Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds:

Practical advice for institutional policy makers and leaders

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About this guide

This resource has been developed as part of a national research project, *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education* **<www.lowses.edu.au>**. This guide provides practical advice about the teaching characteristics and strategies that contribute to the success of students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) and about the ways in which student agency may be enabled.

This raises the question of how to identify LSES students. While it is necessary to identify students from LSES backgrounds at a policy level, and perhaps for measuring performance and allocating funds, it is very difficult, and potentially undesirable, to target students from LSES backgrounds individually for teaching and learning or support purposes. Good practice in teaching and supporting LSES students benefits all students. This guide has been prepared with this in mind.

This guide is not intended as a manual for teaching LSES students, nor is it prescriptive about how the advice it offers might be implemented. Instead, it offers general, practical advice that has emerged from relevant literature in the field, 26 interviews with academic and professional staff in six universities experienced in the effective teaching and support of LSES students, and 89 interviews with successful LSES students in three universities about what helped them succeed. The guide draws on the voices of staff and students and through sharing their views offers broad advice in five areas of teaching that may be of assistance to busy teaching staff. We recommend considering the advice and suggestions in this guide within the context of your discipline and workload.

Bridging sociocultural incongruity

The project assumes that LSES students are as varied as any other cohort of students and is wary of stereotyping. As part of that way of thinking about these students, the project has developed a distinctive conceptual framework that avoids adopting either a deficit conception of students from LSES backgrounds or a deficit conception of the institutions in which they study. Rather than being the primary responsibility of solely the student or the institution to change to ensure LSES student success, we argue that the adjustments would be most usefully conceptualised as a 'joint venture' toward bridging sociocultural incongruity.

The notion of sociocultural incongruence is adopted as a way of conceptualising the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and the high socioeconomic institutions in which they study. The polarised deficit conceptions commonly resorted to for students and institutions, and the conception of sociocultural incongruence, which challenges these perceived deficits, are outlined below.

The first deficit conception: students are the problem

The suggestion that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students can presuppose a level playing field in relation to sociocultural and background characteristics. It can be seductive to think that if non-traditional students are clever enough, or try hard enough, or persevere enough, or believe enough in their own ability, they can engineer their success at university. Devlin (2011) suggests the tacit expectations inherent in university practices are within a sociocultural subset that is peculiar to the upper socioeconomic levels. Unless these implicit expectations are made explicit, they may operate to exclude students from low socioeconomic status who are not familiar with the norms and discourses of universities.

The second deficit conception: institutions are the problem

The other conceptual frame is to problematise the institutions that are responsible for the success and progress of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Some suggest that rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, institutional cultures should be adapted to better fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Zepke and Leach, 2005). Other authors suggest that:

- there are situational and dispositional barriers created by institutional inflexibility (Billingham, 2009)
- ' … the role of the educational institution itself in creating and perpetuating inequalities' should be taken into account (Tett, 2004, p. 252)
- it is unfair to expect the burden of change to fall solely on the students and institutions should make changes (Bamber and Tett, 2001), and
- universities should make changes in terms of heralding the expectations they have of students (James, Krause and Jenkins, 2010).

Devlin (2010) argues that to genuinely contribute to the success and achievement of non-traditional students, universities need to do much more than to spell out their expectations for student involvement in learning.

The sociocultural conception: incongruence must be bridged

The project proposes a conceptual framework of 'sociocultural incongruence' to describe the circumstances in which students from low socioeconomic status attempt to engage with the particular sociocultural discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education. Murphy's (2009) UK study of factors affecting the progress, achievement and outcomes of new students to a particular degree program found a number of characteristics specific to the institution and to individual students that promote progression and achievement. These factors enable the incongruence between students and institutions to be 'bridged'.

Hence – 'bridging sociocultural incongruity'.

An empathic institutional context

We argue that sociocultural incongruity can be bridged through the provision of an empathic institutional context that:

- values and respects all students
- encompasses an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and coordinated through the curriculum
- incorporates inclusive learning environments and strategies
- empowers students by making the implicit, explicit, and
- focuses on student learning outcomes and success.

These characteristics were derived through the project's literature analysis and are supported by the evidence from interviews with staff and low socioeconomic status students conducted as part of this project. Synthesis and analysis of the interview data revealed four key themes to which institutions need to attend to ensure the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status. The study found that the empathic institutional context:

1. employs inclusive teaching characteristics and strategies
2. enables student agency
3. facilitates life and learning support, and
4. takes account of students' financial challenges.

This guide presents the key findings that emerged from the study that are of relevance to institutional leaders. The focus of this guide is on the active creation of institution-wide supportive and inclusive learning environments that enable LSES students to concentrate on their learning.

The five pieces of advice give practical ways that institutions can further develop an empathic context. These practical suggestions are summarised in the list below and further details are provided in the sections that follow.

Key advice to institutional leaders

The key advice to institutional leaders related to supporting students from LSES backgrounds in Australian universities to emerge from this national study is:

1. Enable inclusive curriculum and assessment design

Enable curriculum and assessment design that caters to diversity, integrates and scaffolds opportunities for students to learn tertiary literacies alongside discipline content, and protects academic standards.

2. Promote engagement with, and support from, others

Create a sense of belonging for LSES students, ensure there are collaborative learning opportunities and peer-to-peer contact inside and outside the curriculum and provide opportunities for families and communities to engage with the institution.

3. Encourage 'help-seeking' by students

Encourage staff to use early feedback and referral, extend and enhance provision of and promote student services, normalise 'help-seeking' and provide infrastructure and resources to allow the monitoring and management of at-risk students.

4. Minimise financial challenges for students

Promote financial services and support such as scholarships, facilitate access to government payment options, and minimise student costs through providing loans, hire services, free car parking and the like.

5. Resource and support teachers of LSES students

Provide high support and resourcing for teachers of LSES students, taking into account the challenges of inclusive teaching and of providing detailed help, feedback, referral and support, and reward and recognise teaching appropriately.

1. Enable inclusive curriculum and assessment design

Institutions need to pay particular attention to the critical role of the curriculum as a key mechanism for supporting LSES learners. Kift and Field (2009) argue that 'in all their diversity, and acknowledging their multiple identities and changing patterns of engagement, it is within the first year curriculum that commencing students must be engaged, supported, and realise their sense of belonging. In this way, the curriculum has an important role to play in first year transition and retention' (p. 2). And the centrality of the curriculum extends beyond first year. The importance of curriculum design in meeting LSES student needs is captured by one staff interviewee this way:

> … how I'd like to design – if I had power over design – is to make sure [the curriculum] … actually comes from where the students are from, so it is flexible enough that they can bring in their world but then it actually challenges them to go beyond that [COL_008].

Knowing the students

Staff experienced with LSES students indicated the value of knowing something about the students for whom you are designing and implementing curriculum. As one senior staff member put it:

> … it's trying to make data available and visible to folk in terms of understanding … what is the cohort that is coming into your course or unit; trying to link that with strategies both in terms of longer-term curriculum design … [and] short-term strategies in the classroom … So trying to make that all visible and not overwhelming for folk [COL_028].

Senior leaders have an important role to play in ensuring that relevant data on student demographics is provided at the appropriate times in usable formats to the staff who need it. However, it is critical that approaches to curriculum and assessment development do not position LSES students as a 'problem' and that institutional actions should focus on good practice for *all* students. As one staff member put it:

> … the philosophical approach is that we shouldn't isolate the low SES students, but it's just good practice that what we provide is provided for all students [COL_021].

The importance of a curriculum designed to cater to diverse cohorts of students emerged clearly from the interview data. Staff comments included:

> … all students are at different levels of learning and understanding [COL_001].

> … every student has [to have] the capacity to look at the task and if they understand it … move on to the next task [COL_013].

Senior and other leaders need to ensure that the policies and practices that underpin curriculum design and implementation enable and encourage inclusiveness to be embedded and woven in, rather than 'bolted on' or considered as an afterthought.

Taking a course level perspective

Many staff interviewed referred to the importance of taking a course (program) level perspective in curriculum review and development:

> … we need to take a bigger picture course approach to assessment … we['ve] got a lot of our subjects and the assessment of those subjects is done in isolation to the other … [we need to be] liaising with colleagues and … [focusing on] the skills that we want our students to develop … throughout their degree … [to avoid] gaps and duplications [COL_014].

As one staff member pointed out:

> … we do need to be aware that our student cohorts are changing … and not assume that they've got the skills to tackle first year university … and that means we do need to adjust our assessment, our communications, how we design our curriculum, how it all hangs together so that the students can see a clear, common sense, plain English path for their studies [COL_014].

Senior and other leaders can work to ensure the processes of curriculum review and reform employ a course focus. Course and program teams should be adequately supported to come together with any necessary information and support, to conceptualise curriculum that facilitates the development of appropriate learning outcomes.

Such curricula should be student-centred, be infused with academic and other literacies alongside discipline content, incorporate appropriate scaffolding and ensure academic standards. Each of these components is discussed below, alongside the importance of staff development.

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Student-centredness

Student- or learner-centredness simply places students at the centre of the learning process. Students are active participants in their learning and, wherever possible and feasible, they learn at their own pace in whatever ways suit them best. While this might be difficult in a mass higher education context, it is an ideal that many staff work towards. The majority of staff indicated the need for the curriculum to cater to diversity. Student-centredness was a common theme in interviews with staff highly experienced in effective teaching of LSES students, one of whom explained:

> *Well it's not just flexibility just to pull people through, it's flexibility to help people to reach their potential … it's ensuring that people meet the learning outcomes but in a way that they can [do] so … you could almost see it as an 'epistemological equity' in some ways because it's meeting students where they're at, it's student-centred [COL_009].*

Academic and tertiary literacies

Another clear finding from the project is the need to embed the development of academic and tertiary literacies alongside discipline content in curricula. Experienced staff recognised the importance of doing so:

> *… somebody needs to teach the students how to write academically, how to do research, how to access libraries, how to do all of that type of thing [COL_006].*

> *I try to examine the subject, see what I need to teach content-wise, and then look to see what strategies we can do to support students in their study, skills that they need to be able to 'do' the content [COL_011].*

A number of staff referred to a widespread and incorrect assumption that teaching academic and tertiary literacies equates to 'dumbing down' curricula. One staff member explained the matter this way:

> *… what we do need to do … is … be aware [of] … how we communicate with our students and not just expect … that they will be able to decipher all the academic language in our subject outline … we're not dumbing things down, we're just making things readable in plain English and now that's going to benefit all students whether they're from a diverse background or not because there are very few that really get … impressed with impenetrable language in subject outlines [COL_014].*

Successful LSES students also commented on the importance of being taught academic and tertiary literacies:

> *… it's such a different writing style from everything I've ever written, and I thought I was quite a good writer. Then I got a bit of a shock the first assignment I got back … And you think, oh dear, OK, I need some help with that [STU_057].*

> *… I had one particular unit last trimester, which was a research essay, which was nothing I've ever done before so it was a completely different approach and format. So I had no idea where to start [STU_010].*

Assistance and support from language and academic skills experts for academic staff undertaking curriculum development should be enabled by institutional leaders. This would enhance the likelihood that academic literacies were appropriately embedded in the curriculum and assessed.

Scaffolding

The term 'scaffolded learning' takes its name from the idea of a support structure that is gradually removed as the central entity becomes strong enough to stand on its own. Scaffolded learning refers to learning that is tailored to meet student needs, helps students reach their learning goals and provides the necessary degree of support to assist students in their learning. The literature shows that there are good reasons to scaffold the learning of LSES students, related to their confidence and relevant skill level (Sharpe 2006; Sharpe 2001; Puntambekar and Hubscher 2005; Werth, Southey and Lynch 2009).

The importance of scaffolding learning was emphasised by many experienced staff:

> *I think … the most important thing is … to ensure that there are adequate opportunities for the students to build their skills … [and] adequate opportunities for the students to be able to gauge how they're … progressing with their skill development [COL_016].*

Scaffolded learning was identified by staff as an important way in which to facilitate the success of students from LSES backgrounds. Staged teaching approaches and scaffolded learning should be promoted within institutions. These pedagogical practices are an effective means of teaching diverse student cohorts, particularly students from LSES backgrounds.

As staff explained:

> *… I think we have to recognise that all students are at different levels. They're not all at the same level of learning and understanding [COL_001].*

> *… we need to prepare them well to tackle those assessment tasks so whatever we expect in an assessment task we need to ensure that that's been provided in the lead up [COL_014].*

Involving colleagues in curriculum design

Far from being protective about their curriculum development and teaching roles, teaching and other staff interviewed recognised that expertise can be found in many places. Curriculum design, approval and enactment activities should ideally involve professional educators as key team members. Opportunities for students to learn, develop and practice tertiary literacies and desired graduate capabilities should be integrated into the curriculum and their development scaffolded alongside the development of discipline skills and knowledge. Along with language and academic skills experts, such team members might include careers staff and library staff:

> *I think incorporating the learning skills advisors and the library people … [is important] say you're going to talk about your assessment, because … what students really want to know [is]: 'How am I going to get my marks in a subject?' … you could bring the library skills, and the learning*

> *skills advisors in … and if you say, 'Your assessment this session will be due here, this is what you have to do, and here are the people who can help you', and you're putting the scaffolding in to support them [COL_011].*

And as one staff member pointed out:

> *… incorporating the library skills into the curriculum, supports every student, including the low SES [COL_011].*

Staff development

Senior and other leaders have an important role to play in resourcing and promoting staff development that is focused on learning and teaching.

Staff development opportunities that include education around inclusive curriculum and assessment design are critical if LSES students' needs are to be effectively catered for at university. Such opportunities would ideally include initial programs for those new to teaching as well as ongoing programs for experienced staff who may wish to learn more about effective teaching of diverse cohorts.

Many staff interviewed saw professional development as a valuable component in ensuring effective teaching and support of students from LSES backgrounds:

> *… just being aware ourselves of what's out there [is important]. I didn't even know what was out there until I went to a widening participation workshop [COL_024].*

In terms of the format of such development opportunities for staff, many staff interviewed noted the potential of peer review, and constructive feedback, for developing teaching strategies for non-traditional students, including LSES students:

> *… any dialogue between teachers of good practice, of best practice for what they're doing and how, and how it works, and this sort of intellectual discussion is really good [COL_001].*

Informal peer review of teaching initiatives is relatively inexpensive for institutions to set up and has myriad benefits as the following comments suggest:

> *You get somebody to review what you're doing and that's always beneficial. But also you get to see what others are doing and you know you adapt what's appropriate to your own student group from that [COL_005].*

Overall, the need for staff to be enabled through professional development to design and embed inclusive curriculum for LSES students was clear. Senior and other leaders need to ensure that professional development opportunities are provided but must also promote the importance and value of staff investing their time in participating in development initiatives and programs designed to assist them to better teach and support LSES students.

Protecting academic standards

Staff made it clear that increasing numbers of diverse students did not negatively impact on academic standards. In relation to LSES students, they commented:

> I think the first thing I would say is don't make assumptions about the students … I think you should always teach students with the expectation that they can excel and that they are capable and have capacity [COL_008].

> We take students who are low socioeconomic and first in their family to go to university and all those sorts of things and last year and the year before that we had 25 per cent of them graduate with distinction. For those that are resilient enough to stick it out they are doing okay [COL_023].

Many had very high expectations of LSES and other students:

> … I have high standards. I want them to go well. I don't want mediocre stuff. I want really good stuff. I mean, they won't all get HDs, but someone who's perhaps a pass might get to a credit, and you've got to look at little increases [COL_001].

Contrary to misconceptions about the participation of LSES students contributing to decreased standards in higher education, when asked what had helped them succeed, LSES students clearly indicated the importance of holding very high aspirations and having high standards:

> … I have been quite dedicated and trying to achieve high results [STU_041].

> … I love anything to do with the science subjects. I excel at them and love them … they're very challenging, I mean, don't get me wrong, it's not that I think that they're easy, but I think that's part of their attraction – they're not easy [STU_082].

> I guess just my attitude. I have so many of my friends say, 'Oh, yeah. All I need is a pass and I just want to get a pass.' But I want more than that … So I … work hard to get the marks [STU_022].

> I always had in my mind that paying money to go to university, that I wasn't just going to be there just to get a pass. That would have been pointless if I was paying hundreds of dollars to attend these classes. I was going to give it my best shot and get the best marks that I possibly could [STU_035].

> … my lowest grade I have received overall so far has been a credit, so it's been mainly high distinctions, distinctions, and credits [STU_064].

Senior and other leaders must communicate both ongoing expectations of continuing high standards and the necessity that staff not make erroneous assumptions about LSES students on the basis of their backgrounds. An important part of this role is to continually challenge misconceptions that link the participation of LSES students in higher education to a lowering of standards.

Suggested strategies

- Use data analytics to provide cohort information to those who design and implement curricula for, and teach LSES students, so that their decisions can be evidence-based.

- Highlight the importance of, and facilitate the development of, inclusive curriculum design in course development and review policies and processes.

- Engage appropriate professional staff, including careers staff, library staff and language and academic skills experts in the processes of curriculum review, renewal and redevelopment.

- Provide and promote staff development opportunities in inclusive curriculum and assessment design.

- Implement informal peer review of teaching initiatives that focus on assisting staff to enhance inclusive curriculum development and teaching.

2. Promote engagement with, and support from, others

The support provided by people in LSES students' lives was clearly indicated as a major factor in their success. People who provide support include friends and peers but in particular, family. While supportive interactions are important for all students, they are particularly important for LSES students, as indicated by the strength of this finding in the data from the project.

In stressing the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging, Kift and Nelson (2005) maintain that students who do not have a sense of 'institutional fit' are less likely to be able to fully engage with their learning. They argue that regardless of how engaging the pedagogical elements of the curriculum may be, if LSES students do not experience a sense of belonging more broadly, they are less likely to engage.

Institutional leaders must work with staff to ensure that opportunities for students to engage with each other, their teachers and, wherever possible, their families and communities are integrated into their university experience.

Collaborative learning

Students and staff interviewed for this project saw providing intentional opportunities for learning with and from peers and experienced students as particularly important.

To provide the peer support that LSES students say they need to be successful, institutions should provide opportunities for, and promote the value of, collaborative learning. These opportunities could include ensuring that purposeful group learning, learning communities and/or opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, are designed as part of course and classroom activities.

Institutional leaders should also aim to provide collaborative spaces/places for students to meet and learn with friends outside of the classroom. Fostering the establishment and sustainability of peer learning communities is one way in which institutions might contribute to collaborative interactions between students.

Peer learning, whether inside or outside the classroom or online, was seen by experienced staff as important to the success of LSES students. As one staff member noted:

… students learn a lot of things from each other and from engaging in learning activities quite independently of anything you can say or do [COL_004].

Another explained the rationale for ensuring students have peer learning opportunities:

My tutorials are basically all about group work and interaction and everybody in the group gets a say, and it is very, very important that they do that … because that binds them together with the other students and it also gets them to settle into the university … and that is critical [COL_006].

However, a number of staff cautioned against a view that peer learning or group work was a panacea for LSES students:

… put them in groups where you think it will empower them … [but] not all groups are empowering … if someone has really low self-esteem and there was someone who kind of [went] 'Oh I'm so brilliant' all the time, that could make them feel even worse [COL_025].

This staff member recommended monitoring how peers react to each other and work together and considering grouping students rather than allowing them to self-select group membership. Opportunities to learn from colleagues and experts about the best ways to facilitate peer and group work should be part of institutions' ongoing professional development programs.

Mentoring programs

Mentoring programs are a potentially beneficial strategy that institutions can use to promote a sense of belonging. While such programs are common in universities, the data from the project suggests strongly that they might be increased in number and reach. Their value to LSES students' success was extremely high.

Successful students reported:

If I would give advice to a student, it would be talk to someone who has already done some distance [study] … If there [are] past students who would be willing to speak to prospective students to give them the overall view of just how they found the experience … and what strategies they used … [that] would be beneficial [STU_064].

Mentors were a wonderful idea. Having another student that was in second year talking to the first years, saying things … what facilities are in the library that will help you … There are a lot of little things that … can make life so much easier and I did find that was more helpful than some of the lecturers [STU_094].

Students outlined some of the benefits of peer and collaborative learning:

… the most learning I have achieved is through discussions with other students [STU_049].

I probably did better on the subjects where I had lots more social interaction with people doing the same subject [STU_072].

… I'll send an email to someone and they'll send an email to me. I'll check theirs, they'll check mine and it's collaborative and I think if you've got a learning community, it's a lot better [STU_087].

Students were well aware of the value to their learning that these sorts of opportunities provide. With respect to the role of friends in learning outside the classroom, students said:

I think it's good explaining something to someone else because it shows your understanding [STU_ 097].

I found that if you get out and mingle with other people, you make friends and then you can learn from them as well, so you don't have to be sort of alone and solitary in your learning. I find it easy, personally, if I can learn off other people as well [STU_044].

Staff also identified peer mentoring as a key institutional strategy to support students from LSES backgrounds, pointing to the particular value of involving peers:

… students from low SES backgrounds traditionally will come with … no role models, nobody necessarily who can support them academically. And so we've developed some peer mentoring programs that we run [COL_005].

… if you are wanting to support your students who are struggling then you will provide some kind of peer-led initiatives [COL_021].

Senior and other leaders can contribute to ensuring connections between LSES and other students through enabling mentoring programs and ensuring they are widespread, resourced and promoted.

Spaces/places to meet and study

An important question is one around where students can meet and share with and support each other outside class. Staff emphasised the need to create a sense of belonging for LSES students through the provision of appropriate spaces, particularly for those who lived far from campus:

… I would prefer to see an inclusive and welcoming and supportive and interested personalised learning environment for all students … our research showed [that] students perceive institutional comfort as a proxy for respect [COL_007].

One staff member stressed that creating learning spaces and environments for students ultimately makes students feel valued in the institution:

… we think that if you make the institution welcoming and supportive then people who need a little bit more support will be able to make use of it if they need to and that may be first in family or non-traditional students, it may be students with mental health issues … we don't think it will hurt them to be welcomed [COL_007].

Students commented on the availability of designated learning spaces for students and their usefulness for study and related purposes:

Another thing that I didn't mention to you earlier is there's this study space … I don't know if you've been up there, but it's like a really good place to study. Like I go there almost all the time … It's very big. So what it's like is it's got its own little kitchen thing … So if you're planning to study there for a long day … you can just have your lunch there … and study as well [STU_097].

Institutional leaders need to recognise the importance of students having comfortable spaces and places to meet and work with other students. They also need to ensure appropriate spaces within departments/faculties as well as in more informal areas are accessible to students.

Encouraging external support networks

To assist students develop a sense of belonging to the institution, fellow students, staff, their course and their future careers, institutions should actively foster opportunities for students' families and communities to engage with the institution.

When asked what had helped them succeed at university, typical comments from LSES students referred to the support of others:

> I am lucky to have such a good family to support me … it has definitely been a huge part in my success [STU_003].

> … the biggest thing that's helped me has been my friends, the people who I've met while I've been at uni and studying my course [STU_019].

Students reported that the support provided by families and friends, which included emotional and financial support, as well as an understanding of what students were trying to achieve, helped sustain their engagement with university. Typical comments included:

> … it helps to have a really good support network otherwise I really don't know if I'd have the drive to continue doing it [STU_092].

> … just knowing that I could talk to [my family] and discuss problems or any issues that I was having with funding or not being able to understand certain topics, that helped greatly [STU_023].

> … having family support is very important, people appreciating and supporting what you are trying to achieve [STU_051].

While the extent of family support available to individual students may be largely outside the influence of universities, enabling family connections with the institution through various means is something on which universities could focus. For example, universities might provide regular information evenings and award nights to which family could be invited. Universities might also consider providing relevant information and advice for family and friends of students such as through hard copy and online guides, a website and/or online fora.

One staff member, from a LSES background themselves, explained why demystifying university for the families of first in family LSES students is so important:

> … when I was a kid, there was no previous university direction in my family at all, no university experience whatsoever, and the idea of going to university in fact was looked askance at. It was a place in the 1970s full of rat bags with long hair, in street marches, so you wouldn't want to go there, anyway, and in any case, most people I could refer to in my own family were highly suspicious about what it is you actually do there [COL_016].

Another staff member spoke more broadly about communicating and engaging with the communities in low socioeconomic areas:

> … we're directly targeting strategies that we think will address the needs of students and communities in low SES areas in terms of just providing information about university and filling in the gaps, if there are any gaps in knowledge about university or questions that need to be answered or services that might be offered [COL_010].

Family members being involved in the students' university experience was recognised by staff and students alike as an important facet of student retention and overall success.

Online engagement

Online forums are another strategy that institutions can use to promote a sense of belonging for LSES students, their families and friends.

As one student recalled when reflecting on what had helped them succeed:

> I remember during my first year before I started university, I looked at the website … some students [were] giving their experiences of university and what to expect [STU_097].

Engaging students who were studying off campus or undertaking online units was identified by staff and students as pivotal to facilitating LSES student success. Students commented on the need for teachers to have an active online presence in order to engage students:

I found the subjects where the teachers are far more interactive on the forum and where there was a chat room for the subject, were easy to feel a part of and easier to feel connected and therefore assisted with the learning [STU_051].

I suppose all the online technology was fantastic and the eLive sessions, I really enjoyed them because you connected with people and the lecturer about the topic [STU_001].

One staff member outlined efforts by their institution to enable genuine connection and interaction with students:

We've decided to embrace a social media model. So we've created a range of tools that allow students, irrespective of where they are, to communicate how they're feeling about their studies and any issues of concern. Those tools are based on web 2 technologies. And they model social media in the sense that they all have 140 characters of free text. So students can tell us at any given time how they're feeling about their current engagement with the institution and with their studies [COL_002].

However, staff members did raise the issue of accessibility to online technology by students from LSES backgrounds:

… we get asked to provide a lot of online material specifically in the form of video files, which is fine but if you're low SES and you don't have access to a computer at home or you don't have broadband so you're using the dial-up, a lot of those videos and things are either inaccessible or they just take so long that it's just frustrating for the students. So I think there's a serious issue there in terms of inequality [COL_013].

Institutional policymakers and other leaders need to consider the availability of appropriate technology and connectivity for LSES students. Policy and other decisions should not exclude LSES students from learning and other experiences and opportunities.

Suggested strategies

- Promote the value of collaborative learning for all students.
- Enable the provision of opportunities for collaborative learning within the curriculum and as extra-curricular options.
- Resource and promote student-to-student mentoring and peer-led programs.
- Provide access to spaces and places for LSES students to meet and work with other students.
- Include student meeting places in the design of new, and the refurbishment of existing, learning and other spaces on campus.
- Design and implement programs and initiatives to enable students' families and communities to connect with the institution, in person or online.
- Design and facilitate online fora where students can share experiences and seek advice and support.

3. Encourage 'help-seeking' by students

A clear finding from the project was the need for institutions to encourage and support 'help-seeking' behaviours among LSES students. These include asking questions in class and online of teaching staff and using adjunct and other learning support services and facilities.

The literature on help-seeking suggests there are many potential barriers to such behaviour by students (Grayson, Miller and Clarke 1998; Easton and Van Laar 1995; Karabenick and Knapp 1991). Clegg, Bradley and Smith (2006) argue that when students first enter university, they often protect their self-esteem by *not* seeking assistance from formal support services. To ensure students feel more comfortable seeking help, Clegg et al. (2006) maintain that seeking help should be normalised.

Part of the rationale for encouraging help-seeking behaviours among students is that such behaviours are part of independent learning, an objective for all tertiary students (Spiro, Henderson and Clifford 2012; Gibbs 1999). In addition, LSES students in particular are likely to have specific needs in relation to interpreting and understanding just what is required of them in terms of independent learning. Institutions have an important role to play in both ensuring staff are adequately educated about the adjunct support services available and what they offer students, and about the need to encourage independence in students by pointing them to appropriate services.

Provide information and development opportunities to staff

Through professional development, staff should be encouraged to provide early feedback to LSES students. This is both a useful end in itself and an early identification mechanism through which students can be referred to specialist services such as academic skills and English language development services and library skills training.

One member of staff explained:

> … once we do write the assignment … then we need to look at the ones who perform poorly and why they perform poorly. It is usually because they just haven't been trained in that type of academic [work] … Usually, they are the first one in the family to go to university and their parents have never been to university and the parents quite often can't assist them with academic writing [COL_006].

Early feedback

Providing early feedback was identified by students as crucial to helping them succeed in their studies. Such provision is strongly supported by the literature. As one student explained:

> … if have a lecturer that you can give them a draft and just say 'Am I on the track here?' then that's really helpful [STU_095].

The benefits of early feedback were clearly articulated:

> … the lecturers give really good feedback on your assignments … so that you know why you got your marks that you got. They also write the gaps and how you could improve, not that you get a second chance but for the next semester you can look back at a lab report and go, 'Actually yeah, I can see their point' so next semester I go, 'Now what did they say about that report? I'll just have a look' and then that helped me to write the next one for the next unit [STU_001].

> So feedback's really important as well to succeed. And I've got a high distinction for that one too and I think that was because of that feedback [STU_101].

> Occasionally, you can take it to your tutor and say, 'I don't want you to mark it but just am I heading in the right direction, am I on track or have I missed the mark?' And sometimes you do miss the mark and – but if you do it early in the assessment – when you are writing the assessment piece, it's easier to go, 'Oh, okay,' and correct it then [STU_084].

The rationale for providing early feedback to LSES students was clear from staff interviews:

> *… what we do need to do I think is that as lecturers [we need to] be aware that there will be numbers from a non-traditional background who … maybe the first student in their family to attend tertiary education and there are … ways that we can … help with the transition so I think constant information going back and forth between the students and the lecturer about how they're performing is … how we make it as straight forward experience as possible [COL_014].*

> *Basically, I think the philosophy is allow them to make mistakes and then improve on it. Don't have this idea that – and it's ridiculous anyway that you have to get something right the first time off – [that] you write an essay and you hand it in and that's it … I mean that seems to me entirely inappropriate for any education, which should be about taking risks, trying things out and having a journey whereby you're not trying to guess what someone else wants or what the right thing is before you really know [COL_003].*

Staff also pointed to the benefits of early feedback being provided to LSES students:

> *I will offer them the opportunity to post online the example question where they will write on a forum, ' … can you check this, is this the way to answer a question about such and such?' And I will do it in real time on the spot, edit that, send it back so everyone can see … using the online tools [COL_015].*

Professional development opportunities offered to staff need to make very clear the particular value of early feedback to all students but especially to LSES students. Mechanisms for providing such feedback and for building it into assessment regimes should be included in professional development programs for new staff and for experienced staff less accustomed to teaching diverse student cohorts.

Further, institutional assessment policies should include guidance on the use of formative assessment to assist students to adjust to university expectations.

Extending and enhancing support service provision

Important to the success of students from LSES backgrounds is the provision of institutional services to alleviate some of the intractable and inherent challenges they face.

Some staff spoke of the importance of providing new support services or extending hours of existing services to LSES students:

> *We have an issue with library opening hours … [The students] work, they study and then the library is closed on weekends [COL_024].*

> *I think the institution should be providing those sorts of cheap breakfasts weekly and sleeping spaces, those sorts of things [COL_007].*

It is important for institutions to consider extending and enhancing the provision of services (for example, online, weekends and 'after-hours') to recognise changing patterns of student engagement. This should be done in consultation with students to ensure changes are appropriate and helpful to students.

Support services being made explicit

Experienced staff suggested many ways to encourage 'help-seeking' behaviours by LSES students. This included making support services explicit and normalising their use. In terms of making them explicit, one staff member suggested that staff should:

> *… work closely with the library staff and the Academic Support Team in the library and make sure that … [the students] know how to contact the welfare officer, the counsellor. They need to know [about] the food bank and text book loan schemes and all those sorts of things that are there to support the students [COL_025].*

As one explained:

> *I think the thing is, you can hope that by putting the message out, the ones who particularly need help will come along [COL_001].*

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Another suggested:

> … if you could bring the library skills, and the learning skills advisors in, right at the beginning of session … 'This is what you have to do, and here are the people who can help you', and you're putting the scaffolding in to support them, then they know who to go to, but they know the ways that they can get help [COL_011].

Less experienced staff may not be aware of the importance of both making support services explicit and, in particular, normalising the use of them. It is critical that senior and other institutional leaders model appropriate attitudes and behaviours in relation to support services.

One staff member described an innovative and thorough approach to advertising support services to students:

> Well I guess we go for high visibility and we call on networks for support … we've run campaigns like Tell a Friend About Scholarships where we've asked students to get another student to fill out the form … lecturers have put slides up in their lecture theatres, we've got low income contact offers in every faculty so we've tried to make it normal business both from academics and support staff to make sure kids are referred to that, and [now] … we get 2,500 applications a year [COL_026].

These are mechanisms all institutions might consider.

More than half the students interviewed for the study made reference to the availability and importance of utilising student services. Typical comments included:

> … it really comes down to making students aware that there are services out there [STU_103].

> In my first year I actually did want to join a lot of clubs and stuff and I couldn't find any, so I didn't do any. I really did want to join them, which I found was disappointing just 'cause I didn't know where to look for them. No one told me [STU_100].

While individual staff can do their best to ensure services are made explicit, institution-wide efforts to advertise and promote the value of services will have greater reach and impact.

Normalising help-seeking behaviour

Staff were very clear on the need to normalise help-seeking behaviours among students, particularly LSES students, who may prefer not to be perceived as 'needy':

> They have got the computer borrowing but I've found that students have said 'Oh, I don't like to ask'. I suppose there's that self-perception … that they don't want to be seen to be needy [COL_024].

> What the challenges really are, are these students don't perceive themselves as the kind of person who would access that service … [using] the support service indicates to them that they're not succeeding at university and probably they've got learning deficits [COL_021].

This matter is critical for institutional leaders to note and address. To avoid adoption of a deficit conception around students, it is critical that seeking and using help for learning and life matters is portrayed and perceived as 'normal' and not as indicative of deficit.

Staff interviewed suggested some ways in which students' help seeking might be normalised. These related to the manner and tone in which support services were discussed and linking the seeking of help to students' current frames of reference:

> So some of that's about direct provision and we make sure its practical, we make, we try our best to make sure it's not stigmatised even though it might be targeted at groups with a shared attribute and we just do that by making it as normal and open and friendly and ordinary as possible [COL_026].

> … you've got to try … to normalise that help-seeking behaviour, that proactive patterns of going out and looking for activities, the support kind of activities that are there [COL_021].

> In support services, I really emphasise … the counsellors … I talk about the food bank and normalise getting support. It's quite okay because a lot of them are identifying as 'I'm getting out of this lifestyle, I'm changing, this is my ticket to freedom', and so we say 'This is okay, this is helping your ticket to freedom' [COL_024].

Identifying and managing at-risk students

Staff were particularly emphatic about the need to assist at-risk students. Some institutions take a cohort approach to this issue. One staff member commented:

> … if there are particular cohorts that are having some difficulties, you want to try and spot them as early as possible [COL_028].

Telephone calls were the most frequently reported means of contacting students thought to be at risk.

One staff member reported:

> … we … did welcome calls to every one of those [students on a particular campus] … [while in] the faculties, we might only do welcome calls to those who did not attend their faculty orientation [COL_022].

Another described how welcome calls could be used to promote adjunct services:

> I manage the Student Success Program, so we employ the students to speak to the students who are at risk … in the early stages, so welcome calls and we … emphasise access to scholarships, finances, food bank, emergency loan schemes [COL_022].

A number of staff reported using different strategies at different times of the student life-cycle:

> … we do welcome back calls to the students coming back in semester two, and just to make sure that they're progressing … [and] they know where to access the resources and support [COL_022].

> In the first trimester, I put out another flier saying, 'Are you feeling stuck?' … By stuck, I mean stuck in their work, stuck in their organisation, stuck in whatever. The second trimester, I know that they haven't always been successful in units, so I put out another blurb: 'Do you want to be better off in trimester two?' [COL_001].

Many institutions use systems through which students can either indicate they need help or are identified as needing help. Automatically collected data can highlight particular students who need help and subsequently trigger action by the institution. One staff member described an institution-wide approach:

> So students can tell us at any given time how they're feeling about their current engagement … We have a series of emoticons which we've embedded in the student portal … [These] are linked to a unit of study, and a student can advise the student support team that they're feeling unhappy or very unhappy … with an aspect of their current engagement with their study. And they have a guarantee that within 24 hours a staff member will be in touch with them [COL_005].

Other staff members described approaches where data is automatically generated and then collated and acted upon:

> … it's an early engagement trigger. Have the students engaged in it? There's a little bit of performance in there. How well have they done in a quick quiz or a very short written assignment? Are they attending tutorials, have they accessed their subject outlines? Are they participating in the forum and accessing their subject sites and things like that, so that we can pick up any at-risk students early on in the session [COL_012].

> … the cornerstone of all of the tools we've developed is our early alert program … bearing in mind that all of our student have to transact on line … we've utilised the power of the systems to … identify students who are not fulfilling certain transactional types. So they haven't been into the electronic library, they haven't been online, they haven't been into the portal, they've asked for extensions at times … So we contact the top 200 students at risk every day [COL_005].

However, a caveat in the use of system approaches to identifying at risk students was offered by a number of staff:

> I think taking an individual approach to the issues, asking the students … [means] they're not stereotyping or making assumptions … we've developed some predictive programs where we can identify things that might place a student at risk. But they're not based on demographics … [and] I think there's a real danger in saying every student from a regional centre or a disadvantaged background, low SES or whatever, will suffer the same impediments. So I think allowing students to feel empowered to express what the support is they need … And being responsive to the things that they tell us [COL_005].

We are capturing everybody who has, say, submitted an assessment late, is failing – got a below pass grade in an assessment or is not participating in group work or in tutorial exercises, so we're basically getting a list of the data from students and they're not identified by their demographic characteristics [COL_022].

A combination of a cohort and an individual approach is probably best to meet students' needs without causing unmanageable workloads for coalface staff. Institutional leaders should consider carefully how best to monitor and respond to students at risk within their particular institutional contexts and resource initiatives and programs appropriately.

Suggested strategies

- Provide a range of information and professional development opportunities to assist staff in their work with diverse cohorts of students.

- Ensure university assessment policies include a requirement for formative assessment, particularly in students' first year of university study.

- Examine the opening hours of student services and consider extending these at peak and other useful times.

- Examine the possibility of offering online services for students who cannot, or choose not to, come on campus.

- Ensure that support services are promoted to all students in positive, non-deficit language and as useful to enhancing their study and wider university experience.

- Design and implement systems to proactively manage students at risk of dropping out and ensure these are resourced to do the necessary follow-up work.

4. Minimise financial challenges for students

Students from LSES backgrounds can face significant financial challenges. Many work part-time or full-time while studying. Many have financial responsibilities for themselves and for others in their care. Despite doing their best to cope financially, many find it difficult. As one student said:

I have three jobs and I still can't manage [STU_104].

Financial pressure can have a direct impact on the quality of student learning:

I work night shift to put me through uni so that part-time job can be tiring when I go to uni [after] finishing at 2:30 or 3 in the morning and then getting up for uni can be taxing on not only my body but mentally as well, trying to remember information [STU_037].

The literature on students from LSES backgrounds points to the positive impact that financial assistance has on their retention rates and overall success. Hatt et al. (2005) found that students who were provided with financial assistance were more likely to continue and succeed than LSES students who are not recipients of financial assistance. Many researchers have explored the financial burdens LSES students experience in higher education and argue for action by institutions to help alleviate financial pressures on these students (Hornak, Farrell and Jackson 2010; Shallcross and Hartley 2009; Stater 2009; Titus 2006; Aitken, Skuja and Schapper 2004; Allen et al. 2005).

Staff experienced with supporting LSES students were keenly aware of student circumstances and the impact these had on students' learning:

… our observation is that there are a significant number of students who are cut out of the learning experience because they can't afford internet connection, broadband and they can't afford a computer [COL_009].

As a student counsellor here, I see a lot of students who are really struggling, and I think maybe that's half the reason why a lot of students drop out is because of their financial situation [STU_064].

Staff were also cognisant of the longer term impact that financial difficulties can have on LSES students:

… the issue that's come up for me in Honours … many people have chosen not to apply. I've just done a shoulder tapping exercise of people who did excellent proposals for their previous research unit, and I've rung them all up and said, 'Look I'd like you to apply for Honours' and they've all said no, and the reason for them saying no is because that would mean that their placement would have to be extended which means they miss out on paid work and they can't afford to miss out on paid work so it means that learning opportunity is not available for these extremely gifted, intelligent students [COL_009].

Institutions that provide a suite of financial services and support for students that are promoted and a visible part of the institutional culture provide both valuable support to LSES students and remove barriers to high-quality student learning outcomes. These services include equity scholarship programs, financial advice and financial and equipment loans. Each of these are discussed in turn below.

Scholarships

Scholarships for LSES students should be one of the financial support options available to these students. The value of institutions providing direct financial assistance in the form of scholarships for students from LSES backgrounds goes far beyond its monetary value as these staff comments indicate:

… [an equity scholarship] look[s] like … charity, but it's actually a learning program, in that it attends to the cluster of issues that go with poverty and [they] have impact because the cluster has been attended to … [Students] can buy books that they otherwise wouldn't have, but they are less stressed because they don't have to worry about juggling the money so much. Fifty per cent of [students] use the money to buy time, which is a big issue if you've got a complicated life. So [students] reduce their paid work hours and put that time into study [COL_026].

… we know that the reason that there is an attrition impact which is a good impact from people who get scholarships is not just because we give them money and they buy things with the money … [and] are less stressed … but … that being chosen to get the money has a psychological impact in that it makes them feel special, wanted, connected and motivated [COL_026].

While all universities have scholarship programs, there are not always extensive scholarships for LSES students and even where there are, students are often not aware of them or are put off applying for them because of complex application processes. One staff member pointed to the importance of promoting scholarships and making them accessible and the challenges in a large and diverse organisation of doing so:

> So of those three levels that I mentioned, the central scholarships, the central loans, grants, and I think the hardest one to organise is the … disbursed because … they're all a bit different and faculties come and go in their energies and attention [COL_026].

Every effort should be made to promote scholarships for LSES students through multiple channels. Students should also be offered assistance to complete scholarship application forms, which can be complex and hard to understand.

Government payments

Students articulated the value of accessing government funding (Centrelink for Youth Allowance, child support payments and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme[1]) as this can be particularly important in alleviating constraints on learning. As students explained:

> … Youth Allowance – so I have been on that the entire time I've been at uni and to tell you the truth, I don't know if I would have been able to go to uni if I didn't have that [STU_035].

> … Youth Allowance got me through uni, essentially [STU_019].

> I've had that financial assistance with childcare, so having that kind of support as backup as well has been really helpful [STU_026].

> … HECS[2] has also allowed me to come to uni because I wouldn't be able to pay upfront … I can pay it back when I'm working later and earning money. So it makes it less stressful as well so I can actually concentrate on studying instead of worrying about money and stuff [STU_074].

Institutional provision of advice services to assist students to access government funding can be enormously helpful in demystifying, and supporting, the process of application.

Financial loans

Financial loans from institutions are common, and useful for some students, particularly in emergencies:

> I've had other students who haven't been able to pay the mortgage or haven't been able to meet their bills and I've organised them to see somebody for emergency funds [COL_023].

However, many staff commented on the drawbacks of loans for LSES students:

> I know that there's this sort of loan program where people can borrow money to purchase a computer but the reality is our students, they're not in a financial position to be able to pay it back so it really … doesn't help the people who really need it [COL_009].

> I know there's some support for students but maybe more food banks and even the loan system is not quite viable because if some of these single mums, and I'm thinking of them particularly, it's not quite viable for them to take a loan and then have to pay it back because they see that as another bill [COL_024].

While loans should be an option for LSES students, these should be part of a suite of other options that enable students to have greater choice about how to manage their individual situations.

Equipment loans

As well as providing financial loans, institutions increasingly make study-related equipment available for loan to LSES and other students. Provisions for borrowing equipment range from informal arrangements with individual staff to more systemic institutional approaches.

Staff experienced in teaching LSES students and who understand the impact of financial strain on the quality of learning had a number of strategies for providing subtle support in the form of equipment loans:

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[1] The Higher Education Contribution Scheme was originally developed in 1989 to offer students government supported places at university. In 2005, HECS became known as HECS-HELP and it is a loan program to help eligible students to pay their student contribution amounts. See http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/helppayingmyfees/ hecs-help/pages/hecs-help-welcome

[2] HECS is the acronym for the Higher Education Contribution Scheme.

… if I noticed that there were students who either couldn't afford a text book or couldn't afford something I would … make sure … a spare copy … would be made available to them [COL_008].

… one of the things that I have done is … to purchase items that students can borrow. For example little net books and internet data sticks … [COL_009].

Staff also referred to more systemic arrangements for loaning students materials and equipment:

… the campus has a textbook hire system, so the ability to be able to access textbooks should they need them [COL_023].

… I've also purchased for Honours students … a digital recorder … and a transcribing set and for some students who are doing the practice skills, we've got a video camera that can be loaned out … we'll build up a library, we'll lend it out to students in good faith and hopefully that will enable more people to participate [COL_009].

… Equity has provided recommissioned computers for them all, and so if a low SES student wants a computer, it's there [COL_021].

They have to come for compulsory … labs, so we're thinking of getting some spare shoes too, like when they come to labs and they come in thongs, and there is a uniform option that they can borrow uniforms to go out on labs [COL_024].

Borrowing arrangements are highly valued by LSES students because they relieve the need to purchase equipment that may be expensive and/or have a limited timeline of usefulness. A relatively small outlay by institutions on setting up equipment loan schemes can have enormous benefit for LSES students who may only need equipment for one study period of 12 weeks.

Free goods and services

When asked what had helped them succeed in their study to date, LSES students often referred to goods and services that were offered free of charge. Experienced staff also offered suggestions about free goods and services that help LSES students. These included parking, food/groceries, heat, places to sit/meet/study, wireless internet, first aid courses, online textbooks, travel support and book vouchers.

When asked what aspects of their financial situation had helped them succeed, one student said:

The free parking. If I had to pay for parking then that would be the straw. It might [only] be something like $5 a day, but that would be the end of [uni for] me, so the free parking is huge [STU_085].

Another said:

I think the online library and free postage has been monumentally helpful. Without them, I would be struggling [STU_066].

Staff also referred to the need for LSES students to be provided with financial services and support that go beyond scholarships and bursaries and advice about government payments:

… for low SES students you need to provide them with the stuff that they can't provide, that is expensive for them to provide at home and that's things like some food, some heat, places to sit, wireless, all that sort of stuff [COL_007].

There is … a welfare cupboard … [with] bags of groceries [COL_023].

Numerous other strategies were recommended by staff experienced in effectively supporting LSES students, for example:

Last year we initiated getting free first aid training for them which is compulsory for their course [COL_024].

… a lot of the stuff I use is actually freely available online and I tend not to set … text books at all because of that [COL_008].

I've had a student who lives on Bribie who didn't have a car or didn't have a way of getting to clinical practice … we … arranged through Indigenous support to be able to have a taxi home for her in the evenings if she was finishing late. So travel support [COL_023].

… but we try to make sure and it is true that every faculty has something for their low income students that isn't catered for by scholarships and isn't catered for by loans and grants and it's typically book vouchers [COL_026].

Free goods and services assist LSES students to address their financial challenges and save their time and energy for their study and learning. Minimising additional expenses by subsidising printing costs and providing free short-term childcare were some of the other practical strategies that LSES students and experienced staff recommended institutions adopt. Prioritising opportunities for paid work on campus for students might be another approach to assisting LSES and other students struggling to balance on-campus time with paid work commitments.

Suggested strategies

- Provide and promote a suite of financial services and support for students that include short- and long-term loans, scholarships and advice on accessing government funding.

- Implement an institution-wide loan scheme for commonly required equipment including but not limited to textbooks, computers, laboratory and other specialised clothing.

- Where feasible and affordable, provide free or subsidised goods and services for LSES students.

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5. Resource and support teachers of LSES students

The importance of providing staff with support, professional development opportunities and the resources they require to teach to increasingly diverse student cohorts is a prominent theme in the literature (Mulryan-Kyne 2010). Many researchers have explored the most effective ways to support staff in dealing with diverse student cohorts, including through peer coaching (Swafford 1998), training programs (Tucker et al. 2005) or through institutional policy (Darling-Hammond 1999). While they argue for different approaches, there is broad consensus that staff require greater support as demands on their time and workload increase.

Staff experienced in teaching and supporting LSES students interviewed for this project made frequent reference to the extra time and work involved in providing careful attention to a wider range of students and to the particular needs of LSES students who are unfamiliar with university practices.

As staff explained in relation to questions about how best to help LSES students succeed:

> *You need a unit of interaction where at least some individual engagement and attention can occur [COL_026].*

> *I think it's just time. I think I would spend the most time with them. Isn't that one of the most valuable resources that you can really give, is time? [COL_025].*

As others explained, LSES students have particular needs in terms of being taught about university culture and understanding the discourses:

> *… we need to spend that extra time with them, they are more one-on-one … I think it has a greater impact on the students here because they're finding their feet, [I'm] trying to enculturate them into the university system … no-one has been to uni before in their family [COL_024].*

> *I can recognise fairly quickly which ones are not understanding the language of business, if you like, or management and I can recognise it. I have strategies to just say 'Right, let's get you in, let's have a chat'. 'How are you going; have you been doing this?' … Look, it is very labour intensive, but it is very effective, from my point of view [COL_006].*

Using large-scale mechanisms

While there may be more efficient methods of addressing LSES student needs, these are not yet commonplace in Australian higher education. What is evident is the urgent need to design and implement large-scale, embedded mechanisms to ensure that the learning needs of LSES and other students can be proactively met. One example might be the employment of academic language and learning (ALL) experts to work with particular cohorts of students in a coordinated and cohesive way.

Another might be the use of a sessional staff coordinator to relieve academic teaching staff of the administrative burdens associated with managing large numbers of casual staff. A third might be the formal engagement of later year LSES and other students to work with newer LSES students to assist them to understand and meet assessment and other requirements. Such mechanisms would not only offer efficiency, they would also provide potential peer learning opportunities for students and relieve teaching staff of some of their current significant time and work burdens.

The extent of academics' time spent on administration, particularly, but not only, in relation to large classes, at the expense of teaching time, was clear:

> *… you might have 600 or 700 students. The lecturer because of all of the admin work, mightn't even do all of the lectures because their workload is taken up with admin, so … you don't get that bonding [COL_006].*

> *… you can afford to keep going back to somebody with re-draft after re-draft after re-draft when you've only got a handful of them. I mean, if you've got 200 undergraduate students, are you going to do it with them, and to be honest … I actually did try this, with 120 undergraduate students I taught at the time, and it was only a portion of them that I was actually going through the reiterative process with, but it nearly killed me [COL_016].*

Technology was referred to by staff as one potential solution to the seemingly intractable issue of workload. However, it was also noted that no matter how effective the technology, it is not a magic bullet in terms of supporting LSES students. As one staff member put it:

… you've got first year students who've never been there before, you have to put more time in to them. It doesn't matter how many fancy electronic resources you've got. If you haven't got time for them, you've got problems [COL_011].

If institutions are serious about teaching and supporting students from LSES backgrounds in sustainable ways, institutional leaders need to attend to significant workload issues that staff report as challenges to effectively teaching and supporting LSES students.

One staff member commented:

I think there's a problem with workload [systems] – it's just a feeling that you're kind of used and abused by the system. Because you're in a lectorial type environment and then students choose your unit, then you end up having a more significant workload. And the head of school will say to you, 'Well then, just get some sessionals to help you with the marking'. Well … that's not always appropriate … you just can't get them, they just don't exist, the bodies aren't there [COL_027].

The matter of potential staff burnout among those who work with very diverse cohorts was often close to the surface in interviews. To ensure staff wellbeing and the continuity of their effective work with LSES students, institutional leaders need to look closely at support for staff. In particular, leaders need to consider designing and implementing new approaches to staffing teaching, and the related support, that will accommodate the increasing number and proportion of LSES students in Australian higher education.

When commenting on what would help them to continue to effectively teach and support LSES students well, staff said:

Oh you know, the usual – resources, resources, resources [COL_005].

I know it probably sounds really clichéd but I guess more time and access to sessional support. I mean I've … had a funding grant so I could buy out a lot of my marking and that really helped me … have headspace and time to be able to be more flexible to students … really, your ability to be flexible is really marred because you just don't have time … I think that … [if we were] more responsive, we'd be able to get better outcomes [COL_009].

Policy responses

Further, aspects of institutional policy and practice in relation to LSES students were identified as being in need of immediate attention. For example, current promotion policies across the higher education sector tend to favour research performance over teaching performance. The institutions that will best support and retain effective teachers of LSES students will be those that appropriately recognise and reward their teaching work.

One staff comment summarised the dilemma for staff who choose to put their time and effort into supporting LSES and other students' learning:

… if you have the choice between spending a couple of hours on supporting a couple of students, versus if you spend a couple of hours reviewing, modifying the last paper you wrote in accordance with the reviews you got. In career terms, is a bit bigger pay off from reviewing the paper that you just wrote and having it accepted, rather than looking after the next couple of students who are having difficulties? [COL_004].

Some staff suggested policy approaches that might help with this issue. For example, one staff member said:

… [one] strategy … at the institutional level … [is] bringing back a higher percentage of the workload for teachers who are teaching first year students, so that they can spend the time, and making that policy [COL_012].

As another pointed out:

… unless there are some kind of career-related incentives, then it will always be the troupers who are kind of, I guess, carrying the world on their shoulders then [COL_004].

These are serious matters that warrant immediate consideration by institutional leaders. Without due consideration and the development and implementation of appropriate policy and strategies, significant staff dissatisfaction and turnover may become an issue. If this were to occur, this might threaten the quality of teaching and learning and academic standards.

Suggested strategies

- Formally recognise the workload associated with providing high-quality teaching and support of high numbers and/or proportions of LSES students.

- Ensure reward and recognition systems and, in particular, academic promotion criteria and processes, acknowledge the valuable contributions of staff who teach and support LSES students.

- Consider employing academic or professional staff to proactively address student queries about studying, assessment and learning as a means of supporting staff who teach LSES students.

- Consider employing academic or professional staff to manage and coordinate sessional staff as a means of supporting staff who coordinate subjects with high numbers of LSES and other students.

Project methodology

Data for the national project from which the advice in this guide was derived was collected from four major sources:

1. A review of peer reviewed and other significant literature in the broad area of the experience of students from LSES backgrounds in higher education.

2. Interviews with 89 students who were from LSES backgrounds and in the first generation of their family to attend university.

3. Interviews with 26 staff known for their expertise in teaching and/ or supporting students from LSES backgrounds at university.

4. An environmental scan of effective practice, programs, policy and initiatives in teaching and/or supporting students from LSES backgrounds across Australia.

The individual and collective expertise of the project team members was also used to inform data gathering and to interpret the findings, based on a unique conceptual framework developed through the project. In addition, the reference group was consulted throughout the project and provided valuable guidance and feedback, as did an independent expert evaluator.

The methodology received ethics approval from the Deakin University Human Ethics Committee (DUHREC) [2011 – 081] and subsequently from the other universities.

Full details of the methodology can be found in the final report for the project at **<www.lowses.edu.au>**

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