Abstract

The focus on widening access to tertiary education in Australia post-Bradley (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) has encouraged a range of innovative initiatives in response to federal equity targets. Success is often defined by access statistics of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, which can detract attention from the importance of the quality of the first year experience in determining whether students benefitting from widening participation initiatives are retained and succeed in their studies. Stories of success are important to sustain such initiatives, maintain funding and ensure high-level institutional endorsement. This case study of one alternative-entry pathway, Broadway UWA, contributes a tile to the mosaic of evidence needed nationally to demonstrate success in widening participation and help sustain equity access and participation initiatives.

Context

Highly ranked research universities1 worldwide tend to be characterised by very selective entry requirements for their undergraduate courses, a factor often at odds with mission statements seeking to attract the most academically capable students, regardless of background or circumstances. There is a substantial body of research internationally in the higher education sector that argues that academic achievement in secondary school is correlated with socio-educational advantage (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010; Levy & Murray, 2002; Win & Miller, 2005). Despite their academic potential, for a variety of reasons students from disadvantaged communities often struggle to achieve the entry scores dictated in competitive entry processes, especially for the professions of law, medicine, engineering and dentistry.

It is not just the admissions processes of research-intensive universities that act as a barrier for students from disadvantaged communities. Their campus culture can be perceived as alienating to students who are concerned that they will not have a sense of belonging at or be likely to succeed in elite research-intensive universities. Even when the admission requirements have been met, students fear feeling isolated or highly visible as a member of a minority group on campus.

Sir Martin Harris' (2010) influential study of the performance of Russell Group universities in the United Kingdom in meeting targets for widening participation concluded that there was much still to be done to improve access for disadvantaged students (see also: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). He recommended that highly selective universities adopt a range of strategies to raise aspirations and build academic achievement amongst disadvantaged cohorts. Universities needed to offer broad-based aspiration-raising activities.

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1 Academic Ranking of World Universities is the first world university ranking. It ranks the world's top 1000 colleges and universities based on objective indicators. See: http://www.arwu.org
for students from a young age, whilst also providing intensive learning experiences for older students through residential summer schools and conferences that inspired students to overcome their reluctance to aim for highly selective universities, if their grades were competitive. Universities also needed to have flexible entry pathways that took account of individual circumstances.

The UK experience in widening participation has been valuable in providing insights for Australian universities charged by the federal government to meet targets for the enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds. Researchers in the First Year Experience in Australia, though, have long understood the need to adapt to local contexts and geographical constraints (McInnis, 2001; Walker, 2001). The university in this case study, The University of Western Australia (UWA), draws its students from a state that is a third of the Australian continent and several times larger than the United Kingdom in its entirety. UWA has adopted an integrated equity and access strategy to raise aspirations and create alternative-entry pathways. The elements that comprise this strategy are a broad-based aspiration-raising program that has a significant regional and remote component; programs targeting Indigenous students; a mature-age access pathway for students who have missed their first opportunity for tertiary study; an alternative entry pathway, Fairway UWA, that takes account of individual disadvantage and provides intensive support through the final year of secondary school to eligible students; and an entry pathway that takes account of school-based educational disadvantage, Broadway UWA, providing students from selected schools with a lower entry threshold.

Methodology

This paper focuses on the first year experience of the inaugural intake of students through the Broadway UWA pathway. A case study methodology is adopted, as is often the case in the social sciences or educational evaluation fields, because it allows a detailed contextual analysis of a real world context (Yin, 1984). This particular example is an illustrative case study, which is largely descriptive in its approach, based as it is on a limited data set of one year of participation in higher education. It can also be viewed as a success case study, although like most case studies it is exploratory in its intention to learn from evidence collected, in order to refine and improve program outcomes in the future.

This case study investigates the hypothesis that underpinned the establishment of the Broadway UWA initiative, that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often perform better at university than their more advantaged peers. Like other case studies (Stake, 1995), it makes use of data from multiple sources: student enrolment and performance data; student interviews; survey data and staff observations. It is grounded in an extensive literature of widening participation (see, for example, the literature review undertaken by Gale, Hattam, Comber, Tranter, Bills, Sellar & Parker, 2010). Again, like most case studies, it has limited usefulness as a ‘stand-alone’ example, but as is argued here, it is important to record successes that contribute to the national agenda of widening participation in Australian higher education. Drawing on the metaphor of the mosaic, this case study contributes a tile or two more to the overall picture.

Background

In 2010, UWA’s Senate commissioned research to recommend strategies to improve access for students from low SES backgrounds to the University of Western Australia. The resulting
The report proposed two additional alternative entry pathways: Broadway UWA and Fairway UWA. The concept of each proposal was endorsed in principle by the Senate and Student Services was then given the task of developing the details of each pathway. Both pathways accepted their first student cohorts in 2012: Fairway UWA recruited a cohort of students in their final year of high school, whilst Broadway UWA supported the first students entering via the Broadway alternative–entry pathway in their first year of university and is the focus of this paper.

The Broadway program aims to address school-based educational disadvantage by providing access up to 5 points below UWA’s standard admission of an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) of 80 or higher. Any student from a Broadway-identified school who attains an ATAR of 75+ will be made an offer for one of the three-year undergraduate Bachelor’s degrees, subject to preference order.

Broadway schools have been identified as meeting the following criteria:

1. Schools with an ICSEA (Index of Socio Educational Advantage) score of 1018 or lower;  
2. Schools who are partnered with UWA through the Aspire UWA program;  
3. Schools with 20 per cent or more of their student cohort who were identified as low SES background; and  
4. Schools who are rated at 5 or above on the RRMA index for regional and remote schools.

Principals and Year 12 coordinators were advised by letter and promotional materials of this new initiative in the second half of 2011. Initially 125 senior high schools and all district high schools in Western Australia were identified as Broadway schools. In 2012 a further seven schools were identified as eligible and in 2013 two further schools have their inaugural Year 12 cohort and will join the Broadway schools.

Eligible Broadway students are notified in their letter of advice from the Tertiary Institutions Service Centre that they are eligible for an offer. They are then admitted through Broadway UWA as an alternative entry pathway: the students’ ATAR scores are not moderated as part of the admission process.

**Implementation**

The first cohort of Broadway students aligned with a major change in course structure for the University as it implemented its New Courses 2012, designed to introduce a degree structure with breadth and flexibility to allow students to explore options, especially in their first year. A bewildering array of double-degrees was simplified to a choice of four three-year undergraduate degrees and one four-year research-focused degree for very high achieving students. This change in course structure was underpinned by an extensive process of curriculum renewal, with a focus on embedding key generic skills in communication, English

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2 1018 was the median ICSEA score of all West Australian high schools at the time of establishment of the scheme.  
3 See [http://www.aspire.uwa.edu.au](http://www.aspire.uwa.edu.au) for a list of Aspire UWA partner schools.  
4 The percentage of low SES school population was identified through use of census data. At the time of establishing the scheme, the ICSEA index was under review and it was considered more robust to adopt several criteria, rather than rely on ICSEA alone.
language development and research skills. Professional courses that formerly had very competitive entry scores now became postgraduate degrees.

Whilst extensive curriculum development undertaken in implementing the new course structure provided a more scaffolded approach to generic skills development for all students, it was felt that the Broadway students should have personalised support from Student Services. A further and more important aspect was to ensure that these students, many of whom were first generation to enter higher education or who came from schools where very few students came to UWA, were welcomed, linked to existing support networks and familiarised with services available.

The first intake of students under the Broadway program occurred in Semester I 2012. 126 offers were made (111 in the first round and 15 in the second). From these 79 students took up studies, with a further 27 students deferring – a familiar pattern in WA amongst regional and remote students who take a gap year to earn money to fund the considerable cost of moving to Perth.

**Transition support**

Transition support for the Broadway students began from the time of offer. Once students accepted their offer, the Broadway coordinator made contact with them via email, congratulating them and strongly encouraging them to make the most of a range of orientation and transition services available to them. The letter also informed the students that they would be expected to attend an interview with the Broadway coordinator early in the semester (during weeks 2-4), or indeed, they could contact her at any time if they had any concerns or questions. This welcome letter also provided details of programs they could access which included: the Flying Start free 2-day residential orientation program; the UniSkills program which arranges social events and subject-specific study groups during semester and provides advice and support on an individual basis; UWA orientation programs; relevant degree-specific orientations; and the support of a student-mentor.

The Broadway students could also access individual support tailored to their specific needs, based on discussions with the Broadway coordinator. Individual interviews were intended to ensure that the students were settling in well and that, by attending in-person at Student Services, they were aware of all the resources that were available to them and where to find Student Services. The interviews also provided an opportunity for the students to meet the Broadway coordinator, so that they could build rapport and be confident that they had a point of contact as and when they felt it was necessary.

The interview covered social and academic transition issues and identified any services that could be helpful, including scholarships and financial aid, health and well-being services on campus, the extensive social networks available through the Student Guild and academic support available. Depending on their degree course, students were directed to faculty-based services including the Faculty of Science’s Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) groups, the Business School’s Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), the UniSkills academic study groups and the comprehensive academic skills program provided by the STUDYSmarter team. During the interviews it quickly became clear that the considerable investment of time in the interviewing process was worthwhile as many of the students were unaware of the available services. A number of the students were advised to seek assistance from either the Counsellors or the Disability Officers. Students’ progress was monitored and some students
attended a second interview in Semester II as their Semester I results indicated cause for concern.

During semester, ongoing support for the students was provided through regular emails reminding them of key dates and other pertinent information, for example, reminders about the Census date and exam preparation workshops which were run towards the end of semester by UWA’s academic skills program, STUDY Smarter. These email reminders generally resulted in responses from a number of students asking questions about some other aspect of their studies. Other students either dropped in or initiated their own email contact with the Broadway coordinator when they had questions.

Throughout the year the effectiveness of the support provided and its uptake by the students was monitored with a view to developing and improving the program for future years. Student uptake of the support was lower than expected (see Tables 1 and 2 below) despite the fact that each student knew about the availability of such services, even amongst those who had encountered difficulties with their studies in the first semester.

The coordinator attributed the limited uptake of support services to a sometimes misplaced sense of confidence by some students, who underestimated the demands of some courses. For example, one student could not be convinced that tackling three languages in his first semester was likely to prove overwhelming, but he was more willing to be guided once he experienced difficulty with his choices. One focus for 2013 will be to develop strategies to more strongly encourage the students to make greater use of the support services that are available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Semester 1</th>
<th>Semester 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASS*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAL**</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UniAccess</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Flying Start</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>UniSkills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>*Peer Assisted Study Session</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Use of support services by Broadway students in 2012
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Semester 1</th>
<th>Semester 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Sessions</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy Consultation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy Drop-in</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy Workshop</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Skills Workshop</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRITE Smarter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Number of Broadway students using STUDY Smarter services in 2012

Lessons learnt from the interview process, based on comments from students and results from student surveys each semester have led those associated with the program to conclude that these students need more direct counseling early in their study program about matters such as withdrawing from units in a timely manner in order to avoid negative impact on overall results and Weighted Average Marks (WAMs). Broadway students, who are often first generation students, are not as well informed as some of their peers of the consequences of not withdrawing prior to the Census or Without Academic Penalty dates. This was clear in analyzing results, where some students passed most units well but allowed one unit to fall away and failed, rather than withdrawing. Kift (2007) noted the tendency to ‘park, churn or drift’ amongst students new to higher education, where their better informed peers might be more proactive, or have parents who advised them to take action in a timely manner, when problems occurred.

Discussion

One of the key arguments underpinning introduction of the Broadway initiative was that students from less well-resourced schools tend to do better at university than their more affluent peers. Analyses of the results of the first cohort of students confirm this hypothesis.

In regard to retention, 126 offers were made under the Broadway scheme in 2012. Of these, 79 students from 47 Broadway schools enrolled and 27 deferred. In second semester four of the students who originally deferred took up their place at the University. At the end of 2012 62 of the students who began their studies in first semester had completed the year. Reasons for students withdrawing during the year included home sicknesses, a realization that university study was not right for the students at this point in time, and the difficulty of managing a long commute, work commitments and study. Among the students who withdrew during the year one has re-enrolled for 2013 and now feels that she really knows what she wants to study.

Of the 83 Broadway students who were enrolled in either Semester I or Semester II or both, 82 per cent remained engaged in their studies until the end of 2012. 10 students either withdrew from their studies very early in the semester, before the Without Academic Penalty date, or left the university without withdrawing. These students’ results are not included in a discussion of results later in this paper.
A further indicator of success was whether an increased number of students from low SES, Indigenous and Regional or Remote backgrounds enrolled at the university. All 83 students who were enrolled in 2012 fell within this demographic. On each of the demographic indicators of success the first year of Broadway UWA could be considered to have been successful. In 2013 the program is expanding with 187 offers being made in the first round, a marked increase on 2012.

A further indicator of success is provided in the results the students have achieved. In 2012 the Broadway students completed a total of 508 units. From these the students achieved 20 High Distinctions (80-100%), 82 Distinctions (70-79%), 159 Credits (60-69%), 150 Passes (50-59%) and they failed 97 units. That the balance of achievement is at the higher end of the scale (High Distinctions, Distinctions and Credits) indicates that many adapted well to the academic requirements of the tertiary environment.

Evaluation of the students’ results in Semester 1 indicates that, as a group, they are achieving well. Table 3 provides a comparison against two other student cohorts and shows that the Broadway students achieved slightly, but not statistically significantly better results than cohorts with which they can fairly be compared. Further analysis has shown that 22 per cent of the Broadway students had a WAM below 50 in Semester 1 while the percentage of WA School Leavers 2 with a WAM below 50 was marginally higher at 23 per cent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Cohort</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>ATAR*</th>
<th>Semester 1 2012 WAM**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broadway Students</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>75-79.99</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA School Leavers 1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>80-82</td>
<td>54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA School Leavers 2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>80-82</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA School Leavers 1 - WA School Leavers with ATAR 80-82</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>80-82</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA School Leavers 2 - WA School Leavers with ATAR 80-82 from schools with an ICSEA of 1150 or higher</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>80-82</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Australian Tertiary Admission Rank **Weighted Average Mark

Data shows that some Broadway students achieved well above the level that their ATAR at entry might predict: 15 students achieved a Grade Point Average (GPA) equivalent to an ATAR of 85-90 and 14 students achieved a GPA equivalent to an ATAR of 90-91.

**Feedback from students**

At the end of each semester the students were asked to complete a survey about their experiences at the university. In Semester I 24 students completed the survey while in Semester II the number rose to 29. In regard to challenges of studying at the university, two issues were frequently mentioned: the time spent commuting and time management. A number of students commented that Semester I had involved ‘a steep learning curve’ but one which they had enjoyed.

Although not many of the students accessed the full range of support services available, 91 per cent of those who completed the surveys indicated that they felt comfortable contacting
the Broadway coordinator to ask for help if they had any questions or problems. This is borne out in the number of students who did initiate contact with the Broadway coordinator over the course of the year.

Of those who completed the surveys, almost 80 per cent indicated that the Broadway program had provided them with a welcome opportunity to study at the university. Illustrative comments include:

Without the Broadway scheme there’s no way I could study at UWA and it would’ve been such a loss to think I wouldn’t have been able to gain the experience that I have and made all the fantastic new friends that will surely stay with me forever.

I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the [Broadway] program, and I don’t take it for granted. I’m very glad to have qualified.

My first semester at UWA has been incredible. I love the environment, atmosphere and culture of UWA.

Recommendations

The first year of Broadway UWA has provided some valuable learning for staff engaged with this program. The very pleasing results could have been even stronger had the students had more direct advice about their options at key points in their transition. To this end, the Broadway coordinator and her colleagues have proposed the following changes:

• Provide more direct advice to students at point of offer and other key points in their first year about the importance of managing their enrolment proactively;
• Devise a check list for them to take away from their interview, encouraging them to seek follow up support when needed and avoid failing units;
• Recruit some of the first cohort to act as mentors for the 2013 students; and
• Promote the pathway more rigorously amongst eligible secondary schools.

Conclusion

The Broadway UWA alternative entry pathway has been a success story in its first year of operation. The students have been retained at equivalent levels to the overall student population and their academic achievements on average have slightly exceeded a comparable cohort of their peers, who entered university with higher ATARs. Students involved have reported favourably on the support available to them in their transition and were enthusiastic about their experiences and feeling part of the campus culture. Their success is helping to dispel lingering doubts in some quarters of the University that students entering with ATARs below the standard entry would be competitive academically. The examples of student success to date also serve as an incentive to expand the pathway and actively promote this opportunity to school communities where a research-intensive university is not seen as an achievable destination.

Stories of success, even small case studies such as this, are important because they form part of a larger picture of creating opportunities for students from low SES backgrounds. Colleagues in the UK report that, in hind-sight, they did not celebrate success sufficiently, leaving widening participation open to challenge at government level. Australian higher
education institutions should learn from that experience and use every opportunity to celebrate success, learn from evaluation and share strategies that help sustain commitment to equitable access to higher education for all who have the academic ability to succeed.

References


