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**Growing Educational Capacity through a Collaborative Education Initiative**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports the background to the development of the Access and Success initiative which is a University wide project designed to respond positively to the learning needs of young people in schools in the University's region. Recent research (Teese 2005, Wiseman 2006) shows students in Melbourne's west have lower aspirations, attendance, academic achievement, completion rates and higher unemployment and crime rates than elsewhere. Victoria University has established Access and Success to respond to this data and better meet learning needs of young people through partnership with local schools. The paper will discuss the methodology designed to work with schools to gather, report and interpret quantitative and qualitative data related to student retention, access to curriculum and completion rates, as well as about school experience and learning outcomes over the next 3 years. It reports the initial findings of the project about the needs and interests of young people in disadvantaged communities. This project provides a basis for growing educational capital through partnerships that are locally developed, achieve personal outcomes for individuals, have reciprocal benefits for all and provide individuals with authority to change their own lives.

## Introduction

The history of Victoria University reflects a series of merges and change, as the small trades school in the working class west of Melbourne has matured over its 90 year existence to become the largest dual sector university in Australia. There are many important features of each of the earlier identities, but in 2006, the University is looking forward to developing a distinctive character, drawing strongly on its traditions but also thinking anew about the needs of its community in the future. Most university courses and programs claim commitment to developing skilled and knowledgeable citizens. This University has set itself the significant goal of supporting and enabling improved educational access and success for young people of western Melbourne, many of whom do not have the social capital and economic means to achieve career and educational outcomes more readily assumed for those from more affluent communities. This paper reports the development of the Access and Success initiative which is a University wide project designed to respond positively to the learning needs of young people in schools and the University.

So much research has been undertaken to understand why young people from poorer backgrounds achieve lower grades and take up fewer post-compulsory education places. From Bourdieu to Connell and most recently in Australia the work of Teese (2003) and Teese and Polesel (2005), it has been unquestionably determined that social class does not determine intelligence, but it does most definitely is a significant determinant in educational outcomes. In Victoria, state education is notionally available to all, yet approximately 35% of final year students are enrolled in non-government schools. These fee paying students have access to a wider range of programs which, along with the enhanced social capital they enjoy as part of more affluent families, demonstrably enhance their curriculum options and year 12 results. This divided system perpetuates the success of the rich and middle classes while it deliberately serves to relegate low socio-cultural communities to limited access to educational participation and success.

McGaw's (2006) analysis of the OECD's Programme for International Studies (PISA [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)) data indicates that while social advantage does trend toward improved educational outcomes, this is not always the case. PISA provides internationally comparable data from education systems and their assessment of 15 year olds in schools. In developed countries which enjoy considerable educational reform such as Sweden and Norway, attention to pedagogy and the development of early literacy, the general trend of low socio-economic status resulting in low academic performance is less significant than for less developed education systems, suggesting that it is indeed possible to provide an education system which enables all students to flourish and succeed. Additionally McGaw discusses three types of capital that support educational achievement: physical capital, human capital and social capital. He further develops a definition of social capital that is concerned with social networks and norms of reciprocity and trust which enhance productivity and the development of human capital. He suggests that the benefits of social capital are in the value of the networks that support the social and cultural bonds between individuals and across groups, reduction in crime and improved health, employment and civic infrastructure.

Both Teese and McGaw are clear about the potential for educational improvement in communities where resources are limited. McGaw reports on the value added through early years literacy in schools in Melbourne's west. While the literacy scores of students remain lower than for other regions in Victoria the end of their first three years of schooling, the growth in literacy is greater than for any other region. This illustrates that although children come to school with lower test scores for literacy than any others in the state their capacity to learn and make gains in this areas is strong and they achieve greater than their well resources peers in more affluent communities (McGaw 2006).

Victoria University has achieved significant gains in the indicators of preparation for tertiary study (Harman 2005). However, it is also critically aware that in doing so, there has been a skewing of the University's capability to include in its programs access for young people who do not possess the educational capital to compete successfully for university places. At the same time, the inner urban development trend is indeed serving to develop pockets of disadvantage across the west as other parts become gentrified. In parallel, places at university for students from our least advantaged families appear to be increasingly more difficult to obtain. Access to vocational and higher education programs for these young people and their communities is critical as, for many, the cost of travelling to another institution beyond the region is prohibitive given their family income.

Victoria University's Mission explicitly claims to 'transform the lives of individuals and develop the capacities of industry and communities within the western Melbourne region and beyond through the power of vocational and higher education'. This is a significant charge for a university, its students and staff. To fulfil this mission, Victoria University has established a research and development project aimed at collaborating with schools and families to improve the educational outcomes and opportunities for the young people of western Melbourne. This project is the Access and Success project, designed to develop the educational experience of young people during their school years and their time at Victoria University as well as increasing the capacity of their teachers and families to support this improvement. The Access and Success project is a deliberate strategic initiative to develop these outcomes. It is informed by successful community focused approaches at a number of international universities, such as the University of Pennsylvania's Nutrition Project, the University of Texas at El Paso's University College program and at Manchester University to name a few.

Victoria University is the largest supplier of university offers to western suburbs applicants And similarly, is also the largest supplier of vocational education and training to western suburbs school leavers. An approach which supports improvements in access, participation and success is needed which is collaborative and inquiry-led with actions and research around collaboration with young people, schools and families.

### **Success:**

Success can depend on many factors. For many students, and as for many life goals and challenges, academic success is simply determined by preparation. Whether it is the school years or pathways through vocational education and training to work or further study, students do better when they are building on successful experience. A DEST study of mature aged students at university (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite and Godfrey 2004) reports that students who have entered higher education programs from TAFE streams are equally confident, motivated and capable as their high academic achieving school leaver peers. It also found that quality support and orientation to university study were also critical factors in supporting academic success for all students, but including those who did not come directly from year 12 (2004, 167).

Students in Melbourne's west are more likely to go on to vocational education and training than higher education which is possibly related to the fact that they achieve the lowest average ENTER scores across year 12 in the state. Demand for places in higher education and TAFE reflects this and the west is generally an inverse experience of application preferences and academic profile for the east of Melbourne (Teese 2005). Once students secure a place at Victoria University, 85% of them are likely to successfully complete their studies in any one year, 75% are likely to stay on to continue studies in the following year, 72% will graduate to full time employment and 77% consider their course experience to have been positive when they reflect post-graduation. These figures vary up to 15% for individual courses and the career chosen upon completing a course (Gabb 2005).

Given how difficult it is for so many students at Victoria University to achieve university entrance in the first place, it is disappointing that they are not all successful in every phase of their university experience. Of course, some would argue the converse: lower school achievers are destined to fail at university as that is the underlying premise of ENTER based selection, so indeed Victoria University should be proud of these figures. The optimistic view is to argue that even with low entry scores, it is significant that so many do so well. Victoria University graduates find career related employment and are well regarded and notably in some programs they are held in very high esteem by their employers and professions.

The issue for the Access and Success initiative then is not whether Victoria University is any good, or students are smart enough or not, but rather, that the educational experience at Victoria University, opportunities and outcomes inherent in a Victoria University education are excellent and that every student is capable of success. The value added through a Victoria University degree needs to be clear, and achieved in the context that VU accepts students of mixed backgrounds and abilities for courses based on a range of criteria including aptitude *and* ability and then works to develop them fully. It is not who enters the University, but rather whom we graduate and therefore the quality of graduates and their experience at Victoria University that matters.

### **Access:**

Students choose to attend university for a variety of reasons. A study of first year aspirations of 177 students at Victoria University (Gabb 2006) indicated that students

come to Victoria University with a strong desire to study areas that are of interest (94%) and improve job prospects (75%). This is not unexpected when considering that it is generally from working class communities that students come to Victoria University to develop their skills, knowledge and training (75%). There is less influence of parental expectation with only 30% indicating that this was an important consideration. Most of VU's first year students also commence their studies knowing what they want to study (85%) and also the sort of work they wish to pursue as a result of their course (67%). Only 13% indicated that university was something to undertake while they considered their work and career future.

Family factors are also influential. The recent report from the Smith Family (Beavis 2006) on the aspirations of young people indicates that the support of family for university study is important as it significantly increases the young person's aspiration and their goals for tertiary study. The research surveyed 1,344 school students and reported that 60% planned to undertake degree or diploma studies after school, but few were aware of the close correlation that has been demonstrated between tertiary qualifications and career and employment prospects. Perhaps most significantly, the Beavis report illustrated that most young people 'want a professional level job and very few want a low-skilled job. This pattern of aspiration differs from the current pattern of availability in the Australian labour market' (Beavis 2006, 22). Golightly (2005) predicts that the future of work in Australia is primed to change dramatically with a substantial reduction in the percentage, from the 2005 record high of 64.8% to 56.3%, of the population engaged in work in 2045. School leavers in 2005 will be in their late fifties and spent the main part of their working life in a declining labour market. Current skill shortages in the Australian labour market are identified as being in the fields of profession and trade engineering, the sciences, regional development, health and child care and in other trades including food industry, automotive and construction (Golightly 2005). The shift from primary and secondary industry is highlighted by the downturn in employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing (-45.1%), manufacturing (-67.5%) and wholesale trade (-74%), and contrasts with the increase in service industries such as property and business services (+375.2%), retail trade (+329.2%) and health and community services (+264.8%).

*Vocational Education and Training, VET partnerships and project-based training have created and mobilised capital, as well as human, environmental, cultural and built (physical) capital in regional Australia. These various types of capital are core requirements for sustainable regional development* (Allison, Gorringe and Lacey 2006: 4).

At Victoria University the mean ENTER score for school leavers entering the University has risen 4.6 points in the past 4 years, while some competitor universities have experienced a slight reduction in the mean. This increase reflects a trend across the west of Melbourne towards upward social mobility, gentrification and an associated increase in awareness of the need and benefit of tertiary studies. Can these data be translated in assuming Victoria University is supporting improved educational outcomes in the region? Not entirely! If the relationship between social capital and academic achievement is upheld, then the explanation for improved entry scores can also be located in the social trend accompanied by the once strong push by Victoria University to set minimum ENTER scores, artificially raise ENTER scores and to

generate other pathways to higher education, usually through TAFE for year 12 students with lower scores.

However, in 2005, Victoria University still had the second lowest number of year 12 entry students with tertiary educated parents of all Victoria universities. With only 32% of students in this category, the educational demand placed on Victoria University is very high when compared to the students from the University of Melbourne of whom 63% have tertiary educated parents. The funding is the same, the expected standards are the same, it is just that students at Victoria University come with far less capacity and educational investment in success than do their peers in other universities. If likened to an athlete, Victoria University students have to run twice as hard over the same distance to equal the achievement. By any standards this represents gross inequity for students, families, staff and communities of the region.

One distinctive change is required to improve access to post-compulsory study: an improvement in academic success in the previous years of schooling (and the measures which indicate this success). While this is a simple task to identify, it is varied and complex to realise. A number of elements contribute to a lack of readiness for post-compulsory study. They include:

- new year 12 arrangements and reformed selection and entry processes at university, i.e. the development of a rigorous holistic measure of readiness for tertiary study and the current ENTER score is one perspective on capability only, weighted in favour of elite schools and students with high levels of resource and social capital, ie new pedagogies in schools which enable all students to be accommodated and engaged in learning from early years to year 12
- strong relationships between schools and university for appropriate career and work education advice to support new and informed aspirations and educational choices
- a range of pathways and transition arrangements which encourage creative thinking about learning goals and outcomes.
- improvement in family support, literacy and educational capability

### **Participation:**

The Gabb (2005) study also looked at the experience students had of university and strongly indicated that more was needed to be done to engage learners in the first year of their course and to encourage a stronger emphasis on learner centred pedagogy. Victoria University has historically developed over up to 14 sites across western Melbourne. There are currently 11 campuses and they provide easy access to tertiary studies for many students who may otherwise be unable to attend university. The financial costs of leaving home and travelling great distances are prohibitive for many young people, and similarly access for the whole family to the a local university site increases the reality of university access and education for many.

At the university significant change is also demanded for this access to be translated to success. This includes:

- New pedagogies at university which recognise, value and draw on the holistic strengths of students and respond to inclusive selection processes and so the diverse talents and needs student groups.
- Open access to resources, including places to study close to home, transport, information technology, library and other services which support disadvantaged students to be successful at school and university.
- New ways of thinking about university learning
- A redefinition of the university experience for 21<sup>st</sup> century society
- Restructure of university work and policy which defines work for general and academic staff in university
- New thinking about course location – across campuses, campuses as ‘bus stops’ only
- Increased learning and social support for students who have diverse talents and needs
- A cross sectoral view of learning development which acknowledges the continual intersection between knowledge, skills, competence and application of ideas and practices (McLennan 2005)

### **Access and Success:**

The goal of Access and Success project is to respond to the needs of learners in Melbourne’s west and to improve the access and successful participation of young people in post compulsory education and training. This is being developed through collaborative research and deliberate informed strategic action through partnerships with schools in the western region of Melbourne.

This Project seeks to respond Teese’s research on the educational experience of young people in disadvantaged communities which identified pedagogy, literacy and numeracy and educational pathways as have powerful influence in academic success. Access and Success aims to achieve in have 3 areas. I

- Achieve significant increases in educational capital, choices and outcomes for young people in Melbourne’s west
- Reform teaching and research at Victoria University to support improved educational outcomes
- Position Victoria University as an international leader in education for disadvantaged communities

In establishing Access and Success projects which extend and expand opportunities for young people to enhance their educational experience, choice and outcomes are being developed across 6 key directions:

1. **Educational Experience:** *Improving the educational experience of young people.* By working with young people, identify and develop learning and teaching activities in schools and community settings which enhance the educational experience and learning of young people in early childhood, primary, secondary and post-compulsory schooling.
2. **Aspiration and Access:** *Improving access to post-compulsory schooling for young people.* By working with young people and their families and their schools, this project

will identify factors which influence educational outcomes and choices for young people and identify strategies to increase educational aspirations and enhance preparation for post-compulsory schooling.

3. **Teacher Learning:** Focus on improved teacher education and professional learning. By working with teachers and the teaching profession, focus on the diverse needs, abilities and backgrounds of students in all levels of schooling from early childhood to university, and build approaches to teaching and learning which are learner responsive and support educational access and success.
4. **VU Educational Research:** Grow research capacity in school, vocational and higher educational research. By working with collaborative research partners in Australia and internationally undertake research which delivers measurable research outcomes within 5 years that support and inform VU's and the West's capability as a source of transferable knowledge to the world about Access and Success in post-compulsory education.
5. **VU Educational Practice** Develop VU's capability and processes to support increased access and success through integrating entry and exit points across school, TAFE and higher education and strengthening work integrated learning. By working with VU staff, course development initiatives and with local employers ensure VU's meets the educational needs of young people.
6. **Policy and Government:** Identify policy barriers and influence new policy direction to improve access and success in post-compulsory education. The capacity of individuals, education providers and employers to ensure effective take up of education and training is influenced by Government policy settings. This research will inform policy development through a mix of identifying limitations in current settings and proposing and trialling the impact of potential improvements.

The development of these directions is focused on 4 themes

1. **Learning Enrichment**

Expand and extend Partnerships with schools to support improved learning outcomes from Prep – Year 12 in literacy, numeracy and science. This initiative includes learning in the workplace and community for VU students from Education, Science, Arts, Health, etc to work with teachers and young people in classrooms and in special projects across the region.

2. **Teacher Leadership**

Develop with state government and schools strong professional learning approach for teachers with specific interests in excellence in pedagogy and practice, and teacher leadership and research.

3. **Youth Transitions and Futures**

Establish a VU youth focus through the development of Focus on Futures initiatives which provides support for young people who are seeking to know more about work and careers, seek advice on transitions and pathways and locate support for study and academic success.

#### 4.. ***Schools Plus Provision***

Working with state government and schools on local provisioning initiatives to support joint activity, fully utilize resources and improve pathway opportunities for young people.

Learners and their needs are the central focus of the practices of this project. The development of close relationships between schools and Victoria University is essential in scaffolding partnerships which provide the necessary support to teachers and families so that the development of capacity for full educational achievement is realized for every student from early childhood to post-compulsory education. This project provides the basis for the development of educational capital in the region based on partnerships that are locally developed, achieve personal outcomes for individuals, have reciprocal benefits for all and provide individuals with authority to change their own lives. There are a number of projects already underway under each of the four areas above. Pilot projects in 2007 have indicated that the strongest area of need is for support around Youth Transition and Futures while there has also been strong interest in long term primary school level projects around science, health and well-being.

#### **Researching Outcomes:**

In 2007, the Access and Success Project has supported and generated approximately 60 projects with schools and communities. Some examples include the Kinder Kinder project which provides a preschool experience for children who do not attend kindergarten, the Career Ladder project which support year 11 and 12 students with personalized career advice, literacy programs in secondary schools and science based projects especially in primary schools. The Access and Success project is critically underpinned by an on-going action research model of development which draws on the Plan, Do, Review, Improve model for University growth and development. To understand the capacity of the Access and Success project to support improved learning outcomes a research methodology has been developed which will include both demographic and quantitative data collection and attempts to collaboratively describe, understand and develop practices in learning and teaching of young people for improved educational access, participation and success.

Following an extensive review of the literature and enquiry about other current research projects in the area, this methodology draws on the collaborative practitioner research (Cherednichenko, Davies, Kruger and O'Rourke 2001 p. 78) model developed at VU for inclusive research of practice for improvement. The project will collect both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the following issues and questions:

- a) How do young people experience access, participation and success in schooling?
- b) What are the current enablers of and barriers to educational access and success for young people?
- c) What is the relationship between VU and the development of access, participation and success in schooling?

- d) How can VU strengthen its relationship with young people and schools for more effective access, participation and success in schooling?

Fifteen schools have been invited to participate in this research and quantitative measures are being tracked for each participating school including their standard test scores across year 9-12. The research attends also to the data for the uptake and achievement in units 3/4 English, maths and sciences, for teacher, parent and student attitudes and response to pedagogy. Additionally VTAC data will be tracked for TAFE and higher education application and offer trends.

Qualitative data sources are being developed collaboratively with teachers in schools so that a rich description and analysis of local school context and practices can be identified to explain, elaborate and validate the quantitative data. Qualitative data will be presented as whole school collaborative case study developed using the school case study protocol which is developed from the collaborative practitioner analysis of a range of quantitative and qualitative school data such as the data listed above as well as artifacts of learning and teaching including work samples, interviews, school charter and other school based reports and teacher case writing.

Already the Access and Success project has identified over 60 schools who are committing to long term projects and relationships around student learning needs initial data for this project is indicating a number of issues to be pursued in the next phase of the research. Discussions with school principals and preservice teacher coordinators of schools working with VU indicate that there is a significant variance in the expectations for and perceptions of the partnerships amongst participating schools. Some are open to a deepening of collaboration, and have high expectations on the impact of the partnerships on student learning outcomes and school practice. Others hold a more traditional view of student teacher practicum, and perceive the PP model as a potentially burdensome responsibility in an already busy teaching and learning environment.

### **Early Findings:**

The initial research has included 40 interviews with teachers about their expectations, needs and impressions of their collaboration with the University and an analysis of the schooling outcomes being achieved for young people in the post compulsory years in the region. This 2007 research has identified a number of important tentative findings which will guide the Access and Success project in 2008 and beyond. These include information about the nature of the needs of young people and schools, the potential role of a university in working with schools and ways in which we can collaborate more effectively.

One critical insight the data and interviews with teachers reveal is that young people who do not go on to post-compulsory education belong to one of 3 main groups. They are either a) high achieving and not aspirational, b) high aspirational but without

the educational skills and capacity, or c) they are disengaged from schooling. This is reflected in the high numbers of young people who are offered a place in tertiary education but do not take it up – up to 50% for some schools in the region. This low uptake warrants much greater exploration but it supports the strong demand Access and Success has found from schools for work with later year students in developing their applications for tertiary entrance such as the 2007 Uni and YOU! Project (Williams & Cherednichenko 2007).

It further supports the need for increased literacy, numeracy and science education in the middle years, although the demand from schools is very strong around re-engaging disengaged students at this age through a stronger emphasis on health and well-being projects.

### **2008 and Beyond:**

While genuine collaborative research is occurring appropriate resources and recognition are still issues to be unraveled and resolved if we are to engage in truly learner centred and research informed practice for improvement. The future for Access and Success looks demanding. The Youth Transitions and Future initiative is developing to including a student leadership program and develop mentoring between university students and school students. As well, successful school students are now working with their peers in younger year levels to encourage them to think about further study but more importantly to know how to go to university. The Kinder Kinder program will expand to up to 12 sites in 2008 with a major corporate sponsor and is seeking philanthropic funding to enable the conduct of a Kinder College initiative so that the parents of these young children can re-engage with their own schooling and so provide even greater support to their children as they progress through the primary years.

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