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Social Disadvantage and Access to Higher Education: What Potential Students don't Know and how to Address their Needs

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Abstract: There is consistent evidence that access to higher education in Australia remains a function of the students' background including, among other factors, their socioeconomic status, race and Indigeniety. With the demise of many programs that were established in the early 1990s to assist students from underrepresented social groups in higher education to participate in university studies, more research is needed about the barriers to higher education and how can they be avoided. In this paper we discuss learnings about different knowledge needs of high school students from underrepresented groups and suggest ways in which these needs might be met. The observations in this paper arise from our experience with the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project, a collaborative project between high school students, their teachers and university staff working together to increase the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education.

Access to university by traditionally underrepresented students, based on their socioeconomic, ethnic or geographical background, is a major concern in many developed countries including the UK, USA, and Australia. The costs of lack of participation both for the individuals concerned, their families and to the nation itself are well documented (see, for example, Beebe, 2007; Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003) The educationally privileged are better positioned to obtain a Year 12 qualification and a

subsequent tertiary qualification which greatly determine a young person's pattern of future education, training, and position in the labour market. This view was supported by a discussion paper released by the Department of Education, Queensland, in 2000, which declared that high quality, internationally recognised qualifications are necessary to students' futures in the "knowledge society" (p. 2). During the past few decades, many nations and universities embarked on special programs to increase the participation of students at universities and higher education. Since the early 1990s, Australian universities have established alternative entry and support schemes (Evaluations and Investigations Program, 1994). Many of the schemes targeted a combination of some of the identified under-represented groups while others were aimed at one specific group such as Indigenous students. The principles and designs of these programs also varied. Some focused on an increase of knowledge by potential students about university options and perhaps provided some remedial assistance for them to pursue these options. Other programs concentrated on the university structures and policies to become more welcoming to special student populations who may not meet the normal entry requirement but are quite capable of pursuing higher education and benefiting from it.

Simply increasing tertiary access for under-represented students, however, does not affect the processes of cultural reproduction (Bernstein, 1997). This paper examines the various needs of students from underrepresented groups that act as barriers to their participation in university and examines possible approaches to remove these barriers. Here we identify a threefold hierarchy of barriers and suggest that managing each hurdle necessitates a different approach and strategy.

Limitations to university access involve two main types of barrier. Some barriers are *systemic* – these may include monetary costs involved in enrolling at a university, including possible loss of income that might have to be forgone in order to study full time, and travel to university, or enrolment requirements that do not take into account the special conditions of the applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. This type of barrier needs to be challenged and exposed. At times their solutions are beyond the individual university or high school. This does not mean that individual universities can not contribute towards their removal – many Australian universities, as well as the Federal Government, now provide scholarships to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Further, a number of special entry procedures that are more sensitive to the opportunity to learn from students from underrepresented backgrounds, including low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds, attempt to increase their participation in higher education.

The second type of barrier is less concrete, constructed of what might be called *symbolic* or *cultural*, related to the gap between the habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) (i.e., a disposition toward

acting and thinking in a certain way) of the marginalised students and the institutional habitus (Reay, David & Ball, 2001) of the university. In this context we will refer to these barriers as *myths* about university.

By calling this type of barrier myths, we do not intend to imply that they are not real in their effect. In fact, they may be as strong as the systemic barriers above in preventing students from underrepresented groups from participating in university study. However, by naming these barriers myths we signify that their management can be attended to at a local level within the jurisdiction of individual schools and universities. Further, their solutions depend on exposing their arbitrary and hegemonic nature and a change in knowledge, change in heart and change in mind by the target underrepresented student population. By making this distinction between the two types of barrier, we need to stress that they are obviously related and interact in preventing or promoting students' participation. It is this latter type of barrier that we are concerned about in this paper. The aim of this paper is to identify the main types of myth that prevent students from marginalised groups from considering university as a post-school option and to suggest actions that might be needed towards their management.

First we will discuss the context in which these learnings have arisen.

The SARUA Project

The learning discussed here is based on our long involvement with the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project, a collaborative project between an Australian university and a group of high schools with large numbers of underrepresented groups of students. The overall aim of the project, in which nearly thirty schools have participated since 1992, is "to increase the participation of under-represented groups in higher education" (Atweh & Dorman, 1999, p. 7). Using participatory action research, the students investigate local barriers to higher education and plan, implement and evaluate school-based projects to overcome the problems identified. This pattern follows the action research cycle of investigation, planning, action and reflection, and is generally carried out across one school year. The student-produced research has led to the creation of, for example, homework centres in schools where students have inappropriate resources to study at home; tertiary shadowing to introduce junior students to ideas about university life; and projects to increase self-esteem and motivation through the provision of role models.

In a typical year, students initially attend an on-campus training program on social issues, project management and introduction to research methods. The training session concludes with plans for projects for the rest of the year. Students and their teachers work on a weekly basis on their projects at the

school and, close to the end of the year, they return to the university for at least two days to analyse their data and write their reports. Throughout the year, staff from the university provide assistance, advice and specialised training as requested by the school. The reflections contained in this paper are taken from an intensive action research investigation of the project that formed the basis of a doctoral study (Bland, 2006).

Students' Myths about University

Through listening to SARUA Project participants, we have discerned a number of myths about university. It seems to us that the myths may be classified into three different types. Some myths are the result of lack of knowledge about practical aspects of university entry and life. There were, however, other types of myth that were more cultural and attitudinal that prevented students from thinking that university is a possibility for them. A third type of myth is related to the agency and efficacy that gives the students the stance of "Yes I can!". We will discuss each type of myth in turn.

Lack of Knowledge

Every year, we ask the SARUA project students from the target schools if they have ever been to a university campus and if any of their family or close friends have ever been to a university to study. Generally, the smallest minority of students answer in the affirmative to either question.

One group of Polynesian students said "We thought that University was just for smart people and that there was only one way to get in, by getting a good [high school result]". Other students saw university as "just a school, only bigger and more of a maze". For these students, whose reported experiences of school were fairly negative, the idea of spending four more years in a similar environment was not appealing. The experience of visiting the university campus to undergo SARUA training led to amazement on the students' part to discover what to other students might be simple facts about universities; that university students do not wear uniform and they do not have classes all day from 9 to 5.

Arguably more serious than the lack of knowledge about the day to day life of the university, participating students revealed very limited knowledge about the availability of the alternative entry

programs to the university such as some of those mentioned above, that gave concessional entry to target group students. There was also a general lack of knowledge about other flexible arrangements at university that might have made it more attractive to these students. For example, many students were also unaware that it was possible to attend university on a part-time basis. Also that there was a chance of deferring entering university at the end of Year 12 and applying later as an adult.

This is quite concerning since the particular university involved has always attempted to promote its special entry programs for students from disadvantaged schools and considering that the majority of participating students were at the senior level in their schools - a time when such knowledge would have been essential in making informed post-school decisions about their future. We were curious about the advice that students were getting from their career counsellors in schools about universities. Very few students, it appeared, were informed about special entry programs and some students were actively discouraged by the career advisors from considering university and to consider the 'easier' technical colleges.

It might appear that removing this hurdle preventing university participation by students from underrepresented groups is a simple matter. In one sense, the information is readily available on the internet and is routinely sent to schools. In reality, however, these measures fall short of what is needed for these students and their schools in removing this barrier. Information sent to schools is always contaminated by local conditions, biases and lack of resources. The dissemination of information about university options for the underrepresented groups should include professional development of local school advisors, not only about the information, but also about catering to the needs of the underrepresented groups.

Without adequate information, underrepresented student populations have little hope of considering university education as part of their post school planning. Very rarely do they get that information from home since the number of people they know who have gone to university is mostly very low. Students indicated that they had "no-one to ask what it's really like". As the experiences of the students we worked with show, often students do not get that information from schools. At times, teachers' attitudes also contribute to the lack of information where there is a belief that these students are more suited to technical education. According to participating students, low expectations had been conveyed by school staff ("some teachers just see you and like don't expect much") with some students in the group having been advised by a school counsellor to "quit [school] and not even think about going to uni".

In designing the SARUA project, we realised the importance of receiving correct and relevant

information about university as an essential prerequisite for consideration as an option. In this project, we have attempted to build in sessions during the training days that specifically target information about the university. We invited people from the university to discuss the special programs that allow entry to disadvantaged groups based on socioeconomic and Indigenous background. Likewise, we have invited current students at university from the same underrepresented groups to talk about issues that they have experienced in their first year at university. As a result of their participation at SARUA, students expressed significant knowledge about university that for many other students may be routine and perhaps not necessary to make their decisions. For example, they made many observations about the flexibility in the university timetables that increased options relative to underrepresented students:

- there is a flexible timetable
- students do not attend every day
- it is possible to attend part-time
- some courses are not 9-5
- students can also have paid work

Undoubtedly, this information has opened new pathways for many of the participating students. One case study illustrates these benefits for some students at least. Wes, for instance, had an ambition to undertake graphic design at university. However, as a senior school student, Wes was a fully self-supporting 17-year old, and the circumstances of his home life had contributed to low school results that misrepresented his true academic ability. Nevertheless, Wes expressed an interest in participating in the SARUA Project. A meeting at the school with the SARUA facilitator informed him of relevant alternative entry schemes and, through taking part in the SARUA Project, he found out more about university. The following year, he was successful in achieving a place in the university of his choice.

Cultural Gaps

Not considering university as a post school option by students from under represented groups goes beyond simple lack of knowledge about university life and entry requirements. The lack of knowledge, lack of role models of people who have gone to university as well the lack of

encouragement, if not explicit discouragement, lead to an emotional and cultural gap between the student and the university. Often in this project, the students' views about university were emotionally charged. Many saw the prospect of entering a university as “daunting”, “intimidating” and “scary”. Such fears were reinforced by an expectation that they would not be able to make friends or to find supportive groups at university as they saw themselves as “different” to those at university.

The lack of direct and indirect familiarity with the university leads into the attitude of “it is not for me”, or even “not for us” to cover the exclusion of all students like me – whether that was based on socioeconomic background or type of interest or level of achievement. Perhaps the strongest illustration of this is the group of Polynesian students referred to above who, prior to the project, were unable to see themselves represented in their own conceptions of university, and had accepted that there was an implicit racial aspect to the entry criteria which automatically ruled them out of contention.

In designing the SARUA project, we planned a few days at the start of the year in which students work at the university to design their project and further visits for documentation of the projects near the end of the year. This was particularly important to bridge the emotional distance between the university and the students. Further, in planning the activities during those visits we made it a point of dealing with students as university students. Moreover, we have made that explicit to them. For example, we encouraged them to call all university staff and their own supervising teachers by their first name while working on campus. We acknowledged with them that such addressing by first name was not appropriate at school. Experience has shown that the students did not have a problem switching codes between the two settings. At the conclusion of the project, some students identified the following learning about the university culture that was foreign to them at the start, following the opportunity to “view university life from the inside”:

- there's no teachers like telling you what to do;
- there is more freedom;
- felt more independent and treated as adults;
- you have to be responsible for yourself rather than rely on teachers like we have to at school.

The benefit from the school visits to the campus was summed up by one student who said: “I think going on the campus day things, they do help as well - you do see a different side of what it's going to be like and you can picture yourself there”. This employment of critical imagination and envisaging of the possibility of going to university is very significant for students of backgrounds typical of SARUA

students, as it contributes to the kind of “turning point” (Hodkinson, 1999, p. 259) that can transform habitus.

Efficacy and Agency

The first type of myth identified above relates to lack of knowledge about university. This lack of familiarity, in addition to constant messages from significant others, can reinforce a habitus that precludes higher education. In dealing with the students, we also felt the presence of a more fundamental hindrance caused by a sense of negative efficacy - a sense of “can’t do”. At the initial stages of the project, student discourse may be posited in terms of “not interested” in university rather than “I can’t succeed there”. Only at later stages of the project do students discuss the attitude of “can’t do”.

Where a mismatch of student habitus with the school culture occurs, such as for working-class students in a hegemonic education system, those who are disadvantaged by such educational systems can become complicit in their own subjugation by uncritically adopting the values of the system. This kind of self-censorship thus “delimits the universe of possible discourse” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 169). Indeed, during the early stages of their SARUA participation, many SARUA students present deficit views, or blame the victim, regarding the failure of students from their schools to pursue higher education. Initially, in discussions with students regarding low aspiration for university, students’ reasons are often along the lines “because they are lazy”, “they want to start work and earn money fast”, or “they are interested in having a good time” (Bland & Atweh, 2004). Some of the SARUA students also identified a preference among their peers for sporting achievement over academic work as the cause of disinterest in tertiary education.

However, as students progressed through the SARUA process, they are less likely to “blame the victims” for the disadvantages inflicted on them, but come more to a viewpoint of social injustice and a better understanding of the ways in which the education systems have impacted on the students’ lifeworlds and opportunities (Atweh, 2003). Indeed, in their research reports, the students’ analyses tend to become more empathic and focused on structural and social problems such as “lack of knowledge about university”, “financial limitations”, and “lack of teacher expectations”. The language of barriers and social disadvantage has become an integral component of the students’ language as a result of their participation in this project. Some of the titles of their project research reports illustrate that they have understood the problem of lack of representation:

- Bridging the gap
- Challenging the barriers
- Our aspirations, our school and the university
- Envisioning and creating our future.

Similarly, within the reports reference to social justice and disadvantage is frequent. SARUA students at one school, for example, found that “different language ability, family history, as well as the fact that students of ethnic backgrounds are usually represented as a minority within our school” contributed to low tertiary aspiration. Another group, comprising mostly Pacific Islander students, identified a discrepancy between males and females aspiring to attend university and reasoned that “this could be due to socio-cultural influences in a more local sense such as men needing to work at a job in a physical sense to be productive or a lack of male role models who have a tertiary education”. Further, according to one student, the most valuable aspect of the project was the realisation that “if you’re disadvantaged you can still get into most unis”. The awareness of themselves and their school as part of a social disadvantage was a significant development in the project.

Another example of the development of this sense of agency by the students is the confidence that they have in making the right decision for themselves based on the available options. In dealing with the students, and in reflecting on our own values, we were careful not to think of going to university as the main criteria for success of our activities. A decision of not going to university that is based on knowledge of options and alternatives is as much a sign of agency under certain conditions. One student, for example, left school to attend a technical college, realising this pathway better suited her career interests than university, while another student, after considering the plusses and minuses decided that the costs of attending university were beyond what she was willing to sacrifice.

Which aspects of SARUA contributed to this sense of agency and efficacy on part of the students? Generally, the SARUA project did not address directly the concept of self image or confidence with the students. Rather, we believed in the students’ ability to do what ever they aimed to achieve. We trusted and collaborated with them to identify problems and to develop and implement solutions. During the conduct of the project, the students not only increased their knowledge about the university and ways of getting there, they also developed skills that are needed when they go to university and, more generally, in their adult life. Moreover, these skills were developed in a real world context that was accepted by the students as a real world problem and of direct relevance to their lives.

The initial university based training, however, included a special session, designed as consciousness raising, or act of *conscientisation* (Freire, 1972), for the students about social barriers to university. The session was presented to them in part through a “running race” visual metaphor depicting uphill lanes, an uneven track and various obstacles for some starters as opposed to a smooth, straight track for others. Students were then asked to select another visual metaphor representing the major barriers to higher education facing students from their schools. In addition to the highly imaginative visual images that the students developed, the barriers they identified are among the ones often raised by professional researchers. Arguably though, the most significant gain from this workshop is that the problem of lack of access to university has been constructed as one of social barriers rather than solely as a personal problem related to interest and ability.

Conclusion

Universities are able to put policies and practices in place such as alternative access and scholarships to improve the representation at tertiary level of Indigenous and low socio-economic background students. Such actions, however, are not sufficient to make a significant difference to the educational outcomes of underrepresented groups. In addition, there is a need to put in place opportunities for students to transform their habitus through over-turning certain myths. These myths can be related to awareness, attitude, and self-efficacy. Often, these myths result from a combination of school and family factors, such as a lack of appropriate role models and low expectations of teachers and peers. The myths that SARUA students present with at their introduction to university have to be challenged through first-hand experience. The SARUA Project presents opportunities for students from underrepresented groups to experience a university campus first-hand, to obtain a realistic image of life as a university student, and to participate in activities that can challenge and transform habitus. Finally through the involvement of the students themselves in identifying problems and seeking their solutions, the students from disadvantaged background develop sense of agency and skills that are necessary for effective participation at university.

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