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TEACHING REGIONAL STUDENTS FROM LOW SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS: KEY SUCCESS FACTORS IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from an Australian study exploring how best to facilitate the success of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds who are studying at regional universities. Interviews with 69 successful regional students from low SES backgrounds, and 26 staff identified as experts in supporting these students, were carried out across six regional universities. The findings show that effective teaching was viewed by all respondents as critical to student success. This paper presents four key success factors from this research, offering insight into what constitutes effective teaching of regional students from both student and staff perspectives, and in line with relevant literature. These success factors include, understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students; facilitating students being and feeling connected to university; student preparedness for the realities of university study; and an inclusive, engaged approach to pedagogy. This paper presents these factors and a range of practical strategies to effectively teach regional students from low SES backgrounds.

Keywords: effective teaching; higher education; regional universities; regional students; students from low SES backgrounds; student success

Introduction

Bipartisan widening participation policy in Australia has catalysed an intensified focus on teaching practices that best cater to a study body with increasingly diversified needs (Shah, Bennett & Southgate, 2015). While numbers of non-traditional students in higher education institutions are increasing (O'Shea, Chandler & Harwood, 2015), the exception to this is students from rural and remote areas, often referred to as “*regional*” areas. Within Australia, regional students are defined as those who have a home address in a postcode that lies beyond the major capital cities (Regional Australia Institute, 2019). As at February 2019, of the total Australian population of 25.2 million people, 9.05 million of these people reside in regional areas (ABS, 2019; Regional Australia Institute, 2019). The successful retention of regional learners in higher education is challenging, with dropout rates persistently high (Hare, 2015). Early departure and the increased possibility of these students leaving university without a degree points to the fact that getting students into university is only the first critical step, and that there is a significant need to also determine “*what works*” for regional students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds in terms of policy and

practice so that greater attention may be paid to evidence-based success factors for these students (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

The study from which this paper emerges set out to explore how best to facilitate the success of students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities. Interviews with 69 successful students from low SES backgrounds, and 26 staff identified as experts in supporting these students, were carried out across the six regional universities which comprise the Regional Universities Network¹ in Australia. The findings show that among other factors, effective teaching was viewed by all respondents as critical to student success. This paper presents the key findings related to teaching, offering insight into what constitutes effective teaching of regional students from both student and staff perspectives. The paper presents four success factors relating to the teaching of regional students including: understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students; facilitating students being and feeling connected to university; student preparedness for the realities of university study; and an inclusive, engaged approach to pedagogy.

Literature Review

Effective teaching in the regional context

The research on effective teaching is extensive, canvassing a vast array of practices, principles, policies, strategies and frameworks (Laurillard, 2013; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Student perceptions of effective teaching are also extensively researched (see for example Devlin & O’Shea, 2012; Vulcano, 2007), and there are numerous studies that explore academic and staff perceptions (see for example Ballantyne, Bain & Packer, 1999). Undertaking one of the most extensive examinations of effective teaching in an Australian context, Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) found effective higher education teaching to be a “contested concept” (Skelton, 2004, p. 452) around which definitions vary. Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010), among others (Macmillan, 2007), claim that many attempts have been made to identify the specific characteristics that comprise effective teaching and these attempts have been multi-disciplinary and drawn on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches. However, as Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) note, despite decades of work on the topic, there is no universally accepted definition of effective university teaching. That said, these authors also note that effective teaching has been broadly understood as teaching that is oriented to and focused on students and their learning and, that in addition to that fundamental tenet, requires a set of particular skills and practices to meet the particular requirements of the context in which it occurs. Determining the set of skills and practices is particularly critical when considering non-traditional students are now entering higher education in larger numbers than ever before and when drop-out rates for equity students remain a concern (Norton, 2019).

This paper explores the concept of what effective teaching means in a very specific context, that is, what it means for students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds who are studying at regional universities in Australia. This paper makes an important contribution to the literature and to scholarship given that few studies have specifically explored effective teaching in the regional context (Chatterton & Goddard, 2000). There have been a number of studies examining the lower participation rates of people from regional, rural and remote areas in Australia (James, 2000; James et al., 1999; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Marks, Fleming, Long & McMillan, 2000). Across this body of research is a shared acknowledgement of “*the complex variety of factors that lead to differing participation rates across regions*” which include, “*distance from a university campus; differences in aspirations and attitudes of regional students; Year 12 retention and completion; and the cost of university study*” (DEEWR, 2010, p. 3). Halsey (2018) states that

¹ These six Australian universities include Central Queensland University, Southern Cross University, Federation University Australia, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland and University of the Sunshine Coast.

geography is indeed a key factor in the Australian graduate landscape, with national statistics consistently showing a relationship between location and educational outcomes.

With the increasingly diverse student bodies in universities globally, theorists, researchers and practitioners are increasingly advocating inclusive pedagogical approaches (Cara, 2007; Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008). Effective teaching in the regional context is broadly considered that which adopts an inclusive teaching approach, that is, teaching that embraces and caters to diversity (Devlin & McKay, 2011). While the focus may vary on types of learners in this body of research, there is consensus on two broad points: 1) that inclusive learning and teaching aims to respect diversity and create an inclusive and respectful learning environment engaging all learners (Loxley, Fleming & Finnegan, 2017); and 2) that inclusive learning and teaching benefits not just non-traditional students, but *all* students in higher education (Stanovich & Jordan, 1998).

Research on the barriers faced by regional students from low SES backgrounds who are at university is vast. It shows the challenges regional students face as unique and nuanced, relating to previous educational experiences (Boyd, 2017), access to resources and online learning, financial disadvantage, and balancing work and family commitments (Pollard, 2018). Many regional students have to relocate to study, which brings a range of additional, specific challenges. O'Shea et al. (2019, p. 21) explain, "*Students who relocate to take up further study face logistical, financial and emotional challenges such as managing transport logistics, finding suitable accommodation, accessing allowances and financial support and seeking part-time work*" (also see Nelson, Picton, McMillan, Edwards & Devlin, 2017). Students who choose to stay in their own regional communities and study via distance/online options face their own challenges. Indeed, according to O'Shea (2019, p. 21), "*Online/distance/external students have poorer outcomes than internal students, and part-time students fare worse than full-time students... but regional students are taking up these approaches to study in greater numbers than metropolitan students*" (also see Pollard, 2018). O'Shea (2019, p. 21) argues that the "*distance*" regional students are forced to navigate between their home and university is "*physical, psychological and sociocultural, and can result in psychological distress and impaired mental health*". The impact of distance can thus be significant to students, and it is imperative teaching staff have insight into this element.

Specific factors impacting teaching and teachers in the regional context are also important to consider. Stack, Beswick, Brown, Bound, & Kenny (2011) found that regional areas often have less experienced staff, higher staff turnover and staff often having less access to professional networks and development compared to their urban peers. Roberts (2005) found that Australia's remote, rural and regional schools are frequently staffed with young, inexperienced teachers, and teacher turnover is high. Geographic isolation and distance from family are some of the reasons teachers provide for leaving regional areas (Burnheim & Harvey, 2016). White and Reid (2008) stress the need for adequate teacher preparation in the regional context to ensure they are prepared to be inclusive of rural students' needs.

While many studies offer insight into the *barriers* to access, participation, progression and retention, limited Australian studies focus specifically on the factors that *assist* regional students from low SES backgrounds to succeed in higher education, though this is changing (see Pollard, 2018). To this end, the current paper foregrounds and explores *success factors* related to teaching and learning in a regional context for low SES background students. It also presents implications for teaching practice.

The Study

The objectives of the Australian study from which the findings presented in this article are drawn included:

- to determine the major, high-level factors that contribute to retention and completion for domestic students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional Australian universities;

- to determine successful approaches to increasing the success of these students; and
- to provide guidance about how to begin addressing gaps in current approaches to supporting these students.

The methodology for the study was deliberately “*success-focused*” (Devlin & O’Shea, 2011). Given that research in the area has tended to focus on the barriers to success and the problems facing low SES and/or regional students, this study deliberately sought to adopt a methodological approach focused on success. For the purposes of the study, successful students were defined as those who had progressed far enough through their studies to be enrolled in one or more final year subjects/units of study and therefore were approaching successful completion.

Theoretical framework

The study drew on the theoretical framework proposed by Devlin (2013) of *bridging sociocultural incongruity*. Devlin maintains that adopting either a deficit conception of students from low SES backgrounds or a deficit conception of the high socioeconomic status institutions in which they study should be avoided. Further, rather than it being the primary responsibility of the student or of the institution to change to ensure student success, it is argued that both students and institutions should contribute to this “*joint venture*” (Devlin, 2013, p. 1) of making the adjustments necessary to ensure success and achievement for students from low SES backgrounds in higher education.

According to Devlin (2013, p. 945), “*the culture of higher education is incongruous with the cultures with which ... [non-traditional students] are familiar and comfortable*”. Devlin (2013, p. 945) sees a critical need for “*changes that could be made to lessen or ease socio-cultural incongruence*” and a major part of this is reform in teaching and support which moves beyond deficit conceptualisations of students from non-traditional backgrounds. This would entail students being empowered to develop university-specific sociocultural capabilities: including mastering the student role; feelings of belonging; and confidence to participate in the culture and discourses of higher education institutions. Facilitating student success thus relies heavily on students and teachers working together to ensure students are equipped with the adequate capabilities to achieve and succeed in the face of the sociocultural incongruities which may exist between them and the universities they enter.

Data collection

Interviews with 69 students identified as successful by virtue of having progressed through their studies to the point where they were enrolled in at least one final year subject were carried out at the six regional universities in the Regional Universities Network (RUN). With a focus on success, student interview questions sought to determine the major factors that had contributed to their success. Semi-structured interviews with 26 staff/stakeholders identified as expert in their knowledge, research on, support and/or teaching of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities were also undertaken at the six RUN universities. In order to ensure anonymity, each interviewee was issued a code which identified their university via a three-letter code (e.g. UNE), whether they were a student (STU) or staff/stakeholder (STK) and the number of the interviewee (e.g. UNE_STU_001).

Data analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews undertaken were transcribed and analysed using NVivo 11 qualitative software. Adopting a general inductive approach delineated by Thomas (2006), two researchers analysed the data to identify recurring themes related to what had “*worked*” for students in terms of their success. The researchers implemented a “*memoing*” approach (Birks, Chapman & Francis, 2008) in their analysis to enhance the analytical process, and the coding and identification of themes underwent recursive examination and auditing to ensure validity and reliability (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001).

Findings: Effective teaching and learning factors

The study identified a range of teaching and learning factors that were viewed by both students and staff as effective and critical to student success. These were:

1. Understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students.
2. Facilitating students being and feeling connected to university.
3. Student preparedness for the realities of university study.
4. An inclusive, engaged approach to pedagogy.

Drawing on the qualitative data to emerge from the study and relevant literature examined as part of the study, this section presents these findings to offer a nuanced insight into effective teaching in a particular context.

1. Understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students

The first teaching and learning factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds studying in regional settings was the university and staff understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of these students.

Balancing competing priorities: The study found that many students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities are parents and many have other carer responsibilities. Previous studies have documented the struggle students face – and particularly those from low SES backgrounds – in trying to balance academic study with family responsibilities (Devlin *et al.*, 2012, Nelson *et al.*, 2017). A total of 72.5% of the students interviewed (50 out of 69) discussed the pressures and challenges around their family responsibilities and the impact this had on their studies. In addition to typical types of family obligations such as caring for one's own children, students often discussed dealing with death, divorce, and having to look after elderly parents and physically or mentally ill family members. The impact of family responsibilities on study success were clearly articulated:

I've got a disabled father and a little brother... It's made it real hard ... it adds to the stress level and ... when you're really stressed you don't want to study. You press on, you try to study, you're not going to do as well as you would when you're calm. So it has been a problem. (FED_STU_010)

[My competing priorities have] determined what times of the day I can commit to study, how many hours a week I can commit to it. It's really changed how much time is spent on an assignment. (SCU_STU_066)

The study showed that regional students from low SES backgrounds often have complex lives and competing priorities. Many balance academic study with caring and related responsibilities, which often include the need to engage in paid employment while studying. Echoing much of the recent research into the educational experiences of regional, low SES background students, our study shows that this navigation of competing priorities can be a challenge for students and an additional stressor to the extant stress of study. Staff who understand and are responsive to this complex situation can have a profound impact on student progress and success.

Being unfamiliar with university: Many students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities are also the first in their family to attend university (Gofen, 2009). In the present study, all students selected for interview were the first in their immediate family to attend university; that is, neither of their parents had attended university. Forty-two percent of staff (11 out of 26) and sixteen percent of students (11 out of 69) raised the matter of students being first in family. Typical comments from each included:

If they're first in family, that can be very tough as well because they're stepping outside the norm. (USC_STK_024)

... when I left my job as a manager of a jewellery store to start university he [dad] was actually disappointed in me, he was like, 'Why would you give up a great job?'
(USQ_STU_159)

Being the first in their family to attend university can mean there is a lack of familiarity with the peculiarities of university life and expectations of them as students, and an absence of particular, university-specific cultural and academic capital in their families on which they can draw. Many experience significant financial pressure. The costs of study materials, travel to university and the like on top of the usual expenses of living, including sometimes supporting a family, often while on a reduced income, mean they may have to make difficult choices about their priorities that other more traditional students do not have to make.

In previous research, Devlin *et al.* (2012) found that university staff understanding the circumstances of, and respecting, regional students from low SES backgrounds was key to student success. In particular, staff understanding how “time poor” students were compared to traditional students due to “balancing financial pressures, family responsibilities and/or significant hours of employment with study” (Devlin *et al.*, 2012, p. 4) was found to be significant. Staff being flexible in their approaches to teaching and assessment to assist students manage their competing priorities, was also found to facilitate student success. Echoing the findings of this earlier study, the study from which this paper is drawn found that university staff, programmes, initiatives and approaches that considers the realities of students’ complex lives and competing priorities contribute to student retention and success.

In the more recent study, it was clear that staff understanding these competing priorities was key to student success. Thirty-five percent of staff (9 out of 26) stressed the importance of understanding on the part of staff, and the accommodation of students’ life circumstances.

I also have a little understanding with my students that particularly on school holidays, if you've got a problem with the kids and it means I either miss out on one of [X's] tutes or I bring my kids along, bring them ... Stick them on their iPads ... at the back of the room, or let me know and I'll get some Lego ... out of the maths storeroom, or we'll set them up on a computer. I'd much rather you were here with the kids than not here at all. (CQU_STK_043)

Some of the ways that understanding of these students’ particular circumstances and needs can be demonstrated include, promoting existing support services to them; providing empathic support; and offering flexibility. Each is detailed below.

Promoting existing support services to students: When asked about how the success of regional students from low SES backgrounds could be improved by institutions, 26% of students (18 out of 69) referred to the promotion of support services. This finding is echoed in prior studies which similarly highlight the need for support services to be made explicit to students (Gale & Parker, 2014). One student stated: “I really struggled for a while because I just wasn’t aware of the support that was available” (SCU_STU_064). Another simply said: “...knowing who to talk to or who to ask for help is the biggest thing” (FED_STU_011).

Forty-two percent of staff (11 out of 26) were equally insistent on the need for support services to be made explicit and being publicised to students, commenting: “... we have to be very aware, very agile, and very active in raising student awareness of what’s available, rather than being passive and assuming the students will discover these thing” (FED_STK_004).

Providing empathic support: As well as support services being appropriately publicised to students, staff also highlighted the importance of “empathic support”; that is, “support that takes into consideration the unique circumstances and needs of students from low SES backgrounds located in regional areas”. Empathic support, as described by staff interviewed in the present study: takes into consideration the distinct needs of low SES regional

students for flexibility; is support that empowers students to be enabled and self-supportive; stems from an inclusive approach that helps students feel they are part of an institutional / tertiary “family” (USC_STK_023); entails personal welfare checks where students know someone “cares” (CQU_STK_043); and, is personalised and ongoing throughout a student’s academic journey. These characteristics are touched on in the following illustrative quotes from staff:

I think again it comes down to that empathetic support. It’s a fine balance because you need to support people without doing everything for them. So supporting people to enable them to become independent and effective and confident. (UNE_STK_012)

In terms of supporting them, I think a lot of it comes down to empathy and encouragement. (USC_STK_024)

Offering flexibility: The matter of flexibility was a prominent theme in both staff and student interviews. A total of 38% of students (26 out of 69) and 46% of staff (12 out of 26) stressed the importance of flexibility as a critical factor in the success of students. This flexibility related to:

- assessment dates, deadlines;
- study load (part-time/full-time) and ability to defer studies;
- access to teaching staff;
- access to online learning;
- generous open times for the campus and computer labs; and
- special consideration and extensions.

Flexibility was viewed as critical for those balancing work and study (65% of students), or dealing with study and having children and/or other family responsibilities (72.5% of students). These findings align with prior research which highlights flexibility as a positively influencing factor in the academic experiences of non-traditional students (Devlin *et al.*, 2012; Kehoe, Tennent & Becker, 2004; Roberts, 2011). The research points to the importance of open and flexible access (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), flexibility in relation to the curriculum (Miller & Lu, 2003), and flexibility relating to timeframes, timetables and deadlines (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007).

Technology was seen to play a significant role in offering flexibility to these students. Indeed, students and staff commented on the flexibility that technology offered students in terms of anywhere, anytime access. Students variously referred to flexibility facilitating them: being able to undertake their studies while being in hospital; getting an essay done on a four-hour car trip; and undertaking assessment tasks while waiting for appointments. This flexibility was particularly critical for students balancing work, family responsibilities, and/or disabilities, though issues with accessibility are an ongoing issue for this cohort of students. As one student who had opted for online study explained:

I wouldn’t be able to do it if it was on campus ... I get up at 4:30 and go and do some work, come home, do a couple of hours’ study, get the kids to school, go to work, come back, study, pick the kids up, do all the afternoon stuff, and then go back and study again ... if you’re on campus, I don’t think you can do that sort of thing. (USQ_STU_139).

The importance of understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities was highlighted in the present study. Approaches to pedagogy and teachers who consider the realities of students’ complex lives and competing priorities were highly valued by students and were seen to contribute to their success. The research further points to the need for ongoing professional development for staff, improved promoting of existing support services to students, offering empathic support, respecting students and exercising flexibility (particularly through technology).

2. Facilitating students being and feeling connected to university

The second teaching and learning factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities was facilitating them being, and feeling, connected to the university. Prior research indicates that a sense of connection is a powerful social and emotional factor that affects student learning (Becker & Luthar, 2002). According to Osher, Kendziera, Spier and Garibaldi (2014, p. 1), this includes "... how the student experiences his or her relationships with the teachers and other students as well as how students experience the care and support provided to teachers and other staff." They add that "connectedness" refers to the experiences of a student and their perceptions and feelings about their university.

Students from the present study reported that connectedness was critical in relation to helping them feel encouraged to continue with their studies. One student explained: "I think it's a big factor that can make you feel... a bit isolated and alone, and if I was beginning I probably would have given up" (SCU_STU_062). Staff similarly highlighted the criticality of connectedness, with one insisting, "You've got to get that connection because my experience is, is that if there's no connection with the institution, people will just leave. You just don't hear from them" (SCU_STK_031).

Fostering connectedness: Students appreciated timely responses to their queries, including in interactive online forums, which helped foster a sense of connection. As one student stated, "... just having that forum, the more informal forum, to talk to your peers. I guess it's made me feel less disconnected and less isolated as an external student" (UNE_STU_021). As was the case in the findings of the recent study of the experiences of regional students by Nelson, Readman, and Stoodley (2016), students also valued early contact from the university when they first commenced their studies:

I think it was from the initial emails that I had from Student Central. So, I was really impressed by the timing. I didn't feel like [the university] was this big, unfamiliar entity that I was coming into. (USC_STU_048)

Staff similarly recognised the benefits of these early efforts to foster connection: "It's that connection with people really early, as soon as they've made a decision, accepted an offer, and then taking that through to orientation and to what's offered to students" (SCU_STK_031). However, continued support which extended beyond the first year was also deemed critical: "I feel like I have a greater connection with them and they in a way have been a really positive guiding influence because they're always checking in" (USC_STU_048). Staff viewed connectedness as helping students feel valued and welcome, and ultimately helping "students feel at home" (CQU_STK_042). Staff saw the value in having a dedicated team of staff or staff member that was a continuing point of contact for a student throughout their academic journey. Thirty-five percent of staff (9 out of 26) did, however, recognise resourcing (both funding and time) as a key challenge.

Fostering connection through technology: Those teachers who were seen as effective by online students made strides to "bring the campus" to students (through recorded lectures, online resources, Skype meetings), responded to queries in a timely manner, and made efforts to foster face-to-face contact (even if it was only one meeting per semester). Students appreciated staff who made themselves readily available to answer questions and provide academic support, and valued staff who shared their own experiences and who felt more like a "friend".

Research testifies to the importance of connection between students and staff. Zyngier, Martin, Loughran and Ewing (2016, n.p.) claim it plays a substantial role "in facilitating students' motivation and engagement." Connectedness and a sense of a good teacher-student relationship has been shown to equate to students having more confidence, being more focused, aspirational,

participating in class and persisting with their studies. Poor relationships and a lack of connection experienced by students can result in anxiety, failure and disengagement from studies (Zyngier et al., 2016).

Technology was seen by the majority of respondents as having the capability to foster the connections for students with other students and with staff. The importance of facilitating these connections for remote and online students was a recurring and prominent theme, as one student commented:

I've made use of Facebook as far as connecting with other students goes. Being able to just connect with them sometimes and say, 'Oh my goodness that was an incredibly challenging unit, did anyone else have trouble with this particular thing?' ... just because we don't have that face-to-face connection that on-campus students have. It is good sometimes to be able to say to someone 'did you get that? What, did I miss something?' So I've made use of that and that's made a difference to my ability to push forward sometimes. (USQ_STU_121)

Staff appreciated how technology enabled relationship building: "... making sure that there is a relationship built which is decidedly much, much harder if it's a distance education student you've never seen. Technology can help with that, really it can" (SCU_STK_032).

Approachable staff facilitating connectedness: Previous research documents a raft of factors affecting general student health and wellbeing. These include staff-student relationships, especially staff receptiveness and approachability (Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins & McMillan, 2009). In the present study, thirty-five percent of staff (9 out of 26) thought the approachability of staff was essential to facilitating student success through connectedness. Typical comments included:

... they have to engage with academic and professional staff who really do care. And, the student needs to know that they can approach a variety of people with ... questions, issues and problems, and know that that person really is trying to connect with them, to understand them, and to as simply and as positively as possible, provide them with the information or the skills ... they're looking for. (CQU_STK_042)

... we seemed like we were really approachable and I think that broke down all those barriers. (USC_STK_026)

Teaching staff being accessible and approachable played a large part in students who were studying online, in particular, feeling as though they were not disconnected from the university experience:

I have been able to get in contact with the teaching staff in order to just do a quick ten-minute Skype, just to put things in perspective and have that one on one chat as opposed to doing it via email. But I've also found the emails are really good. I've never waited any more than a two-day turnaround for a response to an email about questions, so that's really helped as well. (UNE_STU_026)

A feeling of connectedness to the university, its staff and fellow students is clearly critical in relation to helping regional students feel encouraged to continue with their studies. Early engagement with students and approachable staff are important to this connection and technology is an important tool for facilitating such connectedness.

3. Student preparedness for the realities of university study

The third teaching and learning factor that contributed to the success of regional students was their preparedness for the realities of university study. While some regional, low SES background students who were first in their family to attend university were prepared in some ways for study and university life, many had gaps in their understanding of what was expected of them as a

university student. Building students' capacity for success and their confidence, including through making the implicit expectations of them explicit, were identified as key practices that assist students to succeed.

Being prepared for the realities and challenges of university study is widely understood to be a factor in student persistence and success. Eighty-one percent of staff viewed being prepared for university studies as a key factor in student success. Some viewed students from low SES backgrounds as more prepared than their middle-class peers:

I would say that they do come well prepared. We often find they arrive here with a backpack that's brand new ... they have gone and spent a bit of extra money on themselves, and got a new backpack, they've got a pen and pencil, and the moment they sit down at the desk, and open their new pencil box, or whatever they've got there, ready to roll. Bring it on. Whereas, those who aren't [prepared] will be rocking on the chair and not looking at you, and turning to their phone and trying to send SMSs while you're speaking and such. They're not focussed. They don't focus. Then, when we dig deeper we find out they're here because mummy and daddy... said so. (CQU_STK_041)

However, other staff members viewed students from low SES backgrounds as less prepared than some higher SES peers because of their prior educational experiences, background and/or first in family status:

I think some students from low SES backgrounds come to the university without possibly the 'backpack' of competencies or experiences that other students may have - they may be the first in their family to come to university - so they don't always have that whole toolkit and understanding about university: who does what, who to talk to, what it looks like, what the hierarchy's like. (SCU_STK_031)

Echoing the findings of Pitman et al. (2016), thirty-five percent of staff (9 out of 26) in this recent study saw enabling programmes and preparatory courses as critical in adequately preparing students from low SES backgrounds for university study.

Building capacity to succeed: Students from low SES backgrounds entering higher education are often required to shift from being unfamiliar to being familiar with university-specific culture and practices. Research in this field highlights the need for students to become more competent and confident in the specific knowledge and skills necessary for university and to have the requisite self-efficacy and "grit" necessary to succeed. Several staff interviewed for the present study framed these shifts as "adaptation":

I think it's the ability to adapt quickly, that's the single most important factor, because the environment that they're coming into is so different to what they would have come from. So, adaptability and coping strategies would be ... most important. (USQ_STK_120)

Building student confidence: Thirty-five percent of staff spoke about the need to build student confidence as part of their preparedness for the rigours of university study. They commented:

You have to remember that a lot of these students have never had any kind of previous experience with a tertiary environment, they might initially be pretty tense and nervous about being enrolled in a university programme, they probably feel under-confident. (USQ_STK_121)

...if we can't teach them to rise up, or raise up their self-confidence and their belief in themselves, then we will lose out on keeping that student at the university. (CQU_STK_041)

Making expectations explicit: The importance of making explicit the implicit was clear in student interviews. Students spoke of coming in "blind" and having to "read between the lines" to

determine what was required. When asked about specific improvements universities could make, students made specific reference to the importance of university staff making key academic skills and amenities such as library services explicit, along with university-specific information such as course structure. Students also indicated they would appreciate explicit instruction in relation to referencing, course structure, orientation, library services, postgraduate opportunities and career services.

Thirty-five percent of staff (9 out of 26) stressed the need for expectations of students by the university to be clarified and made explicit to students. One staff member said:

I think clear information at the outset about what study at university involves because again I think we're seeing students who enrol and haven't got a clue what they've signed up for. Informative open days, informative web pages for perspective students, information that's realistic and honest and isn't sugar coated and isn't underplaying what tertiary study involves. I think there's actually something to be said for being upfront about the commitment and I think they value it more. (UNE_STK_013)

Staff were keen to emphasise the role of students in their own success and to point out their own role as facilitators of student agency:

..students ... have got to become agents themselves of their own transformation. (FED_STK_001)

This is very much about building the whole student just as well as building the academic side of the student. (FED_STK_004).

Teaching that attends to the gaps in student preparedness and understanding, and teachers who make explicit that which is implicit, can help build student capacity and develop their confidence and overall ability to succeed.

4. An inclusive, engaged approach to pedagogy

The final teaching and learning factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities was an inclusive, engaged approach to pedagogy and assessment that takes account of the realities of the lives and preparedness for study of these students. Roberts (2011) purports that part of effective teaching is the adoption of pedagogical approaches that better cater to diversity, and 27% of staff (7 out of 26) interviewed in the present study agreed. The present student found that teaching that was, and teachers who were, inclusive of the “real-world” of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities were able to facilitate success for these students.

An inclusive approach to pedagogy would helpfully include the engagement of students through active and interactive learning. Sixty-five percent of staff (17 out of 26) shared the view that engagement was critical to student success, while thirty-six percent of students (25 out of 69) referred to the importance of engagement in their learning, and saw active, interactive teaching approaches as critical to facilitate this. As students put it:

The more interaction the better. So online tutorials, so not just recordings but interactive. Every time we've had them like in Blackboard Collaborate sessions and things like that, I've done a lot better. Especially if they're structured where they give you activities to do rather than just going in to ask questions. (USQ_STU_133)

I found that you'll learn more when you sort of literally interact with the teachers, and actually talk to the teachers whereas sometimes they just talk at you and you sort of tune out. It's really good when they actually interact with you and actually makes you respond to their questions. (FED_STU_004)

An important aspect of inclusive pedagogy is assessment of student learning that is meaningful and relevant to students' lives and experiences. Sixty-eight percent of students (47 out of 69)

commented on assessment as a key factor in their success. Students appreciated assessment tasks that were relatable, practical and “real-world” based. They also valued those assessments which challenged them and encouraged them to learn. One student illustrates this:

Probably the memorable assignments are those ones that you struggle with but they're very applicable to the real world and you struggle because you can't quite make that leap but, once you get there, they are the most helpful things. Like, you learn the most about what you're going to need when you're out there. (SCU_STU_065)

Staff stated that “being able to have a diverse way of assessing students” (SCU_STK_031) helped them to help students succeed. Devlin et al. (2012) also found that variety and flexibility in assessment, while upholding academic standards, assisted low SES students to succeed. Of particular note was the repeated reference by staff regarding the relevance of assessment. One staff member summed up a common thread in a number of comments: “It has to be relevant to them” (SCU_STK_032). This same stakeholder went on to explain, “But most of all I think intelligent design of assessments. That move away from just writing a bloody essay, that are relevant to them. But that then would benefit everybody, not just the low SES [students]” (SCU_STK_032).

Finally, when asked about the ways success could be better facilitated through assessment, as well as a “variety” of assessment tasks (UNE_STU_027), students and staff highlighted the following factors: the importance of making the criteria explicit; and, given many students work full time as well as studying and/or having family commitments, reasonable amounts of reading material.

The study found that an inclusive, engaged pedagogical approach helps regional students from low SES backgrounds succeed. Engaging students in interactive exchanges, thoughtfully and intelligently designed assessment that has real-world relevance to all students, making sure expectations are understood all assist students to progress through their studies.

Conclusion

As Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) argue, effective teaching must be oriented to and focused on students and their learning. To effectively teach regional students from low SES backgrounds, teaching staff must understand their students so that teaching can be effectively oriented and focused. It is only by having insight into these factors that teaching practice can meet the requirements of the context in which it occurs, another key aspect of effective teaching (Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2010). As argued in this paper, the regional and rural context of learners must be a key consideration in teaching practice in efforts to bridge sociocultural incongruities. Moll et al. (1992) call for an understanding of rural and regional students' “funds of knowledge”, while Grunewald (2003) refers to the need for “place-based consciousness”, and appropriate skills to develop place-based curriculum (White, 2010).

This study found four major factors related to learning and teaching that helped facilitate low SES student success in a regional context. First, teaching staff should be open to understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students. Part of this entails having staff, programmes, initiatives and approaches that factor in the realities of students' complex lives and competing priorities. Second, facilitating students being and feeling connected to university is critical in relation to helping them feel encouraged to continue with their studies. Significant aspects of that connectedness are relationships with staff who are approachable and available as well as engagement fostered through engaged teachers and engaging pedagogical approaches. Third, students need to be adequately prepared for the realities of university study. Building students' capacity for success and their confidence, including through making the expectations of them explicit were identified as practices that would assist students to be prepared to succeed. Finally, the adoption of an inclusive, engaged approach to pedagogy helps students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities to succeed.

The table below provides a summary overview of the four key findings and the practical advice for teaching to regional students from low SES backgrounds presented within this paper.

Table 1. Practical Strategies for Teaching Regional Students from Low SES Backgrounds

KEY SUCCESS FACTOR	PRACTICAL STRATEGIES, APPROACHES
Understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be understanding and responsive to students' complex lives and the multiple priorities they are managing - Offer flexibility - Use inclusive pedagogy - Offer empathic support - Promote existing support services to students - Understand first-in-family issues (feelings of belonging etc.) - Use technology as a tool for connecting with students (while mindful of potential accessibility issues for some)
Facilitating students being and feeling connected to university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage early with students - Use technology to foster connections with students (through online chats, social media, etc.) - Be approachable and accessible as staff - Provide timely responses to students - Offer support beyond the first year - Provide a dedicated staff member and/or contact person for students
Student preparedness for the realities of university study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognise many students may not have the sociocultural capital of their middle-class peers - Build students' capacity for success - Build student confidence - Make the implicit explicit - Help students adapt to university-specific culture and practices - Develop student the skills and knowledge necessary for success at university
An inclusive, engaged approach to pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use pedagogy and assessment that take into account the realities of students' lives - Engage students through active and interactive learning - Use diverse, meaningful and relevant assessment - Be flexible and use variety in assessment (while upholding academic standards)

Central to these practical strategies and approaches outlined in Table 1 is an overarching understanding that takes into account potential sociocultural incongruities. Bridging sociocultural incongruity foremost relies on helping students navigate their way through “*a new culture*” (Devlin, 2013, p. 942). Northedge (2003, p. 17) explains this as “*modelling learning as acquiring the capacity to participate in the discourses of an unfamiliar knowledge community and teaching as supporting that participation*”. Devlin’s (2013, p. 946) framework maintains that students “*need to be prepared to take the risks and opportunities inherent in joining a new community, and to persevere in order to ensure the learning required to function effectively in that community*”.

Students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities face a range of specific challenges in accessing, participating and successfully completing their studies. These include geographical location, financial constraints, emotional factors and overcoming sociocultural incongruity. These factors pose a significant challenge to the success and completion of students who are impacted by the two equity factors of low SES background and regionality. The findings presented in this paper contribute to understanding of “*what works*” in relation to teaching practice to facilitate the success of regional students from low SES backgrounds.

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