

**Effective teaching and support of students
from low socioeconomic status backgrounds:**
Resources for Australian higher education

NEW IN LAW

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

Applying the practical advice from the LSES resources

The Australian Office for Learning and Teaching funded project **Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education (SP10-1838 2011-2012)** focused on identifying and making explicit a series of succinct guidelines to assist the teaching and support of students who come to university with varying diversity in terms of their preparedness for higher education, and social and cultural capital. Two major resources were produced in the form of booklets: **Practical Advice for Institutional Policy Makers and Leaders** and **Practical Advice for Teaching Staff** which highlighted the policy frameworks, programs and practices that had facilitated the success of students from LSES backgrounds. The findings are applicable to a range of higher education contexts and appropriate to be taken up to enhance the teaching and support of all students, irrespective of their background.

Four national workshops were conducted in 2013/2014 (South Australia, Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia and Queensland). Participants had the opportunity to actively engage with the practical advice and guidelines that arose from the project and to consider the application of these findings to their institutional contexts.

Workshop outcomes:

- An understanding of the social cultural incongruity conceptual framework.
- An understanding of the key themes emerging from the data.
- An understanding of how to apply the findings in your context/institution.

Workshop leader/s: Professor Sally Kift (James Cook University), Ms Liz Smith (Charles Sturt University) and Professor Karen Nelson (University of the Sunshine Coast)

The resources produced provide guidelines and best practice information and strategies for institutional staff involved with Low SES cohorts:

Project website: <http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/resources.htm>

Practical Advice for Institutional Policy Makers and Leaders:
<http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/leaders.htm>

Practical Advice for Teaching Staff: <http://www.lowses.edu.au/files/teachers.htm>

The outcomes of the workshop produced a small number of vignettes as a way of detailing/exemplifying how these proposed strategies are implemented in the institutional context. The following details the **New in Law** Program at Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia.

New in Law

Overview

Flinders Law School currently offers a range of orientation and transition programs including *New in Law* (for LLBLP students) and *New 2 Justice* (for Bachelor of Justice and Society students)

New in Law is a two-day program run during Orientation Week, and presented in professional conference format. Students receive a personalised invitation to the event with their enrollment offer which is subsequently followed up by email so that all commencing students are encouraged to register for the event. The two day activity introduces the students to their Law program, allows students to meet their mentors, senior students and academic and support staff, and makes expectations around study explicit to new students.

The program includes group activities with mentors. In 2014, special interest groups were also trialed bringing together those students with common backgrounds (first-in-family, mature-age, school leavers, graduate entry, etc.). This enables students to connect with each other prior to the commencement of study.

The *New 2 Justice* program operates similarly over a half day period.

Reflecting on good practice

Senior legal professionals are invited as guest speakers to give the opening and closing addresses. This helps set a highly professional tone for the program which includes a panel presentation from a number of current students from a diverse range of backgrounds (i.e. first-in-family, international, indigenous, rural, graduate entry, part-time, students with children). Commencing students have the opportunity to ask the panel members questions and there is an emphasis on acknowledging and celebrating the various pathways current and commencing students have taken to get to university – whether it be from school, TAFE, a foundation course, graduate entry – so as to create a sense of belonging for the new students:

There is a place for everyone ... and we welcome that diversity

(Tania Leiman, 2014)

Applying the practical advice from the LSES resources

New in Law includes two additional activities at the beginning of the semester:

In Week 1 Flinders Law School holds a Welcome Evening Reception. Whilst targeted primarily at 'first-in-family' students, all commencing students are invited and are encouraged to bring family members or others supporting them on their learning journey. Supporters have indicated that this opportunity to visit the Law School and meet staff has been very valuable in allowing them to gain an understanding of the challenges involved in studying law and transitioning to university. Participants are formally welcomed by the Dean and then staff (also first in their family to attend university) speak briefly about their own experience, prospective careers, what happens in class, and supporting wellbeing. This is followed by live jazz, drinks and finger food in the Law School Courtyard. The primary aim of the evening is to give everyone, including family and partners, a sense of attachment to the institution and to each other – the message is:

STUDENTS ENTER THE LAW SCHOOL FROM A WIDE RANGE OF PREVIOUS 'LIVES'. NEW IN LAW HELPS STUDENTS FOCUS THEIR DIVERSE SKILLS AND INTERESTS ON THEIR LAW DEGREE. IT IS FUNDAMENTAL TO DEVELOPING THE CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE NEEDED TO MAKE THE MOST OF THEIR TIME WITH US.

http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/law/program-and-courses/undergrads/newinlaw/newinlaw_home.cfm

You're a really important part of this person's learning and this is what it is going to be like for this person when they are studying.

(Tania Leiman, 2014)

In Week 2 Flinders Law School holds a 'Tips for Success' Evening. Whilst aimed at encouraging those mature students or students returning to study after a period of time to make connections with each other, it is also open to all commencing students. The event focuses on addressing expectations in the law school which may be different from those in other disciplines. It also assists the transition process of those students not able or not wishing to attend *New in Law* during Orientation Week. The evening format consists of current mature age students or recent graduates sharing their own personal experiences and tips for success, followed by an informal panel discussion and supper - allowing all attendees to engage socially and informally with each other. These evenings have proved to be enriching and inspiring for all involved.

Feedback from students regarding *New in Law* and its associated activities has been overwhelmingly positive:

Gives a very visible link for a commencing student who can say 'there's someone who's got a journey like mine'.

(Tania Leiman, 2014)

The activities summarised here align directly to six key pieces of advice provided from the *Resources for Australian higher education: Practical advice for teachers* - and specifically the following:

Advice #1: Know and respect your students

Advice #2: Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice

Advice #3: Make expectations clear, using accessible language

The activities summarised here align directly to five key pieces of advice provided from the *Resources for Australian higher education: Practical advice for institutional policy makers and leaders* – and specifically the following:

Advice #2: Promote engagement with, and support from, others



More information:

New in Law Program website: http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/law/program-and-courses/undergrads/newinlaw/newinlaw_home.cfm

Flinders Law School: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/law/>

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