the owner, but each having potential to cause incongruence between members of the dominant culture and students from LSES backgrounds.

Major Barriers to Participation

Over the past 20 years, the number of university students considered to be from LSES backgrounds has remained at 15%, possibly due to limited funding and a lack of incentives for universities to accept enrolments from members of educationally disadvantaged groups (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009, p12). Major barriers to participation in higher education may include an individual's "previous educational attainment, lack of awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education which results in little ambition to participate, a need for financial assistance, and provision of personal and academic support once enrolled" (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009, p13). Research by Billingham (2009) that investigated barriers to higher education in the United Kingdom found that besides situational and dispositional barriers, there was a need to focus on changes to "institutional inflexibility" and the role that institutions play in creating and "perpetuating inequalities" (Tett 2004, p252). Social identity and academic learning are inextricably linked, and a high prevalence of students from the dominant culture "can pose a threat to low socioeconomic status individuals" thus creating a barrier to entry and educational achievement (Ramburuth & Hartel 2010, p154).

Contributing reasons why students leave higher education are: lack of preparation for higher education; a poor match between the institution and course selected; previous academic experiences; inability to make friends and interact socially; personal circumstances; and financial issues. Adding to the "academic culture shock" are the complexities of learning and living, expectations placed on students, new teaching and learning, learner autonomy, self-direction and interacting with teaching staff (Thomas 2009).

Federal Government Reform Targets

Federal Government targets to address widening participation include:

1. By 2015, to raise the number of young people achieving Year 12 or equivalent qualification to 90% retention rate;
2. By 2020, to increase the number of low socio-economic students enrolled in higher education from 15% over the last two decades to 20%;
3. By 2020, to halve the number of 20- to 64-year-old Australians without a Certificate III qualification;
4. By 2020, to halve the gap of Indigenous students attaining Year 12 or equivalent; and
5. By 2025, to increase overall participation of 25- to 34-year-old Australians in higher education to 40% (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009, p13).

To achieve these targets, the Australian government proposes to invest $437 million over four years to encourage tertiary institutions to expand their leadership role by providing higher education to all groups in society, thus increasing participation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Universities will also need to transform first-year programs "which assume the particular background and cultural capital of the high and middle SES students they mostly recruit" to ones that cater for a more diverse student population (Moodie 2009).

This paper reports on a collaborative Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) program that is addressing the second of the Federal Government targets. While the term "disadvantaged", as discussed above, includes a wide range of student backgrounds, the key focus of this paper is on students from LSES backgrounds. It is noted, however, that this is yet another "umbrella" grouping that is likely to include Indigenous and Pacific Islander students, as well as those from itinerant families and others who may be marginalised by traditional education provision. The program reported here included students from this range of backgrounds and cultures.

Australian Government Priorities to Widen Participation

Widening participation has been defined as "increasing access to learning and providing opportunities for success to a much wider cross-section of the population than now" (Kennedy 1997, p15). To achieve this reform, the Australian government proposes to work in partnership with each university, school and vocational education or training provider to develop clear and consistent targets that can break down barriers to a full representation of students from disadvantaged groups in higher education. These will be defined in the institution's "mission-based compact" (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009, p48), and reaching government targets will generate reward payments to universities and institutions. According to Thomas (2001), there can be no explicit plan or formula to address widening participation gaps because the context in which policy and practice occur is neither uniform nor static. Action to address the issues of low enrolment must be both local and contingent.

The Review of Australian Higher Education (2008) states that aspiration to attend university should be "firmly on the 'radar screen' of potential higher education participants while they are still at school" (p40). Therefore universities are encouraged to develop "strong two-way relationships" (p42) with schools and families of under-represented students, to identify early in their schooling those students with academic potential, and to work with them through sophisticated pre-enrolment strategies. An essential aspect of this partnership would be to support

these students in continuing their education to gain entry to university and to continue to support them once enrolled to ensure retention.

To improve completion, progress and retention rates in universities, new student-centred Federal Government funding arrangements will provide incentives for universities to step up enrolment of LSES students and provide greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services. A more diverse student population will also require a broader range of student services and amenities to cater for health, cultural and social activities. In a reversal of long-standing Federal Government policy, from 2012 new legislation will allow, higher-education providers to charge a fee for non-academic services and amenities to students such as sporting and gym activities, recreational activities, employment and career advice, child care, financial advice and food services. Moreover, as part of its emphasis on helping students from LSES backgrounds, the Australian Parliament passed legislative reforms in November 2011 to make more students eligible for income support. The parental income test for financially independent young people has also been increased, and all higher education students who receive student income support will receive a Student Start-up Scholarship of $2050 per annum to assist with costs (http://www.deewr.gov.au/highereducation/programs/youthallowance/pages/rsisroverview.aspx; http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Pages/TransformingAustraliasHESystem.aspx).

The data reported in this paper demonstrate that the support factors identified in the Federal Government's report can, when combined with awareness and capacity-building initiatives, produce worthwhile results (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009, pp8-14). The program reported here is one example of how a two-way relationship, or "joint venture" (Devlin 2011, p8), has provided greater opportunities for students in an LSES community in a way that actively engages with the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (DEEWR 2011). The program's participation component seeks to increase participation of students from LSES backgrounds and support retention and success, while the partnership element seeks to build aspiration and capacity in an effort to bridge the socio-cultural incongruities that confront such students (Devlin 2011, p8).

While it is acknowledged that the evaluation of the QUTeach program was designed to assess its potential value as a long-term project, the data suggest that key elements of the program offer a model that promises success in the immediate term for both individual and cultural change. In addition, student enrolment and progression to university provide evidence of the effectiveness of the collaboration and commitment of the university and State Department of Education and Training.

The authors of this paper believe that, although the data presented here were collected only during the early stages of the program, the outcomes to that stage show encouraging trends. The paper reports on data from one cohort of 26 students (five boys and 21 girls), a sample of seven parents, four school staff and three university staff. The reported data, gathered in focus-group interviews and individual interviews, illustrate the perceived success and benefits of the program.   Statistics on student progression to university provide further evidence to support the investment in and extension of this program.

QUTeach@Redcliffe

The program described in this paper has been developed to address the needs of, and inspire higher aspirations in, a group of young people who traditionally do not see university as a possible pathway for the future. The program has been developed collaboratively with teachers and school

principals to ensure that students are well supported in their university studies in a local school environment. In other words, the university comes to them. Resources are procured to ensure that students who have financial difficulties are not disadvantaged. Students as a cohort travel a number of times each year to the university and participate in broader academic life on campus. They receive information about study scholarships, accommodation and travel to university and are supported in all aspects of their enrolment at university.

For some years, the university has offered first-year education subjects to Year 12 school students (generally about 17 years of age) through the START QUT program: students attend on-campus lectures with full-time first-year undergraduate students. However, that program does not specifically target students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and relies on participants having the financial means and availability to travel to the university campus. By contrast, the QUTeach@Redcliffe program was developed in partnership with staff from the Redcliffe State High School with the aim of taking the university to the community. A combination of innovative ideas and planning from the university and school staff, concern for students who face barriers to university from social, racial or financial disadvantage and the university's need to address its equity and social-justice obligations were transformed into a plan of action. QUTeach@Redcliffe (hereafter, 'QUTeach') is now a component of the START QUT program. Both programs enable secondary-school students to access university subjects; however, QUTeach is distinctly innovative for a number of reasons.

QUTeach is an equity-focused initiative first introduced to Year 11 students (mostly aged 16 years) attending the Bays Cluster of State High Schools in South-East Queensland: Redcliffe, Clontarf Beach, Deception Bay and North Lakes. This cluster is situated in and around bayside suburbs in the traditionally low-SES Redcliffe Peninsula, about 40km (25 miles) north of the Queensland state capital, Brisbane. According to the Broad Socio-Economic Grouping (BSEG) supplied by the Performance Monitoring and Reporting Branch of Queensland's Department of Education and Training (DET), Redcliffe State High School is classified as a "medium-low" SES school. QUTeach responds to a 2009 Australian Bureau of Statistics Education and Work Report finding that only 18.5% of Queenslanders aged 15 to 64 years had a university degree, compared with 23% in the same age bracket nationwide (p23). More specifically, the QUTeach program was developed to address the low percentage of student destinations to university from Redcliffe State High School and its cluster partner schools. The 2009 Next Step Survey, conducted six months after 129 Redcliffe State High School students completed Year 12 with a Senior Statement in 2008, reported that only 28.2% of Year 12 students went to university, compared to 35.1% of Year 12 graduates state-wide (http://www.redcliffshs.eq.edu.au/RSHS/Welcome_files/Redcliffe%20SHS%202008%20Destination%20Survey.pdf; http://education.qld.gov.au/nextstep/pdfs/2009pdfs/nextstep09.pdf , p16). The 2009 result was, however, a vast improvement on the school's 2008 tertiary progression rate of 21% (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2010). The other secondary schools in the cluster show university as a destination for only 19% of Clontarf Beach State High School's 2008 graduates, while Deception Bay reported only 13% that year. The recently established North Lakes College did not have a Year 12 cohort at that time (ACARA, 2010).

From its inception in mid-2008, QUTeach offered first-year pre-service teacher education units (or subjects) to Year 11 students, with the Redcliffe State High School campus as the site of program delivery. The program, and the choice of teaching-related units, was originally based on informal discussions in which the Redclffe school principal expressed the need for the local area to "grow our own teachers". Negotiations resulted in a Memorandum of Understanding stipulating that QUTeach is joint-funded by QUT's Faculty of Education and the Queensland DET. The units are

coordinated by QUT academic staff who are also involved in presenting lectures on the school site, while the tutors in the university units are registered teachers employed by DET and approved as sessional staff by QUT. The program is run after school two days a week during the school term. The subjects studied across the two years of the program are foundation units common to the early-childhood, primary and secondary strands of QUT's Bachelor of Education course:

- Semester 1: EDB006 - Learning Networks
- Semester 2: EDB007 - Cultural Studies: Indigenous Education
- Semester 3: EDB002 - Teaching and Learning Studies 2: Developmental Psychology
- Semester 4: EDB001 - Teaching and Learning Studies 1: Teaching in New Times

Eligibility criteria for acceptance into the program require students to gain a "Sound" or "B" in English, approval from the School Principal and approval from a parent or guardian. Students who successfully complete two of the course units are guaranteed a place at QUT at the end of Year 12, with no requirement for the normal tertiary entrance qualification, known in Queensland as an Overall Position (OP) score. Successful QUTeach students are also eligible for up to four credit points towards their Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) and credit for each unit passed, giving them an entire semester's head start to the tertiary course. Benefits for students are multifaceted: they include a guaranteed place in a degree course at QUT; supported transition from high school to university; introduction to those QUT staff who deliver lectures at Redcliffe State High School; and the waiving of university fees for units studied in the QUTeach program. The student receives all the privileges of on-campus university students: a student ID card, access to university library facilities and support; access to electronic databases; student email; the Blackboard web-based learning system; and an academic statement at the end of each semester. Email enhances tutor-student contact, and students find the features included in the Blackboard site extremely helpful to their university and high-school work requirements. Adding to these benefits, university librarians, prompted by the high-school students' underuse of electronic databases for literature searches, now provide an initiation course for QUTeach students.

To ensure students receive optimum opportunity to succeed, the program has been developed to provide extensive support on the high-school campus. Unlike other head-start courses, small class sizes (approximately 25) allow students to have support from peers as well as teachers. Twenty-five Year 11 students were enrolled for the initial mid-2008 start of QUTeach, and the program was extended to a second cohort of Year 11 students from Semester 1, 2009. During 2009, twenty Year 11 and 17 Year 12 students progressed through the course, with all but two of the Year 12s successfully completing their studies. A fifth school joined the cluster at the start of 2010, and a further intake of Year 11 students commenced the course. The program's first 15 graduates commenced full-time tertiary study in 2010 with the equivalent of one full semester of study already behind them; university fees for each unit completed through the program were covered with a START QUT Scholarship.

Method

The research is informed by a constructionist perspective, "… the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty 1998, p42). In addition, there is a socio-cultural dimension to these constructions. People are born into cultures that provide them with meaning for their world. These meanings, informed by others around them, shape their thinking and

behaviour throughout their lives (Crotty 1998). The adoption of a social-constructionist approach in the current project shaped the development of the research question, which is designed to gather different perspectives from students, parents and staff about how they perceive the QUTeach Program. Ideally, perspectives from individuals and groups are gathered in focus-group interviews and individual interviews so people have an opportunity to share their own views and be informed by the social groups' ideas.

The research was conducted August-October 2009, the aim being to collect data to address two research questions: How do students, parents and staff describe the QUTeach program?; and, Do students, parents and staff perceive that the program is effective in increasing LSES student enrolment in higher education? The perspectives of students and parents were captured in the context of the school environment, where the program was delivered.

The theory underpinning selection of this participant group adheres to a belief that teachers and parents significantly contribute to the quality of a student's school experiences. Thomas and Slack (1999a) also note that parents are "very influential on the decisions young people make about future education and careers" (p142). A framework that built ethical routines into the data-collection process was developed. This ensured careful communication sequencing, respect for the school hierarchy, adherence to school protocols and meticulous attention to all anonymity and confidentiality issues. An introductory letter outlined the purpose of data collection, description of the process, risks involved and how further information could be obtained. A parent or guardian was required to sign Student Consent Forms prior to the conduct of interviews.

Participants

Without exception, parents and students were keen to be interviewed. From the 20 Year 11 and 17 Year 12 students who progressed through QUTeach in 2009, 14 Year 11 (n = three boys, 11 girls) and 12 Year 12 students (n = two boys, 10 girls) took part in focus-group interviews. Students were interviewed in the school's library meeting room during and after school in groups of four to six. Back-to-back group interviews were organised to suit parent pick-up arrangements. A total of 14 interviews were conducted for the project: seven individual interviews with staff, six focus-group interviews with students and one focus-group interview with seven parents. Each student focus group comprised four to six students.

Data Collection

Table 1 lists the interview questions for each group of participants.

Table 1: Interview Questions

Stakeholder/s	Subtopics	Questions
Students	Introduction to QUTeach	Was enough information provided?
	Program in action	How did you find the mode of delivery?
		Was the work different to that expected?
		Was assignment information clear?
		Were assignments manageable?
		Could you easily navigate Blackboard?
		At what site was the program delivery?
	Reflective comments	Would you have applied to do education units without QUTeach?
		Has this introduction helped you decide on a future course?
		Do you know more about university now than when you started QUTeach?
		How do you manage the school/work/family balance?
	Support needs at university	What might be your support needs once enrolled in university?
	Issues	Any issues with workload/stress/risk of dropping out?
Parents	Introduction to QUTeach	Was enough information provided?
		What features of the program interested you?
	Program in action	How has the program developed?
		How did your child cope with level of understanding and written work required?
		How much help could you give your child?
	Issues	Are there any issues you would like to raise?
	Improvements	How can the program be improved?

Semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews were chosen to identify the "program's strengths, weaknesses and needed improvements" by providing details from multiple perspectives (Patton 2002, p388). Given the plan to get high-quality data in a timely and cost-effective manner, focus groups where individuals could ponder their own views in the light of others' had potential to improve quality. An interview guide kept interviews focused and allowed the same basic lines of inquiry to be pursued with each group (Burns 2000). A flexible approach to wording was adapted to suit respondent age and status (Patton 2002).

At the start of interviews, participants received an explanation of the project purpose, benefits and risk-protection procedures; their opportunity to interrupt ask questions and ask for clarification; and their freedom to withdraw at any time without question. In recognition of sensitive family circumstances, the interviewer offered a follow-up interview to any individual who wished to make contact. Contact details were placed on the interview table. Field notes were recorded after individual interviews; in the case of back-to-back focus-group interviews, field notes were logged at the end of the interview block. The interviewer carefully progressed from questions relating to what respondents "knew" to those designed to elicit personal reflection. Interviews were audio-

recorded, and each student and parent received a verbatim transcript of the interview for their confirmation, correction or extension.

Data Analysis

Data analysis demanded "intellectual rigor and a great deal of hard, thoughtful work" (Patton 1987, p146). An *issue* was viewed as any statement or focus about which reasonable persons may agree or disagree, any point of contention (Guba & Lincoln 1981, pp34-5). Each cycle through the data led to deeper understanding, and descriptions contributed to the identification of strengths and issues (Cresswell 2002). Qualitative analysis techniques were employed, such as coding, organising and delineating data according to parent, student and year-level. To provide anonymity and the facility to track direct quotations back to their original source, a coding system (Table 2) was developed. On the return of transcripts, all personal names were de-identified to protect confidentiality and identity. To circumvent layers of personal understanding during the write-up, direct quotations from individual accounts were included in the narrative. Comments were considered representative of the specific group given the inherent opportunity for moderation in a focus-group context. This paper includes comments offered by students who participated in six focus-group interviews, and one group of seven parents. Comments and insights from school and university staff relevant to this paper are also included.

Table 2: Coding System

DET High School Principal	DETHSP
DET Program Coordinator	DETPC
QUT Program Coordinator	QUTPC
QUT Lecturer 1	QUTL-i
QUT Lecturer 2	QUTL-ii
Teachers – DET Teacher 1 DET Teacher 2	 DETT-i DETT-ii
Parent Focus Group	PFG (i-vii)
Focus Groups – Focus Group Year 11-1 Focus Group Year 11-2 Focus Group Year 11-3 Focus Group Year 12-1 Focus Group Year 12-2 Focus Group Year 12-3	 FG11-i FG11-ii FG11-iii FG12-i FG12-ii FG12-iii

Results

Discussion of results will be organised under themes that align with the research questions for the project:

1. How do students, parents and staff describe the QUTeach@Redcliffe program?
2. Do students, parents and staff perceive that the program is effective in increasing LSES student enrolment in higher education?

This section reports issues for university and school staff in delivering university subjects on a high-school campus 33 kilometres from the university campus, as well as student and parent perspectives of the school-university partnership venture. Also discussed is effectiveness of the QUTeach initiative in increasing enrolment of LSES students in higher education, from the viewpoints of university and school staff, students and parents. Attention is drawn to the benefits of university learning at school and visits to the university campus for students from LSES backgrounds in their transition from school to a higher-education environment. Reciprocal benefits of the venture for school and university and the life-changing impact of QUTeach on parents' and students' lives are reported.

University Staff Perspectives

From a university perspective, setting up the program involved logistical issues such as the teaching team's availability to deliver lectures at Redcliffe; the facilitation of tutorials; the moderation process; preparing the school coordinator to deliver a university unit; and whether this person would become part of the university teaching team (QUTPC; QUTL-i). In the first semester of operation, the university program coordinator and senior lecturers made regular school visits to reinforce their commitment to support Redcliffe students and tutors.

School Staff Perspectives

The school principal said faculty and lecturer support was "brilliant" and "fantastic". "We have a very good relationship with QUT … the support that we've got from QUT with the lecturers is great" (DETHSP). Initially, parents were reluctant to believe that a "wonderful" school-university partnership could develop, and they needed encouragement to come on board and be confident that students could do the work (DETHSP).

Student Perspectives

All student groups expressed appreciation for the QUTeach opportunity. Without QUTeach, some students would not have considered university and others would not have applied to do education units due to pre-interest in other courses or gaining the "right" OP (FG12-ii). One Year 12 student wanted to be a teacher after a gap year but when QUTeach was offered, "it was like I want to be a teacher. This is the perfect thing for me" (FG12-iii). Guaranteed entry to QUT attracted one student and another felt the education units would contribute to her ambition of "being a music teacher" (FG12-iii).

When asked if QUTeach helped students decide on a future course, a range of Year 11 student responses were offered, such as: the course gave immediate entry to university (FG11-i); it provided back-up if "I totally flunked the OP" (FG11-i); credit from units "gives you a six-month break"; and "the course creates a focus on QUT rather than other universities" (FG11-i; FG11-ii; FG11:iii). For students who had already decided on a teaching career, the course "just cemented it" (FG11-ii). When perusing post-QUTeach options, one student discovered choices she had "never even thought about but now I think I might want to do" (FG12-i). Another student said if he had not done the course, he would not be attending university because of senior subject choices that limited his options (FG11-ii). All Year 12 students, except one, agreed that QUTeach had helped them to decide on a future course; the remaining student, although uncertain about university, conceded that the program "has kind of put uni as a doorway instead of closing it completely" (FG12-iii). For one student not planning on going to university, QUTeach "showed

me that it wasn't such a big thing and it kind of helped me think 'maybe I do want to go to university now'" (FG12-iii).

Students acknowledged more familiarity with university at the completion of the project than at the outset, and excursions to the university gave them a taste of what life will be like after completing school (FG12-iii). Engagement with QUTeach units introduced them to university learning, and emails kept students up to date with on-campus happenings (FG12-i). Some concerns about orientation, workload and assignments were overcome. On-campus lectures helped orient students to the socio-cultural aspects of teaching and learning and the rules and task-demands of the university environment (Northedge 2003). Workload was an issue for some, and members of one group said their stress was shared "with other students" (FG12-ii). One student "stopped doing OP subjects halfway through QUTeach" and said "you know you have that extra bit to do" (FG12-ii). Another student found the workload "made me sort of work harder ... it inspires you a bit" (FG12-i). Year 11 students who undertook OP subjects and QUTeach admitted that school was their priority (FG11-i), but expressed concern about the Year 12 workload. Concerns about assignments were addressed by the class tutor, who "unpacked" criteria and simplified the language to ensure students understood "before she stops helping us" (FG12-iii). Discussion of their capacity to balance school, work, family and QUT units drew a range of responses, and the stresses and struggles experienced by some were shared with fellow students. For a Year 12 group, QUTeach inspired members to work harder and manage their time better (FG12-ii). A spokesperson for one Year 11 group offered the following comments:

> It is such a good opportunity … it is hard but if I could do it again, like, I would. You can't do something without having the consequences that go with it. Our workload is our consequence but it is really good. It is worth it in the end. No matter what happens or what we do, it is worth it. You just have to think about the positives instead of the negatives. We save all this money because it is kind of a scholarship or whatever it is, and we get a little bit of time off our degree, which will help us in our first few years. It will look better saying that we started uni in Year 11. We're actually wanting and committed to do this even when we were younger. We're totally, completely sure about it (FG11-ii).

When the school-university transition was raised, students recognised that friendships established through QUTeach made them feel more comfortable and would likely help in this regard (FG12-i; FG12-ii). At the start of QUTeach, one Year 12 group said that uncertainty about making new friends was "really worrying" … now "we're all friends" and those "connections get greater" (FG12-iii).

Parent Perspectives

Features of QUTeach that interested parents were cost and time savings off the full-time course, opportunity for their child to "get a taste" (PFG-i) of university learning, which could avert a "first-year dropout" (PFG-iii), and acceptance into QUT on completion; "not having a gap year is a plus" (PFG-v). Parents agreed unanimously that sufficient information about the program was provided beforehand, and the Information Night was informative and "very thorough" (PFG-vi). There was undisputed support for the program's development over time: comments included, "well, I think it has gone well" (PFG-iii), "brilliant" (PFG-vii) and "there haven't been any problems at all" (PFG-11).

University Learning at School

Course delivery at school was viewed positively because "the biggest challenge for our students is distance, timetabling and organisation", said teachers (DETP; T-I; T-ii). Student visits to the university campuses were also considered very important, ensuring that students gained confidence in considering university as a future pathway. "We see a lot of value in the blended experience and wouldn't want to tip it all one way or the other" (DETPC). Links with Caboolture and Kelvin Grove campuses were kept open because students were geographically "between the two", and might wish to attend either campus depending on their choice of course after graduating from QUTeach (DETPC). Students agreed that school-based delivery was convenient, less intimidating, comfortable, much easier transport-wise (FG12-ii), less confronting and more interactive, although one Year 11 student thought going to university would be "more fun" (FG11-i). Lectures were more like tutorials, where students could discuss things, chat, ask questions and receive "one-on-one" help from the tutor, said a Year 12 student (FG12-i). Students also realised that their work was being marked as a university assignment and "they know that they are real students, not getting the easy way", said the high-school principal (DETHSP). Access to QUT library information 24 hours a day "blew students away". The support and freedom to contact the university coordinator and teachers with questions and rough drafts "makes them feel comfortable, and it makes them think that this is all possible – and a lot of our kids haven't had that" (DETHSP).

On-Campus Visits

On-campus trips are organised through the year so that students gain experience sitting an on-campus examination and attending lectures (QUTPC). Travel training from Redcliffe to the university appeared to change views from "it's too hard to get to, I'm not even going to try" to "well, I'll make the effort. I know I can get there because we've been there", according to the high-school principal (DETHSP).

On-campus visits were applauded by parents and enjoyed by students; the first on-campus examination was an "eye-opener", said parents (PFG). Visits taught the students essential knowledge about the culture of the university, public-transport access and university library navigation and borrowing processes. Visits also oriented students to the university environment, and helped to allay fears and confirm their university status. Year 11s felt elated to be part of the university: "We saw big groups sitting on the ground chilling and you're just like 'that is so cool'" (FG11-i).

Benefits for Parents and Students

Parents of participating students claimed that the program has resulted in increased pride and optimism for their children, while it has also provided the opportunity to save money, as the program covered the costs of textbooks as well as fees, and transport costs, if any, were negligible (PFG). Year 11s viewed the program as "a good opportunity … worth it in the end … we save all this money … we get a bit of time off [our] degree" (FG11-ii). The program allayed fears about university and would also help the school-university transition (FG11-iii). For Year 12s, the program was achievable, "but it is quite challenging" (FG12-iii). It created confidence that university was now a possibility, opened doors to other post-school options, helped with course selection, increased endurance and commitment and inspired students to work harder and manage their time better (12-iii; 12-i). Visits to the university and lecture attendance helped familiarise students with "existing structures and expectations" (Devlin 2011, p6) and the "multiplicity of

sub-cultures" that co-exist within a university environment (Lawrence 2005, p243). Enhanced results across the board with OP subjects as well as excellent performance in QUTeach were reported (DETPC). Additionally, one unit's strong focus on academic writing, referencing and paraphrasing developed skills that had direct benefits for school subjects (DETPC; DETT-ii).

All students found that course delivery at the school site offered easy access. It was reported as being familiar territory, less confronting and more interactive (FG11-ii; FG12-i; FG12-ii). All students valued the friendships that had been made and those that had become stronger through the course (FG12-iii). Parents expressed gratitude for the opportunity offered to their children to get a taste of university. Pragmatic issues such as saving money, guaranteed entrance to QUT (on completion of QUTeach with no gap year) and quicker course progression were benefits identified by students and parents (PFG).

An obvious benefit from involvement with the QUTeach program was students' personal development. Student responses to reflective questions displayed unexpected levels of maturity and emotional resilience, and challenging concepts forced them to question assumptions that underpinned their identity, thus deepening intuition and reflective-thinking skills. Parents, lecturers and teachers agreed that students "are really stepping up, opening their eyes and being critical about their views … and some of them are a bit scared or surprised with what they see", reported the school program coordinator (DETPC). The students' expressions of gratitude for the QUTeach opportunity in the face of a higher-level workload, extra stress from commitment and constraints on social life and casual income, attest to this. As well, students' ability to reflect on unit content, and to link it with existing knowledge and to their own lives, was "quite exciting"; from that perspective, they were no different to first-year on-campus students (QUTPC). Such levels of critical and reflective thinking provide evidence of the integrated, intentional, supportive and inclusive curriculum recommended by Kift (2009), and they endorse school and university staff's active encouragement of socio-cultural and critical practices to help minimise socio-cultural incongruence once on campus (Lawrence 2005). Findings demonstrate multifaceted benefits for all stakeholders, whether academic, personal, professional, financial or simply a boost to parents' pride and optimism for their child.

Benefits for the School and the University

Not only the students have benefitted, but also the school staff involved in the program, who receive training and experience in delivering, assessing and moderating university units. Tutors also gained insight into university processes (DETPC; DETT-i; DETT-ii). School staff initially found assessment and moderation a "bit of a mystery", although both became easier with practice, and meetings with a unit coordinator always provided the information they needed to be effective (DETPC).

There have been reciprocal benefits for the University, as academic staff are kept informed about school and classroom operations. Feedback has been useful as staff learn how emerging technologies are used with school students (QUTL-ii). Furthermore, updated knowledge of school operations and student needs have assisted in the grounding of the faculty's education units (QUTL-i; QUTL-ii).

The principal of the host school expressed great satisfaction with the positive effect that QUTeach has had on her school to date. During a visit to the school, the editor of the local newspaper referred to QUTeach as being "an awesome program", while parents who attended school meetings believed that the university status of QUTeach provides students with "a foot in the

door" (HSP). As knowledge of the program and the success of the student participants disseminated through the school, aspirations for university that had previously been poor were raised among the general student population, as reflected in tertiary-progression statistics (Table 3).

Table 3: Progression to University

School	2009	2010
Redcliffe SHS	21%	31%
Clontarf SHS	19%	27%
Deception Bay SHS	13%	20%
North Lakes College	NA	32%

Source: ACARA (2010).

Many students who had "never thought of going to university" were now involved with the program; for many of these, "QUT is their university of preference because they are familiar with it" (DETHSP). The principal said parents were "rapt" that their child was an enrolled university student, and parents demonstrated increased optimism for their child's future (DETHSP; PFG). Students from partner schools whose families had "never had anyone go to university" now see it as a real possibility: "It is life-changing for some of them and their families", said the school principal (DETHSP), a change that strongly resonates with the key Federal Government priority to widen participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report, 2009). One school-based tutor echoed the principal's approval of the QUTeach program, stating that "it's probably exceeded my expectations … it's been very, very, very positive" (DETT-i).

Improvements to the Program

The research led to a number of potential areas for improvement and development. One of these relates to the short-term nature of the Memoranda of Understanding, covering a three-year time period, and the temporary nature of the staffing allocation from DET. As mentioned by the Redcliffe SHS principal, a permanent allocation of staff would improve the school's ability to deliver QUTeach by ensuring that the expertise developed by the school-based tutors was maintained within the program. Increased interaction between the school and University staff was also mentioned by a number of interviewees as an area for development, particularly between program students and others enrolled in the units studied. It was claimed that this would help expand the school students' knowledge of university life and re-affirm their status as university students.

Discussion and Conclusion

Major barriers to participation in higher education may include an individual's "previous educational attainment, lack of awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education which results in little ambition to participate, a need for financial assistance, and provision of personal and academic support once enrolled" (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009, p13). The QUTeach program is an example of how one university has considered an innovative approach to these barriers by extending its education degree courses to high-school students in disadvantaged areas, thus taking university to the community and guaranteeing entry to the university's undergraduate courses for successful QUTeach graduates. Furthermore, the

community in this case is LSES, thus meeting the challenges posed by Tett (2004) of institutional inflexibility and Moodie (2009) of transforming first-year programs to meet the needs of under-represented groups. One of the principal innovations of the program has been to introduce first-year university subjects to students in Year 11. Promotional activities commence from the middle of Year 10 in the partner high schools, increasing awareness of not only the program itself, but the benefits that can flow from a university education. Although a basic level of ability in English is a requirement for admission to the program, the usual competitive tertiary entrance system does not apply. Students who have struggled somewhat in the mainstream schooling environment may, therefore, have an opportunity to find that the different ways of teaching and learning offered by QUTeach are more engaging for them. For example, while a number of students reported that the language and sentence structures used in the textbooks and assessment criteria to be more technical and more formal than they were used to at school, they found that the time taken by the tutor to help them deconstruct the meaning led fairly rapidly to improved understanding. They also found some of the concepts of lectures and texts confronting, but generally agreed that this led them to deeper and more critical thinking.

The students interviewed reported more-personal stresses and struggles, however, relating mainly to the pressures of time and other commitments. Coming from LSES backgrounds, many of the program's students, more than the average high school student, were involved in part-time work, with middle- to high-achievers being more likely to be employed (Robinson 1996). The "student-worker phenomenon" (Munro 2011, p116) has seen an increase in after-school, part-time work over the past two decades, with around 70% of students in Years 10 and above employed (Billett & Ovens, 2007). One Year 12 student replaced part-time work with QUTeach, one student worked on weekends and another spoke of extra-curricular activities that consumed four evenings out of five: "I would say it is achievable but it is quite challenging".

A number of QUTeach students reported being employed for up to 20 hours a week; their capacity to balance this with regular schoolwork and sport and cultural activities was often strained by the requirements of the program. At times, parents willingly supported their children by sacrificing their children's contribution to the family income. The Australian government has acknowledged the recommendations of the Bradley Review of Australia's Higher Education sector (2008), with an emphasis on helping students from LSES backgrounds, although increased financial support has focussed principally on tertiary rather than secondary students. Some recognition of the QUTeach program's negative impact on student finances has been shown through the introduction of a small number of means-tested scholarships. With program costs shared between the University and the Department of Education, a significant proportion of other financial barriers are removed. Not only are tuition fees waived by the University, but textbooks are provided on loan to each student through the generosity of the publisher. Delivering the course at the school campus means that the students are not required to travel to the university campus, thereby reducing travel costs as well as limiting the demands on the time of students who may need part-time work to help support their families.

QUTeach is helping to meet the Australian government's higher-education reform aim to improve "national productivity and performance as a knowledge based economy", which includes encouraging more students to choose careers in teaching (http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Documents/TransformingAusHigherED.pdf, p9). As noted above, however, while the units offered through QUTeach are core QUT Bachelor of Education requirements, the guarantee of entry to QUT for successful graduates covers a wide range of courses from across the university. The focus on teaching, though, does tend to result in the general gender breakdown in that career being reflected among the program's participants. Of

the 25 students who commenced QUTeach in 2008, for example, only 20% were male, while the 2009 intake included only four males. This is fairly close to the ratio of male to female students participating in the University's Bachelor of Education in 2010, which saw approximately 22% males enrolled, the majority of whom (65%) were in the secondary-education strand. While achieving gender balance in QUTeach appears very unlikely, improving the ratio is an aspect of the program that needs to be addressed in the promotional and recruitment stages.

From all student and parent accounts, the QUTeach initiative has made inroads into disadvantage, whether generational, social, cultural or financial. Without exception, students and parents viewed the program as an opportunity for students to experience university learning and facilitate a pathway to university education. The opportunity to build university-specific "know-how" (Collier & Morgan, 2009) was seen as a valuable aspect of the program and, to some extent, filled the gap in cultural capital and should reduce "academic culture shock" (Thomas 2009). Academic and personal support are taken care of through the in-school presence of well-trained tutors and a visit to the university campus to increase the sense of belonging and get a feeling of being a real university student.

At the outset, some parents were pessimistic that a school-university partnership could work, despite the students' enthusiasm to be involved. All parents interviewed, however, were satisfied with their children becoming enrolled university students. Out of the 25 students enrolled in the original 2008 intake, QUTeach boasted a 60% success rate, with 15 Year 12 students graduating in October 2009 with guaranteed entry to QUT. For a pilot program, such results are very good. This initial positive result was exceeded by the second (2009) cohort of 25 Year 11 students: 76% (19) of this group graduated at the end of 2010, of whom 16 chose to continue to full-time university study. Further research, to take place in 2011/12, will evaluate the progress of those students who maintained their enrolment in the university's Bachelor of Education courses on a full-time basis following their graduation from QUTeach at the end of Year 12. This research will also test the accuracy of students' perceptions, reported in this paper, that they felt well-prepared for university through the knowledge gained from the course, interactions with university personnel, visits to the university's campuses and exposure to the culture and processes of higher education.

This equity and social-justice initiative aims to address barriers faced by students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to experience and benefit from university learning. It has forerun a Federal Government ambition to increase the participation of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds in undergraduate level study to 20% by 2020. The QUTeach program is an excellent starting point. It offers opportunity to a wider and more diverse range of students because it taps into the state high school population, with a focus on communities that do not have a strong record of tertiary destination.

The data reported in this paper show that the program has been successful not only in building individual capacity of students but in helping to change the cultures of the participating schools, demonstrated by the increase in pride and optimism in the schools' communities as well as increased tertiary aspiration, as noted by the Redcliffe school principal. In monetary terms, this change to school cultures represents the most worthwhile return for the University's financial outlay in staff time and the loss of Higher Education Contribution Scheme income. Reinforcing the positive outcomes for those involved in the program was the granting of a $50,000 State finalist prize in the National Australia Bank "Schools First" awards in 2009. This has been followed in 2010 with the program winning the RemServe Showcase Award for Excellence in Innovation by recognising and rewarding the excellent learning outcomes of students at Redcliffe State High School (http://education.qld.gov.au/community/events/showcase/2010/north-

coast.html). These awards represent external assessments of QUTeach and help send a strong message to communities that their children's schools are providing a strong and meaningful curriculum. It is hoped that this message will assist in raising the tertiary aspirations of younger children in the community because it is beneficial for early outreach to focus on upper primary students, as early as Year 6, instead of concentrating on students in Years 11 and 12 after subject choices have been made (Gale 2009).

We are aware that, while much of the rationale relating to limited tertiary access considers students' social and economic circumstances, there is also research suggesting that many disadvantaged students find the school curriculum they are offered to be distancing, leading to disengagement (Levin 2000; McInerney & McInerney 2006; Smyth 2005). Secondary-school curricula also need to promote student aspiration and not restrict the imagined futures of students in educationally disadvantaged communities (Smyth 2005). Such educational experience has major implications for school completion and subsequent tertiary aspiration.

The program has provided an opportunity for participating schools to add value to their curriculum offerings: while students and parents learn more about university study, standards and processes and are more able to see the educational and social benefits. The program has potential to garner interest and support from other school communities whose members face barriers to Australia's higher-education system. Replication in areas known to have high populations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds appears to be an imperative given the Federal Government agenda to increase enrolment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in undergraduate study to 20% by 2020. If they are to succeed, such students will require higher levels of support than their peers in the form of financial assistance, greater academic support, mentoring and counselling (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System Report 2009, p14).

As universities welcome a broader range of students, there will be a need for better programs to support their transition to higher education and for development of university curricula designed and delivered to promote success for all students; formal and informal extra-curricular activities that support students and promote engagement; and learning experiences that are coordinated and managed to promote success (Thomas 2009). Therefore, universities aspiring to increase diversity and transform marginalisation to reflect the "character and construction of the broader community" will need to transform their first-year programs to cater for a more diverse student population (Bowser et al. 2006, p222).

While the evaluation reported in this article focused on the early stages of the QUTeach initiative, a second-stage evaluation is being conducted to investigate the longer-term effects on students and schools. In particular, it will identify how graduates from the program succeed in their first year as full-time university students. Findings from this project to date, however, demonstrate strong potential for the program to change the lives of a number of students and their families and to positively affect schools' academic cultures. The many DET and QUT staff associated with QUTeach demonstrate genuine concern for members of marginalised groups in society and a need to address society's equity and social-justice obligations. Influential ideas, research and planning were transformed into a program of action. QUTeach is a model for future development and the dissemination of findings to government, universities and schools may advance replication at other sites.

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