

**Inclusive teaching and support of
university students
from low socioeconomic status
backgrounds**

**A brief discussion paper
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Overview

This short paper has been prepared to facilitate discussion on inclusive teaching of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

Why the focus on students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds?

The Australian federal government has recently set an ambitious target: that by the year 2020, twenty percent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level should be students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Commenting on the federal policy changes to come in Australia, Devlin (2010) has argued that it is appropriate to work toward successful experiences for all students in an increasingly massified system, including the greater number and proportion of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds who will now study alongside traditional students. Devlin (2010) further argues that this necessitates a focus not only on access to university, but also on success and achievement for all students once they have gained access, pointing to the International Association of Universities (2008) who have adopted the principle that, '...access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase' (p. 1).

Characteristics of low SES students

Literature on 'non-traditional' students suggests there are some common characteristics associated with students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds—characteristics that set them apart from 'traditional' students. While these characteristics will not apply to all low SES students, it is our view that university staff should be mindful of the following identifiers that research suggests distinguish many students from low socioeconomic status:

- *Expectations.* The expectations that students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds bring into higher education Institutions about teachers, teaching, assessment and university culture can be disjunctive with the reality of higher education (Roberts 2011; Brooks 2004).
- *Aspirations.* The aspirations of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are sometimes lower than those of traditional students (Bowden & Doughney 2010; Shallcross & Hartley 2009; Walpole 2008; Hahs-Vaughn 2004; Tett 2004).
- *Confidence.* Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds can be reluctant to seek support from academic staff with subject-related queries because they often unsure of the validity of their questions and how staff might respond to their queries (Benson *et al.*, 2009; Lawrence, 2005). These students can lack confidence and self esteem, which can in turn affect their overall sense of 'belonging' in higher education and their choices about seeking support (David *et al.* 2010; Murphy 2009; Christie *et al.* 2008; Charlesworth 2004).

- *Skills.* Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds may not be equipped with the skill-set of traditional students in terms of their academic, research, computer, writing and language skills (Kirk 2008; Fitzgibbon & Prior 2006).
- *Levels of preparedness.* Levels of academic preparedness of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds can sometimes be different to those of traditional students (Murphy 2009; Northedge 2003; Berger 2000). For example, there can often be a mismatch between their cultural capital and the middle class culture they encounter in higher education (Greenbank, 2006).
- *Time.* As a result of balancing financial pressures, family responsibilities, greater hours of employment with study, many students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are under more time constraints than traditional students (David *et al.* 2010; Murphy 2009; Henderson *et al.* 2009; Benson *et al.* 2009; Hayden & Long 2006; Moreau & Leathwood 2006; White 2006; Northedge 2003; Winn 2002; Douglass *et al.* 2007).
- *Family Support.* Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, particularly those who are in the first generation of their family to attend university, sometimes don't have significant levels of support from family or friends (Murphy 2009; Brooks 2004; Hahs-Vaughn 2004).
- *Rates of completion.* The rates of completion for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are often slightly lower than those for traditional students (Collier & Morgan 2008; Fitzgibbon & Prior 2006; Titus 2006).
- *Priorities.* Some studies have found that education can be lower on the list of priorities for some students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. For example, Crozier *et al.* (2008) suggest that a university degree is often a 'means to an end' and that these students are 'pragmatic in their course and university choices' as more often than not, these students 'don't have a choice at all' (p. 175).
- *Finances.* Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds often contend with financial issues that can impact significantly on their higher education choices, mode of study and overall experience (Simister 2011; David, Crozier, Hayward *et al.* 2010; Hayden & Long 2006; Perna 2000). There is a greater chance that students from low SES backgrounds will find themselves under economic pressure to prioritise work over their education (Greenbank, 2006).

This brief distillation of the literature on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is provided to inform teaching practices and strategies and promote a greater respect for the unique qualities and experiences that low SES students bring into higher education (see Gofen 2009; Auerbach 2006; Fuller & Heath 2008; Markus & Ruvolo 1989; Yosso 2005; Roberts 2011).

How do we best facilitate success for low SES students?

One approach to facilitating the success of 'non-traditional' students that has been used with success is 'inclusive teaching'. While this term has begun to be used in conversation and discussion in Australian higher education recently, it is not well understood outside small pockets of specialist expertise in the sector.

Extensive research undertaken in the UK by Griffiths (2010) provides a working definition, which has been adapted here to fit the Australian context, to focus on students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and to focus on the various aspects of teaching, support, leadership and institutional culture important to ensuring the success of students.

Inclusive teaching and support are initially conceptualised as incorporating the institutional policy framework and culture, the work of both academic and professional staff and the entire pedagogy, including curriculum design, delivery, evaluation, assessment, learning support and the learning environment. Teaching for inclusion includes teaching technique and also:

extends beyond technique, respecting students as individuals who have diverse backgrounds, different learning needs, and a variety of valuable prior experiences. By facilitating learning for inclusion, individual strengths and differences are acknowledged, fostered and maximised to enrich the student's own potential, knowledge, skills and understanding as well as that of others within the learning community. Such an approach is intentionally and thoroughly integrated into every part of an institution and implemented rigorously, vigorously and thoughtfully. (Adapted from Griffiths, 2010)

As Hockings (2010) notes, rather than assuming that non-traditional students have 'special needs' that require attention outside the curriculum in adjunct programs, integrated curriculum design targets all students and assumes that they bring to the learning environment varying resources in the cognitive, linguistic, knowledge and cultural domains and that they need to be guided to 'develop the critical and communicative skills and conceptual repertoires that will enable them to deal with academic tasks' (Warren, 2002, p. 87).

What does this mean for teachers?

Deakin University recently undertook research that interviewed successful students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and asked them what had helped them to be successful. The results in relation to teaching and teachers are summarised in a new guide: *Teaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: A brief guide for University teaching staff*. It can be found here: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/herg/assets/resources/news/teaching-low-ses.pdf> (Devlin and O'Shea, 2011)

What does this mean for policy makers and teaching and learning leaders?

The requirements, perceptions and experiences of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds can be very different to those of students from more traditional cohorts. Teaching and learning leaders should be mindful of these differences. For example:

- Only limited numbers of students seek support from central university support services and other areas of the university (Benson *et al.*, 2009).
- Unlike their middle class peers, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds may not have had nor currently have the benefits of private education, additional tuition, personal computers, and so on (Greenbank, 2006).
- In their efforts to 'integrate' students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, many universities provide a range of social and cultural opportunities for these students to feel included and develop the much-needed sense of belonging. However, policy makers and other leaders need to be mindful of the fact that anxieties relating to work, time management and needing to 'keep on top of it all' may prevent low SES students from participating in activities and programs (Crozier *et al.* 2008).

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