

Non-traditional university student achievement: Theory, policy and practice in Australia

Professor Marcia Devlin (PhD)
Chair in Higher Education Research
Deakin University, Victoria, Australia
mdevlin@deakin.edu.au

Keynote Address

13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference 2010
27 June - 30 June 2010

In addition to the intrinsic commitment that higher education institutions, and the individuals and teams within them, have to the achievement and success of non-traditional students, the links between government widening participation policy, performance measurement and funding to universities will now provide an additional incentive. The future growth of the number and proportion of non-traditional students in Australian universities will focus attention keenly on student achievement. This paper argues that particular theories may be helpful in understanding the experiences and perspectives of non-traditional students and, therefore, in informing policy and practice within institutions and beyond to facilitate student achievement. In particular, notions of role theory, cultural capital, the hidden curriculum at university and socio-cultural theory in action are examined and utilised to inform suggestions for proactive responses in both the 'public and private lives of higher education' (Trow, 1975).

Introduction

As Collier and Morgan (2008) have noted, "Higher education is a critical pathway to achieving occupational success and social status in all industrialized countries" (p. 441). However, as Devlin (2008) and others have noted, this pathway is not equally available to all. In particular, low higher education participation rates for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and for Indigenous students are well documented. And while the issues associated with poor rates of participation for some groups of 'non-traditional' students have been widely understood and acknowledged for many years, there has been little or no improvement or advancement of this situation in this timeframe. As Devlin (2008, p. 1) notes, this "...is despite an expansion of participation *per se*, the provision of financial and other support for students, and significant target setting and monitoring of universities' performance".

In the context of the Australian federal government's response to the 2008 Bradley Review of higher education, we find ourselves on a trajectory predicted by Trow (1972) who wrote of higher education expansion and transformation from elite, through mass, to universal access. This paper argues that as we move forward from the massification brought about by the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s and into the Bradley/Gillard reforms toward universality that are ahead of us, it is appropriate to work toward successful experiences for all students who study within these changing frameworks, including the greater number, and proportion, of non-traditional students who will increasingly study alongside traditional students. This necessitates a focus not only on access, but also on achievement for all students. As the International Association of Universities (2008) puts it, "The goal of access policies should be successful *participation* in higher education, as access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase" (p. 1).

In the short-term future, the Australian higher education sector will have more students. This alone will have significant impact on universities. The sector will also have more 'non-traditional' students. Kim, Sax, Lee, and Hagedorn (2010) point out that a lack of a consistent definition of non-traditional students makes it difficult to understand to which students we are referring. For the purposes of this paper, 'traditional' students might be

understood as those who made up the vast majority of the student body when the system was an elite one, that is students who have come straight from (often, but not always, private) secondary school to university and in the main, from high and medium socioeconomic backgrounds and who tend to study on-campus and full-time. 'Non-traditional' students, then, are those who do not fit this definition and may include: mature age students; VET pathways students; students from low socio-economic backgrounds; Indigenous students; rural students; students who are the first in family to attend university; off campus students; part-time students; and flexible entry students, among others. Students in these categories have grown in number and proportion since the Dawkins reforms and will now increase in number and proportion again as a result of the Bradley/Gillard reforms. This in turn means that in the future Australian higher education landscape, there will be students from a wider range of backgrounds; with a wider range of experiences and expectations; with a wider range of social capital; and with a wider range of university preparedness than in the past.

The Australian federal government's blueprint for higher education following the Bradley Review, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, recognises the association between students' experiences and their achievement. As the document says,

A positive student experience has an impact on student retention and further study. Maintaining and improving the quality of teaching, learning and the student experience is a critical factor in the success of universities and other higher education providers... (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.15).

So committed to ensuring the quality of students' experiences are the government that they have proposed a suite of performance indicators with funding likely to be tied to achieving targets on these indicators. The central objective of these proposed indicators is to guide universities toward increased access and increased success, broadly conceived. It is now likely that in addition to the intrinsic commitment that higher education institutions, and the individuals and teams within them, have to the achievement and success of non-traditional students, the links between government widening participation policy, performance measurement and funding to universities will provide an additional incentive to focus on student achievement.

While a small number of Australian universities have significant experience with non-traditional students, the federal government policy changes mean new directions and new emphases for most universities. It could be argued that there is not, currently, widespread understanding of non-traditional students' backgrounds, characteristics and experiences in Australian higher education and that, therefore, institutions and staff within them are not ready to respond *en masse* to the changes we are about to experience. Particular theories and conceptions may be helpful in understanding the experiences and perspectives of non-traditional students and, therefore, in informing policy and practice within institutions and beyond to facilitate non-traditional student achievement. In particular, notions of role theory, cultural capital, the hidden curriculum at university and socio-cultural theory in action are examined to inform suggestions for proactive responses in both the 'public and private lives of higher education' (Trow, 1975).

The university student role

Non-traditional students must not only survive academically at university, they must learn to become a university student (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, and McCune, 2008) and master the university student 'role' (Collier and Morgan, 2008). Based on their research on the experiences of non-traditional students in a research-intensive university in the United Kingdom, Christie *et al.* (2008) suggest that a lack of knowledge about university practices can hinder learning. Based on their North American research, Collier and Morgan (2008) note that mastering the student role requires students to both understand the expectations of them and to meet those expectations successfully. This distinction between understanding, and meeting, expectations is important. The argument in the current paper is that it is likely that non-traditional students will have a lack of such knowledge and will have particular challenges to overcome in order to achieve at university, and particularly so in their first year of study. It

is further argued that Australian universities, and the Australian sector, have a responsibility to facilitate achievement for these students through proactive policy and practice responses.

Collier and Morgan (2008) argue that "...it is easier for traditional students entering the university to become "role experts," due to their greater familiarity with higher education based on their family's past experiences ..." (p. 442). They contrast this with the expertise of non-traditional students, who are the first in their family to attend university, arguing that they "...typically possess relatively lower levels of college student expertise, in that, they cannot rely on parental advice to help them identify and resolve role-based problems or to help them understand the university's expectations" (p.442). Collier and Morgan (2008) add that these non-traditional students "...come to the university with less understanding of student roles and less capacity to build their existing knowledge into genuine expertise" (p. 442). Mastery of the student role is linked to student achievement and success for reasons outlined later in the paper.

Multiple roles

Higher education students must achieve mastery of the student role within the context of multiple roles, and competing role priorities. Kim *et al.* (2010) draw on role theory, which examines how individuals manage and prioritise the performance of multiple roles, and point out that many tertiary students have other roles besides that of students. These other roles include those as parents and employees, among others. Kim *et al.* (2010) note that each role a person inhabits, "...independently requires significant amounts of time, energy, and responsibility." (p. 407). Based on the work of Stryker (1968) and Stryker and Macke (1978), Kim *et al.* (2010) argue that the commitment a student makes to multiple roles "...is dependent on ... the priority placed on a specific role in relation to other roles" (p. 407) and further that this is, in turn, "strongly tied to cultural values" (p. 407). Some non-traditional students may not always perceive their role as a student as their primary one or the one that should be given the highest priority at all times.

Kim *et al.* (2010) suggest that the higher the value a person puts on a particular role, the higher the priority that role will be given when role conflicts and time management tensions arise. Given that many non-traditional students are categorised as such precisely because they have other roles, role theory can assist in conceptualising, understanding and supporting the higher education experience of many of these students. The work of Kim *et al.* (2010) points to the importance of keeping in mind how individual students conceive of their primary role and then manage and prioritise multiple roles. The student role is one of many that non-traditional students, in particular, must master and so success in higher education demands multiple role management and mastery in their case.

In assessment and teaching and learning interactions, assuming that the student role is one of several for non-traditional students might prove helpful. Non-traditional students in particular often have to fit university study demands around other role demands. This is often not a matter of simple choices or prioritisation, as may be assumed by some teachers and by institutions when making decisions about attendance requirements, timetabling and so on, but involves students making decisions in relation to study that may impact on others such as children and other family members, co-workers and employers and on extracurricular responsibilities that are important and significant.

It has been argued that students who arrive at university with a greater understanding of the role of a university student have an important resource for understanding and meeting expectations (Collier and Morgan, 2008). Greater understanding would be more likely to be evident among traditional students who have had family members attend university than among non-traditional students who are often the first in their family to attend university and who may have greater demands from other roles, such as parent, employee and others.

Cultural capital and understanding tacit expectations

Cultural capital is a notion that is critical in understanding the experiences of non-traditional students at university.

Cultural capital has been defined as “proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices...” (Aschaffenburg and Mass, 1997, p. 573). Bourdieu (1973, 1977, 1984) suggests that the primary vehicle for the transmission of the ‘ruling class’ culture is the education system. He suggests further that teachers and other staff, arguably those representing the ruling class, have the authority and the means to assess students and do so based on a set of assumptions, values and expectations that are not always made explicit. Student from higher socioeconomic strata and traditional backgrounds build familiarity with these assumptions, values and expectations over a lifetime. Others may not. As one student in Gale’s (2002) Australian study of university students with learning difficulties put it:

You’re not told. You’re left there to figure it out. (Student 28) (p. 75).

It has been argued that if a comparison was made between two students who had equivalent understanding of course material, the student who better understood the student role, and in particular the need to respond to the *tacit* expectations of the staff member, would perform better (Collier and Morgan, 2008). Further, Collier and Morgan (2008) point out that different staff in the same university or even department can have quite different expectations of students, thus increasing the challenges that non-traditional students face in succeeding at university.

The hidden curriculum

The expectations to which Collier and Morgan (2008) refer are part of what Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker and Gair (2001) would term ‘the hidden curriculum at university’. Curriculum is evident in three categories: the intended; the enacted and the hidden curriculum. The intended curriculum includes the official texts, and what is explicit in terms of teaching, learning and assessment. The enacted curriculum, as the name suggests, includes how the intended curriculum is delivered, what happens in practice in terms of curriculum. The hidden curriculum includes the values and beliefs that are signified by what is, and is not, represented in the official discourse (Margolis *et al.*, 2001). The hidden curriculum is the one that allows university students to gain understanding and knowledge that may not openly be intended to be taught or learnt.

The term ‘hidden curriculum’ is thought to have originated with Jackson (1968, In Margolis *et al.*, 2001) who observed in school education values, dispositions and social and behavioural expectations and argued that learning these expectations was part of the hidden curriculum. Examples at the school level include learning to wait quietly, putting effort into work, cooperation with and allegiance to teachers and peers and being punctual. Jackson suggested that these have little to do with education *per se* but were essential for progression through school (Margolis *et al.*, 2001). Margolis *et al.* (2001) suggest that some of the elements of the hidden curriculum at university include “...manners, and class dispositions – the qualities once called ‘finishing’ – and certain glib pseudointellectual styles ...” (p. 3).

Non-traditional students notice their difference to traditional students in terms of ‘style’, as a student in the study by Christie *et al.* (2008) points out:

I know that the way that I speak is working class and I have got an accent, and being in an environment where there is lots of middle and upper class students and when they are presenting, and they are able to project themselves, it just seems to be a completely different thing for me, because I suppose I am class conscious ... and I didn’t feel very confident giving presentations in front of middle and upper class people because I know that I carry an accent. (p. 578).

Some of the students in Gayle’s (2002) study articulate the style they encounter at university:

Lecturers tend to use a more textbook style when they’re talking ... It’s like writing an essay. They keep backing it up and backing it up and backing it up ... [with] Vygotsky, Piaget,

etcetera. (Student 23)

[They use] a lot of quotes and paragraphs that actually cover the topic they're talking about ... And they'll refer to page numbers, the year, and sometimes they give you library references ... It doesn't mean anything to some people. (Student 50)

At school, teachers put it in their own words and take out all the mumbo jumbo and just put it down so you can understand it a lot easier ... [Whereas] sometimes it's a bit hard to follow some [lecturers] ... they're up on cloud nine and I just can't understand them. (Student 71) (Gayle, 2002, p.74).

Part of the hidden curriculum includes what Collier and Morgan (2008) term "implicit expectations" and "tacit understandings" (p. 426). Success at tertiary level depends on understanding these unspoken requirements and being able to perform in ways that meet them. Many non-traditional students do not know that these unspoken requirements exist, never mind that they must understand, and then respond appropriately to, them. This lack of tacit knowledge can hinder non-traditional student achievement.

In Australia, the latest national federal government funded study of the first year experience of 2422 students found that students from a low socioeconomic status were more likely than their higher socioeconomic peers to say they had difficulty comprehending material and adjusting to teaching styles within the university environment (James, Krause and Jenkins, 2010). Part of this difficulty in comprehension and adjustment may be due to what Lawrence (2005) refers to as the discourses of university, which might also be categorised as part of the hidden curriculum. Lawrence (2005) points out that students are confronted with the following on entering university:

Each subject has its specific prerequisites and/or assumed entry knowledge; subject matter (content or process orientated, text-bound, oral or computer-mediated); language; texts (study packages, lecture notes, PowerPoint notes, web CT documents, CD Rom); cultural practices (ways of dressing and showing respect – Professor, first names); attendance [mode] (lectures, tutorials, practical sessions, clinical sessions, external/internal/online); behaviours (rule-governed/flexible, compulsory/optional attendance, consultation times, electronic discussion groups); class participation (passive, interactive, experiential); rules (about extensions, participation, resubmissions, appeals); theoretical assumptions (scientific/sociological); research methodologies (positivist/interpretive/critical, quantitative/qualitative); ways of thinking (recall, reflective, analytical or critical, surface or deep); referencing systems (APA, Harvard, MLA); ways of writing (essays/reports/journals/orals); structure (particularly in relation to assessment); tone and style (word choice, active/passive voice, third/second/first person, sentence structure, paragraph structure); formatting (left/right justified, font, type, spacing, margins); assessment (exams, assignments, orals, formative/summative, individual/group) (p. 247).

Lawrence (2005) names these the subject 'discourses' and points out that to pass a subject, students need to engage, master and demonstrate capacity in these discourses. This is significant demand to lace on all students and may present some particular difficulties for non-traditional students.

Some students have what Margolis *et al.* (2001) refer to as a reservoir of cultural and social resources and familiarity with "particular types of knowledge, ways of speaking, styles, meanings, dispositions and worldviews" (p. 8) when they come to university, which allows them to feel comfortable in the university environment and gives them decoding skills. Devlin (2009) has pointed out that some students *do not* have such a reservoir and the hidden curriculum can be particularly difficult for them. Many non-traditional students fall into this second group. Contrary to feeling comfortable, many non-traditional students feel the way those in the study by Christie *et al.* (2008) describe their experience of being at university:

I find it really hard to integrate with ... middle class people ... I feel quite intimidated by this university and I feel as if I'm working class and I shouldn't be here ... I feel ... if Ravenscraig [large steel works] hadn't shut down ... I'd be working there ... now but eh, I just feel I'm no' good enough. (p. 576).

University-specific socio-cultural capability

Collier and Morgan (2008) draw a distinction between two interrelated ideas relevant to the notion of non-traditional students *understanding* their role as students, and, separately, *mastering* that role. Collier and Morgan (2008) distinguish between a student's academic skills and *actual* capacity on one hand and their cultural capital and *demonstrated* capacity on the other. These authors argue that whatever a student's *actual* capacity, their background and cultural capital affects their ability to understand tacit requirements and appropriately perform a university student's role and thereby *demonstrate* their capacity. Collier and Morgan (2008) also point out that *demonstrated* capacity is what is examined and assessed at university.

The following are examples of non-traditional students from the study by Collier and Morgan (2008) 'getting it wrong' because they did not understand tacit expectations, which contributes to their lack of demonstration of their capacity:

The assignment we had said, "write about some field experience" and I literally wrote the two page thing out. It said "write" and I took it literally and wrote it out, and then I got a note back that said "see me." It was in red and everything, and I went and she was like "you were supposed to type this up." But the instructions were to "write." I wasn't sure what she wanted (p. 440).

I am taking biology... I do not have experience in writing, and the main thing is that they require writing for research papers, and I'm expecting doing a lot of work trying to figure out how to do that. I did two papers already and... He said, "You have to go back and do it again, this is not scientific writing"... I thought it was scientific because it was from a biology textbook, and I did study at [community college], and he said "No, this is not scientific writing." So it is really hard to see what they want because they already see it, they already know it, they see what I don't (p. 440).

Collier and Morgan (2008) argue that the traditional achievement model of education in which academic performance is determined by a student's understanding of course material, which is in turn determined by a student's academic ability, is limited. They recommend a wider understanding that incorporates the notion that the 'fit' between the expectations of university teaching staff and the expectations of university students is "...an additional influence that mediates the relationship between students' academic skills and their academic performances" (p. 429). In other words, how closely students can understand and relate to the tacit expectations of staff will have an impact on their performance achievement at university.

According to Lawrence (2005), achievement at university relies on socio-cultural capabilities relevant to the specific context of university study. Some of the elements of university socio-cultural competency include appropriately: seeking help and information; seeking and offering feedback; and expressing disagreement. Taking the example of seeking help, Lawrence (2005) points out that the specific verbal and nonverbal means of asking for help differ from subculture to subculture. She argues that seeking help may not be "culturally 'valued'", for example in "individualist self-reliant sub-cultures" (p. 250). Evidence from Gayle's (2002) study would seem to support this claim. As one student explains:

"... Actually, I got a bad result for one assignment and the lecturer wanted me to go to the Learning Support Centre or whatever it is... He wanted me to go down there because supposedly my language wasn't too crash hot. It seemed to get me through the next lot of subjects, though, /didn't it? ... You listen to them but [not when] only a quarter of your

teaching population said that, only a quarter of the people you have contact with, a quarter of the people you give assignments to, said that. So I didn't — me being so wise and everything — I didn't take his advice.... I don't want to admit [that he is right] either, because that would mean defeat. (Student 69) (Gayle, 2002, pp 75/76, emphasis in original).

If a student does choose to risk 'defeat' and ask for help, s/he needs to consider the words to use, whether to ask directly or indirectly, whether to include explanations or reasons or not (Lawrence, 2005). As Lawrence (2005) explains, students may feel that they do not have the right to ask, or may equate seeking help as remedial. As one student in Lawrence's (2005) study explained:

I don't feel confident enough to speak to my tutor about the essay question because they might think I am stupid or something" (Psychology student, Lawrence (2005), p. 250).

The risk of defeat or being perceived as "stupid" are not the only risks for a non-traditional student seeking feedback or seeking to challenge a grade. As Lawrence points out, there is also the risk that, "... there is a potential for offence (in relation to a high status lecturer)" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 250).

Students in Gayle's (200) study provide an indication of additional potential, or perceived, difficulties, in accessing and approaching staff, even if students decide to take the risks inherent in doing so:

They come in at 9 or 5 past 9 and leave at 10 or 5 to 10. I've tried to talk to lecturers but it's not much good. I can't get across. I can't really communicate with them. (Student 77)

[Lecturers seem to have the attitude that] 'I'm up here. I'm a lecturer. You're down there', that sort of thing ... I knew I'd be wasting my time to ask them [for help]. I've tried asking them [but] they want to remain superior. (Student 23) p. 75

One student in Lawrence's (2005) study who had some experience of challenging feedback and who subsequently understood some of the tacit expectations explains,

"It's not a good idea to just walk in and say 'look this is crap'. You can't bulldoze your way through you have to be tactful about it... 'Look, I agree with this, but I think I've been hard done by with this bit for this reason'" (Nursing student, p. 250).

Without guidance, however, non-traditional students may only learn this is 'not a good idea' through trial and error and this is not an ideal method of learning given the significant risks involved for the students.

Unfortunately, current policy research in Australian higher education has not moved beyond deficit model assumptions. For example, the latest report on the national survey of first year students commissioned by the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) suggests that as we move into widening participation "... attention might be given to ways in which students *are informed of* the kind of engagement that effective higher education requires" (James, *et al.*, 2010, p. 9, emphasis added) and that the sector explore "more sophisticated strategies for *making student responsibilities* in the higher education partnership *more explicit*. (James, *et al.*, 2010, p. 9, emphasis added). While explicitly informing students of their responsibilities is critical, this alone would constitute an inadequate response in terms of assisting them to meet these responsibilities. As Collier and Morgan (2008) point out, understanding and mastering the role are two different requirements. In addition, such suggestions on their own assume a deficit model and assume that changes to accommodate non-traditional students must be the responsibility of these students, once clearer information about expectations has been provided.

In order to assist students with the latter and to genuinely contribute to student success and achievement,

universities will need to do much more than to spell out their expectations for non-traditional student involvement in learning, although doing so is a critical part of an appropriate response. As the Bradley/Gillard agenda is implemented, an increasing number and proportion of higher education students in the Australian sector will be non-traditional. Theories and ideas around role, cultural capital, tacit knowledge, the hidden curriculum and sociocultural capability can inform the proactive responses that higher education institutions now need to make.

Policy and practice responses

Role theory suggests that, within the context of possibly multiple roles, there is a higher education student role that needs to be learnt and successfully carried out. Notions of the hidden curriculum and tacit expectations of staff suggest that for non-traditional students, the details of the student role may be unknown and to some extent, hidden from them. Non-traditional students may, then, be at a disadvantage in terms of familiarity with, and preparation for, the student role. And the idea of Collier and Morgan (2008) of the distinction between actual capacity and demonstrated capacity in the student role points to the disadvantage that non-traditional students have in terms of the performative aspect of their role as student. This paper argues that the mastery of the student role, awareness of tacit expectations and the hidden curriculum, and performing according to unspoken expectations are key to non-traditional student achievement and success and, therefore, are critical elements for the sector, universities and individuals and teams of staff to consider when planning for such success.

Trow (1975) refers to the 'public and private lives of higher education'. The public life includes the public decisions made by government and institutions in relation to higher education. The private life refers to the less public day to day interactions including those between staff and students and what happens in the classrooms, the library and offices of universities. Suggested responses in both 'lives' are outlined below.

Responses in the private life of higher education

Multiple role mastery

One of many ways in which the multiple role demands of non-traditional students might be accommodated within the policy and practice of higher education is through the integration of the expertise and life experience of students into the curriculum. This is more appropriate and more easily facilitated in some disciplines and courses than others, but arguably can be achieved to some extent in most contexts. Rather than conceiving of the student experience as only comprising events inside higher education, the assumption is that those events and circumstances that occur in the lives and multiple roles of students are potentially rich sites of learning and could be brought into the formal learning environment to some extent. The establishment of curriculum frameworks that embrace the experience, knowledge and skills that non-traditional students in particular bring to university would move the sector beyond limited approaches that assume necessary accommodations must be on the part of students.

Strategies such as giving early, low stakes assessment tasks with feedback (Kift, 2008), carefully avoiding over-assessment (Devlin, 2002a), providing advice on special consideration, and support with the development and use of time management techniques can all contribute significantly to student achievement. None of these are necessarily special treatment for non-traditional students but would instead be examples of good practice generally. Role theory points to the limitations of just telling students what their responsibilities are without being mindful of the complexity of enacting the student role, and without being mindful of their other roles, of the challenges inherent in prioritising roles such as parent or employee and of the cultural forces that may be at play when making choices about role priorities.

Managing tacit expectations and the hidden curriculum

Role mastery and expertise involves both explicit and implicit knowledge (Eraut, Alderton, Cole and Senker, 2000).

The achievement of non-traditional students is very likely to be enhanced through the articulation and demystification of the implicit university curriculum. One of the simple and potentially most profound ways in which staff can contribute to this endeavour is to speak in plain language. The use of 'academicese', including waffly language, long sentences, complexity and vagueness, and "big long fancy words" (p. 75) as one of Gayle's (2002) interviewees put it, may disenfranchise students, particularly those who are not familiar or comfortable with this way of communicating. As one of students in Gayle's (2002) study suggests, lecturers who understand the risks associated with obscuring meaning with language "put [their academic ideas] into my terms. They don't ... pull out the dictionary every time they need a word. They say it in my language. They make it suit me" (Student 28). (p. 75). Using plain language, staff need to ensure that there is clear exposition of tacit expectations for those students who do not have the keys to uncovering this hidden information, and may in fact not even know that it exists, as well as appropriate development and support for students.

Assessment is a critical site for such finetuning and for clarity about expectations. Devlin (2002b) suggests the use of assessment 'briefings and debriefings', where all staff, including sessional staff, and all students attend an early lecture (face to face and/or online) where the assessment requirements for the subject are spelt out in plain English. Such exposition in the briefing would ideally include detailed advice about expected standards of work; the provision and explanation of rubrics; discussion of marking criteria to be used for written assignments; advice on avoiding plagiarism and collusion; advice on practical expectations related to assignment preparation and submission; and clear advice about the means through which assistance is provided to students. Such assistance may include staff office hours/availability online and response turnaround times; particular support available from tutors/demonstrators; language and academic skills workshops and consultations; library training, support and resources; online support and resources; and anything else relevant to supporting students in managing the assessment regime and tasks.

Devlin (2002b) suggests that the debriefing would be held a week later and queries, questions, uncertainties and concerns would be aired, discussed, and resolved, again ideally with all staff and students present so that everyone hears the same information and advice. This would not only contribute to widespread improved understanding of assessment requirements, it would also be likely to contribute to greater consistency in marking and feedback across multiple staff, in many cases, located on multiple campuses.

As Collier and Morgan (2008) suggest, universities need to "...ensure that the path to success depends on students' academic abilities, rather than on their abilities to understand what ...[staff] expect of them" (p. 445). Assessment briefings and debriefings constitute one strategy to contribute to the endeavour of making the implicit explicit, among many others in use across the sector.

Demonstrating socio-cultural capacity

As important as exposition is, it is not all that is necessary. If higher education institutions are to assist a wider range of students to achieve in higher education, they need to ensure that all students are equipped for the performance aspect of their role. With sufficient care and effort on the part of institutions to make expectations clear, students may well understand what it is that is expected of them, but performing to these expectations is a different matter.

Lawrence (2005) suggests that the development, *pract/se* and *pract/ce* of appropriate socio-cultural skills is important for students who are less familiar with the student role. Such development in students needs to be Institutions need encouraged, particularly around undertaking and completing assessment tasks, asking for help, challenging grades, interacting with staff, and using language appropriately for all of the above. This would be assisted by staff encouraging students to ask for and seek help and staff normalising, rather than pathologising, doing so. One method that may be helpful in achieving this is through careful and deliberate use of language by staff. For example, rather than using words such as 'If you're having trouble...', or 'If you're stuck....', prior to suggesting students seek help, which suggest any problem lies in deficits within the student, using words such as

'When it comes time to use the resources available to you to help with assignments, the details of the different forms of help can be found here...' which suggest it is a matter of *which sort of help*, rather than *whether or not to seek help*, that is the choice to be made.

Where possible, staff may advise students to enact the appropriate skills and model the use of such skills for students. Supporting and reinforcing student attempts at developing appropriate skills and rewarding these attempts can be helpful, if time and space within and/or concurrent to the curriculum can be found or made. Collier and Morgan (2008) suggest employing successful non-traditional students as peer mentors for new students. Taking up this suggestion might often entail tweaking existing programs to deliberately match non-traditional student mentors and mentees, where such matching does not already occur.

Consideration might be given to providing extra time for non-traditional students to learn and master the performance aspects of their role and to the use of alternative assessment formats, where appropriate, fair and equitable, to allow non-traditional students to make use of their existing strengths to demonstrate capacity. Scaffolded attempts at tasks, particularly in the first year of higher education, the use of carefully designed hurdle tasks and nested assessment to provide opportunities to build skills toward a major assignment are all possible methods of responding to the issue of performance, depending on context. Working collaboratively and in partnerships between academic staff, sessional staff and teaching support staff, such as language and academic skills advisors and library staff, it is possible to teach students the understandings and skills they need in order to decipher, translate, perform and succeed.

Responses in the public life of higher education

As mentioned above, in Trowler's (1975) terms, there is also the 'public' life of higher education – those areas in which policy and other decisions are made. Federal policy decisions underpin the renewed interest in non-traditional students in Australia and institutional policy, structural and other decisions will have a significant impact on the achievement of this greater number and proportion of non-traditional students. Specific institutional initiatives such as English language assessment and teaching services; mandatory English subjects for some students; optional for-credit academic skills subjects; introductory subjects that teach students about the tacit expectations of them and about how to meet them; and collaborations between academic staff and student services staff to provide proactive, embedded career development and academic language and learning support are some of the ideas that have already begun to take hold in Australian higher education.

Collier and Morgan (2008) suggest considering the creation and implementation of orientation programs designed around the needs of non-traditional students, with the central aim of such programs to give students the skills to recognise and respond to academic staff expectations. Such programs, they suggest, would offer a basic understanding of the different kinds of expectations students are likely to encounter. They further suggest that such programs might reach beyond the start of teaching periods, perhaps utilising online technology to do so, to assist students who do not realise they need help deciphering expectations until they begin having trouble doing so. Such ongoing support may be particularly critical for non-traditional students who are less likely to be able to predict what they will need and when they will require assistance during a teaching period.

In addition to such specific programs and initiatives to assist students to succeed such as those outlined above, appropriate leadership, structural frameworks, and the creation of a culture that supports individual and team work in the 'private' sphere will be critical to the success of non-traditional students. This will require thinking differently about many aspects of universities' operations. Student services are an area in which an illustrative example may be made. Arambewela and Maringe's (forthcoming) research points to the traditional nature of student services in some universities and the assumptions that underlie their organisation. For example, if services are only available face to face during office hours, this can exclude some non-traditional students who study in the evenings and/or online. In addition, many non-traditional students are likely to have family responsibilities and may need to factor in the needs of their children and family to decisions they make. Arambewela and Maringe (forthcoming) suggest that

student services that do not provide a broad focus that incorporates this wider orientation by particular student groups are unlikely to adequately meet the needs of those students. While Arambewela and Maringe's work focus on postgraduate international students, their observations apply more broadly to non-traditional students at all levels of higher education study.

Universities may need to provide considerable assistance to staff to acknowledge and manage student diversity, particularly where they have not been required to do so on any scale previously. The provision of adequate resources – financial and temporal – to facilitate professional development for staff, including the induction, training and mentoring of sessional staff, will also be necessary. So too will the development of sustainable approaches that are respectful of academic and professional staff workloads be necessary, as after a certain point, the more demands placed on staff, the greater the risk to the quality of teaching and learning and of support they can provide.

Conclusion

Non-traditional student success is likely to be enhanced through the recognition by higher education institutions, and the individuals and teams within them, that many non-traditional students may not be aware that they need to adopt a student role and behave and demonstrate capacity in certain ways, may not know what the specific required use of language, conventions and/or skills are, and may not have had adequate opportunity to refine such behaviours to adequately meet tacit, unspoken expectations. Appropriate planning would include designing the means for making subculture expectations and rules clear to students, providing safe opportunities to practice the required skills and doing so within a structural framework that normalises such endeavours rather than making them special, unique or 'remedial' and a curriculum framework that attempts to incorporate students' existing knowledge. Appropriate planning would also include the professional development and support of staff so that they can make appropriate changes to their practice to ensure they contribute to the achievement of all students, including non-traditional students.

While there are pockets of excellent practice in relation to non-traditional students in some Australian universities, successfully supporting non-traditional student achievement will require significant change in policy and practice across the sector. Having enrolled non-traditional students, universities have a responsibility to provide the conditions that will facilitate student achievement and success. Appropriate theory, and an understanding of the complexity and nuances of the endeavour, is likely to be helpful in guiding this provision.

Acknowledgements: I'd like to thank Dr Anna Lichtenberg and Dr Helen O'Shea, Research Fellows of Deakin University's *Higher Education Research Group*, for help locating references and for feedback on an earlier version of this paper, respectively.

References

- Arambewela, R. and Maringe, F. (forthcoming). International postgraduate students experience in a UK University: Lessons for academic practice. *Research and Development in Higher Education*, 33.
- Aschaffenburg, K. and Mass, I. (1997). Cultural and educational careers: The dynamics of social reproduction. *American Sociological Review*, 62, 573-587.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487–551). Oxford University Press, New York.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

Press.

Bourdieu, P., and Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, culture*. Sage, Beverly Hills.

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Hounsell, J. and McCune, V. (2008). 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education*. 33(5), 567-581.

Collier, P. J. and Morgan, D. L., (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education* 55 (4), 425–446.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, (2009). *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, Canberra, Australia. Retrieved 28 May, 2010 from:
<http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/default.aspx>

Devlin, M. (2002a). *Assessing learning in Australian universities: Minimising plagiarism*. Australian Universities Teaching Committee and Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne. Accessed 25th May 2010 from: <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/plagMain.html>

Devlin, M. (2002b). *Assessing learning in Australian universities: Assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education*. Australian Universities Teaching Committee and Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne. Accessed 25 May 2010 from:
<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/intstaff.html>

Devlin, M. (2008). Submission to the Australian Review of Higher Education Review. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Accessed on 28 May, 2010 from:
<http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/Submissions.aspx>

Devlin, M. (2009, February). Low socioeconomic status and Indigenous background: Implications for first year curriculum. Keynote address at the First Year Experience Curriculum Design Symposium, Queensland University of Technology, Queensland, Australia 5-6 February, 2009. Accessed 28 May, 2010 from
http://www.fyecd2009.qut.edu.au/program/Marcia_Devlin.jsp

Eraut, M., Alderton, J., Cole, G., & Senker, P. (2000). Development of knowledge and skills at work. In V. I. Frank Colfield (Ed.), *Differing visions of a learning society: Research findings* (pp. 231–261). The Policy Press, London.

Gayle, T. (2002). Degrees of difficulty: An ecological account of learning in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education* 27 (2), 65-78.

International Association of Universities. (2008). *Equitable Access, Success and Quality in Higher Education: A Policy Statement by the International Association of Universities*. Adopted by IAU 13th General Conference, Utrecht, July 2008. Accessed 25 May, 2010 from: http://www.iau-aiu.net/access_he/access_statement.html

James, R., Krause, K. and Jenkins, C. (2010). *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, Australia.

Kift, S. (2008). *The next, great, first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution-wide approaches to enact the FYE as "everybody's business"*. In *11th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference 2008*, 30 June - 2 July, Hobart. Retrieved May 28, 2010 from:
http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers08/FYHE2008/

Kim, K.A., Sax, L.J., Lee, J.J. and Hagedorn, L.S. (2010). Redefining nontraditional students: Exploring the self-

perceptions of Community College students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 34, 402-422.

Lawrence, J. (2005). Addressing diversity in higher education: Two models for facilitating student engagement and mastery. In A. Brew and C. Asmar (2005). *Research and Development in Higher Education*, 28, 243-252.

Margolis, E., Soldatenko, M., Acker, S., and Gair, M. (2001). Peekaboo. In E. Margolis (Ed.). *The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education*, Routledge, USA.

Trow, M. 1972. *The expansion and transformation of higher education*. General Learning Press, New York.

Trow, M. 1975. The public and private lives of higher education. *Daedalus* 2: 113-27.