

Effectiveness of Developing Pathways to University Entry for Low Socioeconomic Status Students

SWAPAN K. SAHA

University of Western Sydney

VIVIAN W. Y. TAM

University of Western Sydney

MARY HARDIE

University of Western Sydney

Abstract

Increased participation in tertiary education is widely seen as fundamental to economic, social and cultural wellbeing. Higher education has a major role to play in meeting the lifelong learning needs of both individuals and the workforce of the future through increased participation. This emphasis on the provision of increased participation has never been greater. The solution is not simply increasing participation in higher education, but increasing participation from groups not currently accessing such education in a proportionate way. This paper examines the early establishment phase of a current pathway being developed for the Bachelor of Construction Management at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). The pathway aims at increasing participation in the degree program by students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Four structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students. This study indicates the possible effectiveness of the current pathways. Future research in this ongoing project will map effective learning and teaching pathways for achieving diversity within the higher education sector of the built environment in Australia generally.

Introduction

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a highly abstract concept (Gale, 2009). Its measurement is both complex and controversial. There is no single, agreed measure of individual or family SES. SES is a combination of economic and sociological factors. It involves the total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or a family's economic and social position relative to others, based on income, education, and occupation. When analyzing a family's SES, the household income, earners' education levels and occupations are examined. For an individual, their own attributes are assessed incorporating similar factors (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). SES status is typically broken into three categories, high SES, middle SES, and low SES to describe the three broad areas that a family or an individual may fall into. When placing a family or individual into one of these categories any or all of the three variables (income, education, and occupation) can be assessed. A fourth variable, wealth or assets may also be examined when determining SES status.

In 2009, the Australian Government announced two ambitions for student participation and attainment in Australian higher education. It was proposed that, by 2020, 20% of all undergraduate students in higher education will come from low SES backgrounds, and by 2025, 40% of all Australian 25-34 year olds will hold a Bachelor's degree (Bradley et al., 2008; Australian Government, 2009). People from lower SES backgrounds, those from regional and remote Australia, as well as indigenous Australians are currently under-represented in higher education compared to

their incidence in the general population (Bradley et al., 2008). Improving access and equity in higher education for these groups is a high priority for the Australian Government.

As in many developing and developed countries, Australian universities generally have poor participation rates for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as a share of all domestic students (James, 2002). This aggregate figure however, hides the variation among universities in Australia. Differences in access and participation rates depend heavily upon the models adopted by the particular institution (Gale, 2009).

Increased participation in tertiary education is believed to be fundamental to economic, social and cultural wellbeing (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003). Higher education has a major role to play in meeting the lifelong learning needs of both individuals and the workforce of the future through increased participation. This emphasis on the provision of increased participation has never been greater, as noted by (Bradley et al., 2008).

There is considerable evidence of existing yet isolated models to foster lifelong learning within universities that encourage and enable diversity and equity. Some such current models are capable of delivering the flexibility needed to diversify the student cohort and widen access to participation in education from traditionally under-represented groups (Philips, 2006). While there is some evidence of success in enabling and widening participation in higher education, the current models exist in an environment that is complex to navigate for those individuals wishing to upgrade or broaden existing skills and knowledge, especially through the acquisition of additional qualifications. There is substantial evidence of rigidities, inflexibilities and obstacles to learning and teaching within the higher education sector, which mean that both individuals and industries most in need of a qualified and professional labour force are unable to access flexible education in an efficient and transparent manner. Bradley et al. commented upon these barriers and concludes that “much remains to be done to improve connectedness and ensure that pathways operate effectively” (Bradley et al., 2008).

Transitional pathways offer a fundamental organizing principle to broaden and diversify access to tertiary education by facilitating access to and movement across the education sectors. Defined by principles of social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity (Aspin & Chapman, 2001), the concept of lifelong learning encompasses notions of economic development and progress, personal development, and enrichment and the extension of knowledge, with learning conceptualized as flexible, universal and accessible (Candy & Crebert 1991; Tight, 1998; Hyland & Merrill, 2003). Adequate transitional pathways are a first step on the road to lifelong learning.

Within the concept of lifelong learning is the notion that education can be non-linear and thus it can incorporate vertical articulation and horizontal integration across curriculum and programs to create pathways within and across the education sectors. Further, this concept is underpinned by the notion of learning as flexible, universal and accessible, including to diverse groups of learners, with learning conceptualized as occurring throughout a life cycle. It is a system that provides multiple entry and exit points for those already in the workforce or those anticipating entry. It is a system that is able to provide integrated responses to individual and industry needs to reflect changing educational requirements at all levels and link qualifications with strong, articulated, and transparent lifelong pathways.

These learning and teaching models may facilitate seamless, transparent pathways between qualifications. Such models commence with the first transition from compulsory schooling, but are not necessarily linear. There is significant evidence that within the Australian tertiary sector reverse articulation and parallel articulation between qualifications is occurring (Tight, 1998; Harris et al., 2006). Increased participation in higher education by students with vocational education qualifications

gained in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector may enhance opportunities for individuals from under-represented groups to successfully access university education.

This paper aims to report on the preliminary experiences of some articulating students in the Bachelor of Construction Management program at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). Future research will study other universities' pathways and their effectiveness. The aim is to develop effective learning and teaching pathways that lead to best practice in student diversity improvement for the higher education sector of the built environment. The ultimate intention of the ongoing project is to evaluate and disseminate best practice exemplars across both the built environment sector and the wider higher education audience.

Pathways for Bachelor of Construction Management at the University of Western Sydney

At UWS, the Bachelor of Construction Management program is located within the College of Health and Science. The College's preliminary 2010 data shows that its overall low SES participation rate of about 23.9% is very close to its 2010 target of 24.0%. The preliminary undergraduate low SES participation rate in 2010 is about 24.4%, whereas the postgraduate rate is about 18.3%.

UWS has the largest numbers of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Construction Management in Australia. About 730 students are enrolled in the four-year degree program. UWS is in the process of developing well-defined articulation paths into degree programs for the holders of relevant TAFE diplomas. In general, four to eight units (or subjects) are granted for students with a completed TAFE diploma. This is the equivalent of one or two semesters of study. TAFE diplomas in Building and related fields usually involve two years of full time study. Therefore, articulating students receive a maximum of 50% of their time spent in TAFE study, as advanced standing in the construction management degree program. This pathway is not a shortcut, but it does allow students who otherwise might not have gained entry to university to aspire to gaining a degree.

Recent research on the final grade point average (GPA) of the full list of graduates from the Bachelor of Construction Management program, between 2007 and 2009 at UWS, found that students from TAFE diplomas achieved a higher GPA of about 4.678 when compared to students from high school of about 4.510 (Hardie & Saha 2010). The GPA is awarded at a rate of 7 per High Distinction, 6 per Distinction, 5 per Credit, 4 per Pass and 0 for Fail. This study found that the pathway taken to get to university does not determine outcomes to any great extent. Students from trade backgrounds, those from disadvantages groups and mature age students have all demonstrated an ability to match their cohort of school leavers at university. They do, however, need appropriate levels of support.

In addition to the TAFE pathway, a distinct institution called UWS College has been established to provide alternate diploma pathways, which directly articulate into UWS degree programs. A Diploma of Construction Management is available from UWS College. The diploma provides students with a broad range of knowledge and skills, in order to prepare them for second year university study. When the students successfully complete the diploma, they can progress to second year of the Bachelor of Construction Management at UWS. The course content of both the three-term (standard) and two-term (fast track) program is broadly equivalent to the content of the first-year of the corresponding UWS undergraduate degree. Successful completion of the diploma in Construction Management provides advanced standing of 80 credit points (first year study) in the Bachelor of Construction Management at UWS. The diploma can be completed in one year full-time study over 12 months (three terms) or eight months full-time study (two terms). This means that fast track graduates can complete a four year UWS undergraduate degree in just three years and eight months. Year 2011 is the first year that students from UWS College are transferred to UWS degree programs in

Construction Management. It is necessary to monitor the progress of the students whom enter via different pathways.

Research Methodologies

To examine the student response to the current pathway developed for Bachelor of Construction Management at the UWS for achieving university access for low SES students, structured interviews with four SES students studying in the course were conducted. This study uses postcode to identify low SES students in the selection of the interviewees. The questions were asked during the interviews are related to the background of the students, experience in the UWS College and university life, awareness and suggestions of the pathways and career opportunities.

Results and Discussions

Student 1 is currently studying the first year of the Bachelor of Construction Management at UWS and previously studied for the UWS College Diploma in 2010. He is very interested in construction and wants to understand how jobs are completed on time as well as the whole construction process from the beginning to the end. He has some work experience on construction sites. His whole family is currently working in the construction industry. The student heard about the pathway to UWS College from a friend. The pathway definitely helped the student to make the decision to study the course at UWS, as it provided a good introduction to university life and the construction management program. The student believes that if it were not for the UWS College pathway, he would not have gone to university and he would probably be working on construction sites in a trade or unskilled capacity.

Student 2 is also currently studying the first year of the Bachelor of Construction Management at UWS and previously studied UWS College Diploma in 2010. As he was not successful at entering university based on his high school results, he received an offer letter from the UWS College and heard about this pathway for the first time. The student felt that university life is somewhat more difficult than college life. The student has wanted to study construction since he was a high school student. A lot of his family members are also working in the construction industry. The UWS College Diploma saved the student one year when compared with a TAFE diploma. If he did not get the offer letter from UWS College, he would have studied for a TAFE diploma and tried to get into the construction industry in a trade capacity.

Student 3 is an international student, who is currently studying the second year of the Bachelor of Construction Management at UWS and previously studied a foundation academic skills program at UWS College for three months in 2010. This is a pathway from UWS College for international students who are interested in enrolling in a UWS degree, but do not meet current entry requirements. The student is interested in building and construction work and intends to find a job related to the course after graduation. The student heard about the pathways from an agent in the overseas office. He did not agree that UWS College should provide a guaranteed place in the higher education bachelor's degree at UWS. He believed that entry should be based on merit achieved in the diploma. If this pathway did not exist, the student would have sought other opportunities in other countries for a construction management degree.

Student 4 is a third year student in the Bachelor of Construction Management program at UWS who previously studied UWS Diploma in Engineering in 2009. The student was initially interested in engineering because of inspiration from his brother. However, he did not have enough marks for the entry requirement for engineering and ended up studying the engineering diploma at UWS College. After commencing his diploma he found himself very interested in construction management and he subsequently selected construction management as his career path. The student had the opportunity to

study either the UWS Diploma or TAFE diplomas. The student chose to study at UWS College as it has a better entry path to university. The student thinks that UWS College should provide a guaranteed place in the higher education bachelor's degree in construction at UWS if students have passed all their units in the UWS Diploma. If the student did not have a position from UWS College, he would have found a full time job after his high school study. His other options were to join the Army or Police Force.

Based on the four structured interviews with students from low SES background, it is indicated that the UWS College pathways are effective for students entering the UWS bachelor degree. Without this pathway, the students concerned might not have had the opportunity to study at university.

Further Study

A number of discussions have been held with local Institutes of TAFE offering building and related diplomas regarding standard articulation. Pathways in practice at other universities will be also analyzed before finalizing the standard pathways for TAFE diplomas for the Bachelor of Construction Management course at UWS. Similar studies will also be conducted for other universities. The aim is to develop robust exemplars and models that lead to best practice in student diversity improvements. The higher education sector has an ongoing need to evaluate and disseminate best practice exemplars across both the built environment sector and the wider higher education audience. This study hopes to contribute to this much larger discourse.

Conclusion

This paper examined the subjective response of a small group of students to the current pathway developed for Bachelor of Construction Management at the UWS, which aims at improving access for low SES students. This preliminary study indicated the potential effectiveness of the current pathways. Without such pathways, many students may not have the opportunity to study at university. A small preliminary study cannot be used to draw robust conclusions. It does, however, give an indication that articulation pathways need further attention and have the potential to influence university access for low SES background students in a positive way.

References

- Aspin, D. & Chapman, J. (2001) *Towards a Philosophy of Lifelong Learning*, International Handbook of Lifelong Learning (London, Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- Australian Government (2009) *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Canberra).
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H. & Scales, B. (2008) *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia).
- Candy, P. C. & Crebert, R. G. (1991) Lifelong Learning: An Enduring Mandate for Higher Education, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 10:1.
- Gale, T. (2009) *Towards a Southern Theory of higher education*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (Townsville, Australia).
- Hardie, M. & Saha, S. (2010) Some Significant Issues Concerning the Articulation of Construction Programs Between TAFE and University: a Discussion of the Experience at a NSW University. 35th Australasian Universities Building Educators Association Conference (Melbourne, Australia).
- Harris, R., Rainey, L. & Sumner, R. (2006) *Crazy Paving or Stepping Stones? Learning Pathways Within and Between Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education* (National Centre for Vocational Education Research).
- Hyland, T. & Merrill, B. (2003) *The Changing Face of Further Education- Lifelong Learning, Inclusion and Community Values in Further Education*. (Routledge, Falmer).
- James, R. (2002) *Background and Higher Education Participation: An Analysis of School Students' Aspirations and Expectations*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education (Melbourne, Melbourne University).
- National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) Socioeconomic Status (Retrieved 31 March, 2008, from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/glossary/s.asp>).

- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2003) Program for International Student Assessment (Retrieved November 12, 2003, from <http://www.oecd.org>).
- Philips, K. P. A. (2006) *Giving Credit where Credit is Due: A National Study to Improve Outcomes in Credit Transfer and Articulation from Vocational and Technical Education to Higher Education*, (Department of Education, Science and Training, Australian Government).
- Tight, M. (1998) Education, Education, Education! The Vision of Lifelong Learning in the Kennedy, Dearing and Fryer Reports, *Oxford Review of Education*, 24:1.