

A Step Out of Poverty: Aspirations, Retention, and Transformation: A Review of Equity Scholarships at Griffith University.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a three year study of equity scholarship recipients at Griffith University to identify the enabling factors for the participation and retention of students from low socio economic backgrounds. The recipients identified that in addition to scholarships, there are social and cultural enabling factors that facilitate the participation of students from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds. These factors include counselling, equity outreach programs, student welfare, careers and employment programs, mentoring, and health services. The recipients highlighted these services as making a significant contribution to their learning experience that not only prevented them from 'dropping out' during critical times but also assisted in their preparation for job seeking and future employment.

First, the paper discusses the extent of the social and cultural barriers encountered by scholarship recipients in their pursuit of Higher Education. Along with low income, these barriers include family backgrounds of domestic violence, child sexual abuse, chronic ill health, alcohol and drug abuse, family tragedies, family breakdown, long term stress disorders, refugee trauma and insecure accommodation. Second, the paper discusses participant aspirations to transform their lives and 'to step out of poverty' through the pursuit of higher education, and third, the paper discusses the facilitative role of a range of student services in building social and cultural capital. The paper concludes that the success of the widening participation goal to increase the participation of students from low SES backgrounds not only depends on financial support but also on the enabling factors that build social and cultural capital.

Introduction

This paper makes a valuable contribution to understanding the learning experience of students from low SES backgrounds with findings grounded in the reality of those with

the least financial, cultural and social capital. While the overall study is based on the findings of surveys as well as interviews, this paper discusses aspects of the qualitative inquiry based on in-depth exploration of the transformational enabling factors contributing to the recipients' success in higher education.

The overall purpose of the study was to identify the learning experience of equity scholarship recipients at Griffith University on the basis of:

1. The social and economic background of scholarship recipients;
2. The effectiveness of the scholarships;
3. The key retention factors for scholarship recipients; and
4. The impact of scholarships on access, equity, and participation.

The survey findings highlight the importance of scholarships in enabling access, for example, 24% of participants indicated that they would not have been able to access Higher Education without an equity scholarship. Furthermore, the value of scholarships to retention was identified with 82% of recipients reporting that scholarships were significant in making it possible for them to stay at University.

However, this paper focuses on those recipients most at risk of dropping out who described a range of support services as 'life saving' partly because of the interventions made possible by these services during times of financial and social crises. These services included counselling, the Uni-Reach equity outreach program, student welfare, mentoring and health programs. GUMURRII was also identified as essential to providing cultural, academic and personal support for Indigenous Australian students at Griffith University. The recipients identified these services as enabling the first step on the path out of poverty because it is through these services that they found out about equity scholarships.

The title of this paper, *A Step Out of Poverty*, is a phrase extracted from the comments of one of the scholarship recipients, a sole parent, in describing the significant difference a scholarship had made to her life.

I saw that as change of my life and my children's lives. I thought it was just so important that I had to do it to make a change in my life. It was like a step out of poverty. And I thought I've got to do it, no matter what.

Research Design

The overall study explored the experience of 260 students in receipt of scholarships during the three year time frame 2007-2009 using questionnaires and interviews. During the first year, common themes were identified with the use of a random sample survey. The themes were further explored with a follow up survey in the second year. The study was completed after interviews with 30 students, selected on the basis of theoretical sampling to include those most at risk, and this paper reports on the findings from this final stage of the study.

A summary overview of the research design, identifying the linkages between the research objective, the aims, the research questions and the methods used, is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Design

Research Objective: Identify the effectiveness of scholarships for increasing participation and retention of students from low socio-economic backgrounds at Griffith University.		
Research Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the social and economic background of scholarship recipients • Explore the effectiveness of the scholarships • Identify the key retention factors for scholarship recipients • Explore the impact of scholarships on access, equity and participation 	
Research Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the social and economic background of students in receipt of scholarships? • How effective have the scholarships been? • What are the key retention factors for scholarship recipients? • What is the impact of scholarships on access, equity, and participation? 	
Mixed Methods (Quantitative and Qualitative)		
Sample	Random sampling	Theoretical sampling
Method	Survey	Interviews
Data sources	260 survey responses	30 interview texts (from the 260 survey respondents)

Literature Review

Consistent with the grounded theory method, the literature review draws upon studies that contribute meaning and context to the study's emergent findings in relation to aspirations, retention, and transformation. The literature also includes an explanation of concepts in relation to equity target groups, barriers to participation, capacity building, the Government's reform agenda and widening participation.

Equity Target Groups

Many definitions of equity are framed in the context of limited or inequitable access to employment and education opportunities often associated with inherent characteristics of gender, race and impairment (James, 2009). More recent reports have continued to highlight that poverty remains a significant barrier for those from low socio-economic status backgrounds to increase their participation in higher education (Krause, Vick, Boon, Bland, & Clark, 2009).

An explanation of under-representation, disadvantage and discrimination, provided by 'A fair chance for all: Higher education that's within everyone's reach' (1990) is summarised as follows:

Those identified as under-represented, disadvantaged, or discriminated against, include women in non-traditional areas of study, Indigenous Australians, people with a disability or impairment, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the barriers encountered by students from backgrounds of poverty are also recognised in the category of low socio-economic status, while distance and rural isolation are also recognised as barriers to access and participation. (Department of Employment, Education and Training., 1990)

Equity Policy Framework

The following is a summary of the recent literature in relation to the dimensions of the Australian Higher Education equity policy framework that are relevant to the findings of this study.

- Enabling factors that promote participation and attainment in Higher Education for people from low socio-economic backgrounds include targeted and aspirational scholarships, 'encouragers', that is well-educated role models, friends and family members, targeted strategies to raise student aspirations to attend university and access to information about post-school options (Krause et al., 2009).
- Student fees and HECS debt are a major barrier for students from low income families in attending university (James, Bexley, Devlin, & Marginson, 2007).
- Students from low income families are half as likely as their higher socio-economic counterparts to attend university (Ferrier, 2006).
- Students from low income families who do attend university are less likely to attend the 'sandstones' and less likely to undertake 'status' courses such as medicine or law (James et al., 2007).

- About 70% of full-time undergraduates work an average of 15 hours per week during a semester and 39% believed their paid employment had an adverse affect on their studies (James et al., 2007).
- One in eight students reported that they regularly go without food or other necessities because they cannot afford them (James et al., 2007).
- Scholarships and other forms of financial incentive and support are essential for removing financial deterrents and hardship, but are only part of the solution. These are a necessary but not sufficient condition (James, 2007).

By way of contrast, students from high income families are up to three times more likely to attend university. This proportion has not changed for almost fifteen years, despite universities' experiencing significant numbers of growth over this period (James, 2007).

Moreover, students from high socio-economic (SES) backgrounds are far more likely to pay their HECS/FEE-HELP fees up-front, leaving students from lower SES backgrounds with a large debt upon entering the workforce and a consequent lower after-tax income (Birch & Miller, 2006).

Capacity Building

The barriers identified in the equity policy framework can be discussed in terms of capacity building whereby those from backgrounds of poverty might be assisted to achieve success in the mainstream (James et al., 2008). While some of the barriers to access and participation can be addressed by increasing the financial capacity of students, this study highlights the importance of building cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

In broad terms, the concept of cultural capital can be explained as the reproduction of cultural advantage through the transmission of education, skills and knowledge from one generation to the next, most often from family. This system of social reproduction, while of benefit to some, also contributes to the cycle of social exclusion, class distinction, and inequitable access for those who have a family background of limited cultural capital (Turner, 2003). It has also been argued that educational levels (and parental occupation levels) are the best predictor of the likelihood of higher education participation (James et al., 2008). For example, people from low socio-economic backgrounds have been found to be more likely to have lower perceptions of the attainability of a university place, less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education, and are more likely

to experience alienation from the cultures of universities (James et al., 2008).

Closely aligned with cultural capital is the concept of social capital that refers to resources made available as a result of relationships, influential networks and group memberships that significantly contribute to the achievement of success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Sources of social capital have been referred to by some authors as 'encouragers' comprised of well-educated role models, friends and family members, as well as targeted strategies to raise student aspirations and access to information about post-school options (James et al., 2008).

Reform Agenda

The 2008 Bradley Review confirms the conclusions of previous reports that despite a decade of targeted access and equity programs, the participation rates remain low for students from low socio economic backgrounds (James et al., 2007). To address this ongoing concern, the future directions of the tertiary education sector (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) include strategies to increase access, participation and retention.

The Review recommends a system of institution-specific targets to increase the participation of low socio-economic status students for national benchmarking against other OECD countries (Bradley et al., 2008). The reform agenda establishes a target to increase the participation of people from low socio-economic status backgrounds to 20% by 2020 (*Transforming Australia's higher education system*, 2009).

To reach higher levels of attainment, the reform agenda includes a target to increase the participation of all 25-34 year olds with a qualification at bachelor level or above to 40% by 2025. To facilitate the achievement of targets, a package of reforms has been introduced to enhance the Commonwealth Scholarships program by providing benefits to all eligible students receiving Austudy or Youth Allowance for education and accommodation costs (for those who need to leave home) and by transferring responsibility for the payment of benefits to Centrelink.

Widening Participation

While increasing access, equity and participation are fundamental to the equity policy framework, the concept of widening participation to a much wider cross section of the population is also discussed in the literature (James, 2007). Some suggest that it is

important to discuss widening participation, rather than simply retaining a focus on increasing participation, to include those who may be discouraged by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers (Ferrier & Heagney, 2001; Stuart, 2002; Thomas & Quinn, 2003).

We must widen participation not simply increase it. Widening participation means increasing access to learning and providing opportunities for success to a much wider cross section of the population than now (Thomas, 2005).

Widening participation in the UK and in other developed countries is about more than the recruitment of a wider range of school-leavers to existing full time programs and it includes older, part-time and work-based students (Allen & Storan, 2005; Thomas, 2005). Widening participation refers to non-traditional groups of potential students and includes targeted initiatives directed at discrete social groups (Thomas, 2000).

Method

The overall study was undertaken with a mixed method approach of surveys and interviews. While the two surveys were useful for obtaining data from the participants in a short period of time, the process of qualitative inquiry and the use of interviews were effective in exploring the sensitive themes associated with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Consistent with the concept of 'giving voice' to previously silenced voices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 508), the use of interviews was necessary to facilitate student voice of their lived experience.

The method of interview data analysis was informed by the grounded theory method (Charmaz & Bryant, 2007) using MAXqda qualitative data analysis (QDA) software. This enabled the application of systematic procedures for sorting, labelling, and categorising similar concepts, and the identification of emergent themes. It is important to note that the software is a research tool only and is not capable of conceptual analysis or data comprehension (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In addition to the enhanced management of data, the value of using the software is that it increases the reliability of the data because there is a readily accessible recorded trail of coded segments from which the emergent themes were identified.

Ethical Considerations

This research, to conduct a mixed method quantitative/qualitative research project, gained approval from the University's research ethics committee in March 2006. Approval was granted to collect data using questionnaires and interviews for analysis of the experience of scholarship participants. Approval was provided on the basis that the risk of any distress for students be reduced by ensuring breaks were taken as often as required. Additionally, conversations were steered back to positive outcomes and achievements before the completion of the interview. The participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any questions being asked and that they could amend their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy, confidentiality, and privacy. Confidentiality has been protected throughout the period of research and individual participants are identified by pseudonym.

Participant Selection

To maintain anonymity, an item was published in a student newsletter inviting those in receipt of either Commonwealth or equity scholarships to participate. The invitation attracted 260 survey responses and 30 were subsequently selected for interview on the basis that their voice might best provide a rich source of meaning data for highlighting the overall findings. Those selected identified membership of at least two equity target groups and included two Indigenous Australians, four from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, one with refugee status, and five people with a disability as indicated in Figure 1.

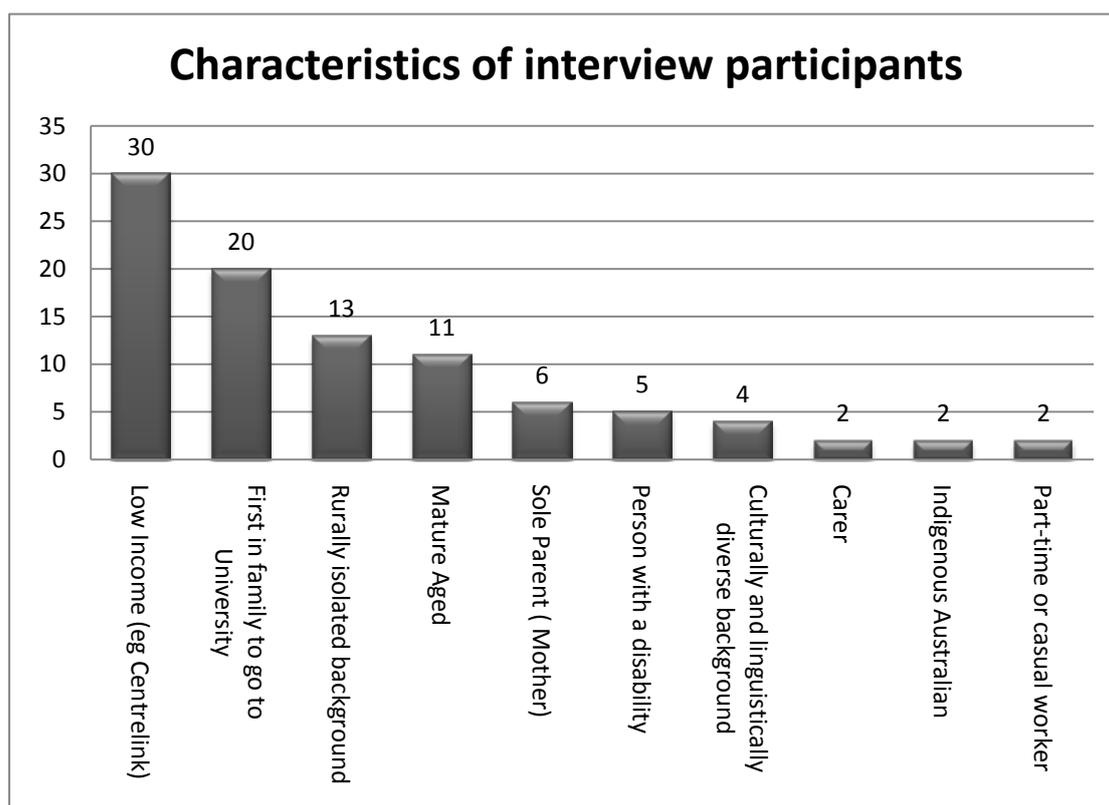


Figure 1: Characteristics of interview participants

Twenty students indicated that they were the first in family to attend University, and 30 were in receipt of partial Centrelink payments.

It is important to note that some of those interviewed indicated multiple characteristics that presented challenges to the completion of their studies. For example, a female mature aged participant was also a sole parent of a child with a disability. Additionally, she was from a non English speaking background and was managing an ongoing stress disorder arising from years of sexual abuse as a child.

Findings

The findings are consistent with those discussed in the literature in identifying that while scholarships and other forms of financial incentive are essential, they are only part of the solution (James, 2007). The importance of building cultural and social capital is identified in this study as a necessary part of the equation in facilitating participation in Higher Education.

Cultural and social barriers

While all recipients had low income background, some were also challenged with additional barriers. For example, one student provided the following description of an incident from her childhood.

... [there] was always ... violence and alcohol and chaos ... [there was] a huge fight and ... my mum stabbed him ... I saw him beating her up and he came after me and hit me ... the police were called and they took him away and then ... four hours later he was back cos it was his caravan. So it was like that.

Low income (F)

While some had the benefit of cultural and social backgrounds that facilitated their participation, others were dependent on student support services, for example those provided by the Uni-Reach equity program, to assist in bridging the socio-cultural gap. Some of the cultural and social barriers identified in this study are indicated in Figure 2.

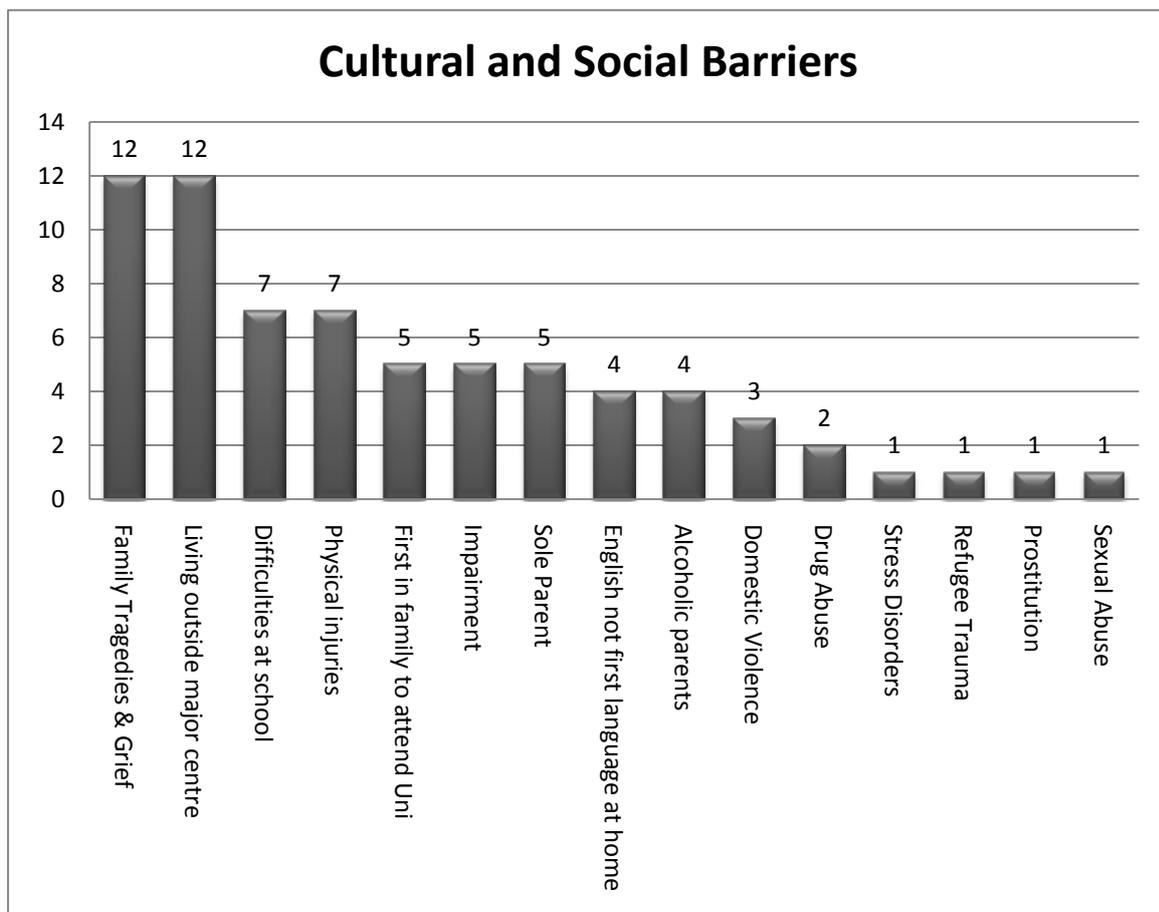


Figure 2: Cultural and Social Barriers

Social barriers, expressed in the terms used by the participants, include grief associated with family tragedies, accidental physical injuries, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, stress disorders, refugee trauma, prostitution and sexual abuse.

However, despite the adverse impact of these barriers, the interviewees aspired to better futures and the award of an equity scholarship was a first step on the pathway out of poverty.

Individual aspirations, combined with the financial and social capital contributed to the capacity of these participants to partially address some of the barriers arising from their life experience.

Aspirations

The survey findings indicate that the equity scholarship program is a retention enabling factor for 76% of those participants who had already made the decision to participate in Higher Education at Griffith University.

However, another 24% of survey respondents identified that the scholarship gave them the opportunity to participate in university studies that they otherwise would not have had.

Well to put it simply, I wouldn't have been able to go to university if I didn't have a scholarship.

Low income (M)

Another interviewee's comments highlight that as a result of her adverse experience she realised that she could access Higher Education and the Uni-Reach program at Griffith University facilitated this. The example also demonstrates the importance of widening participation to include mature aged students.

So, you know, once I got into recovery from my drug addiction, stopped using drugs, you know, I started to think about, well, I haven't ventured into my life, you know, I have some input in my life and I have choices in my life and I can now follow goals, I can set goals, and I can follow goals. So, you know, with that then came the understanding that, 'O my God, I can go to uni, I can get a degree, I can become a professional in something!' So yeah, that's exciting.

Mature Age (F)

Retention

While 24% of participants indicated that they would not have been able to access Higher Education without a scholarship, all participants rated scholarships as essential to their ongoing participation. In addition, some identified other factors that significantly enabled their retention as indicated in Figure 3.

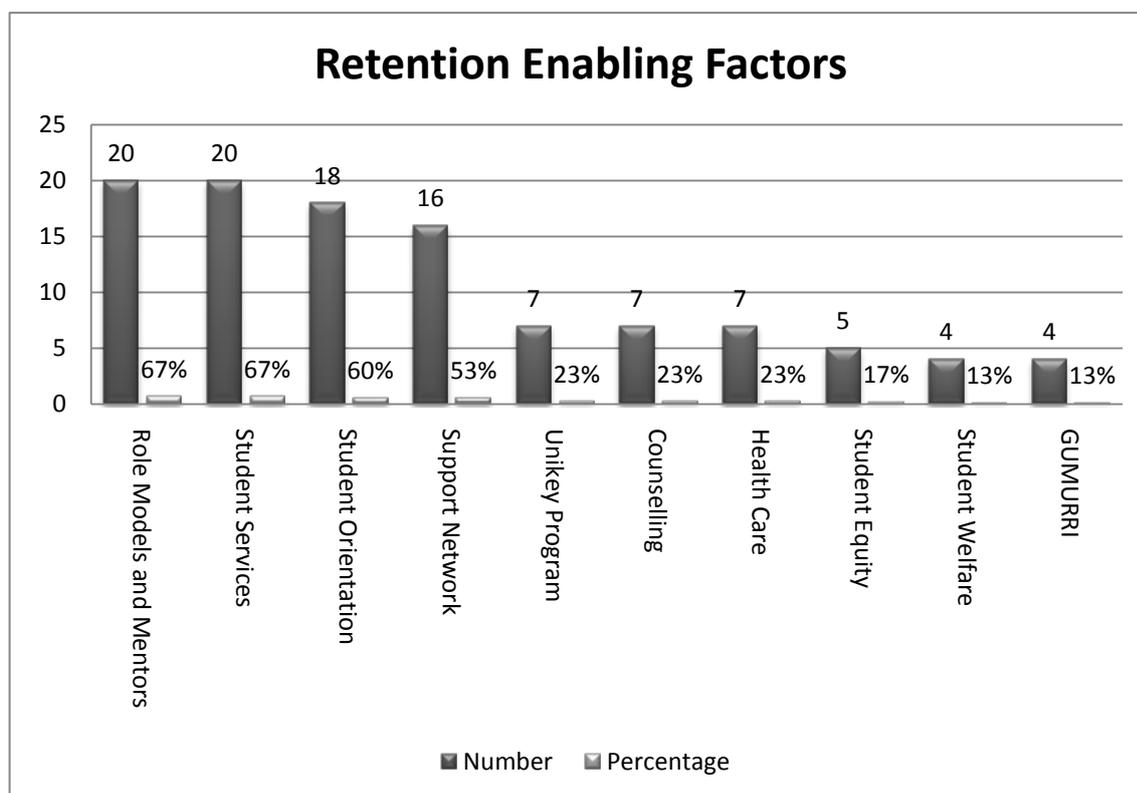


Figure 3: Retention Enabling Factors

The recipients identified their access to cultural and social capital as having significantly contributed to their ongoing participation and retention. Aspects of cultural and social capital identified included role models and mentors (67%), Student Services (67%), Student Orientation (60%), Support Networks (53%), the Uni-Reach program (23%), the Uni-Reach program (23%), Counselling (23%), Health Care (23%), Student Equity (13%) and GUMURRI (13%).

The importance of building social capital is indicated in the following comments from one student who refers to the value of the early social connections he made during Orientation Week activities. The example also highlights one of the University strategies for building cultural capital through the academic writing skills program.

Interviewer: Well, if you took part in orientation, was it useful?

Interviewee: Oh yeah. Well, most of mine, they were all compulsory that I had to go to. Like, compulsory workshops stuff that really, when I think about it, I don't know they taught me too much. But I s'pose they have to make sure you know, lab safety and stuff like that.

But I think, some of the other extra stuff you give helps 'cause I did some student service workshops. Like in academic writing and stuff. Yeah I did them and they definitely helped me.

Interviewer: So you said that, you know, when you first came down that you didn't really know anybody, did it help you to meet people?

Interviewee: Oh ... it did 'cause there was about 4 other people in my [orientation] group that did my degree as well, so we were in the same classes and stuff so I at least knew some people. At O week I usually just sat with people I knew from the mentor. So, yeah, the mentor, in fact they gave me some people to sit with.

Rural student (M)

Discussion

These findings can be summarised as a process of transformation from the barriers of hardship and poverty with aspirations to participate and succeed in Higher Education with the goal of creating a better future. Some of these findings are listed in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Barriers, Aspirations, and Retention

The barriers are listed in the first column, and include drug abuse, prostitution, refugee and family trauma. While some participants commented that they always wanted to go to University, most discussed their aspirations in terms of improving their economic circumstances as listed in the second column.

The pattern that emerged is that students experiencing traumatic life experiences aspired to transform their economic circumstances to improve their quality of life through participation in Higher Education.

Additionally, as indicated in the third column, while retention was partially attributed to financial capital in the form of scholarships and Centrelink payments, other key retention factors included counselling, equity outreach programs, student orientation, student welfare and careers and employment services. The role of mentors, role models, support networks, and student orientation provided by the Uni-Reach equity program were identified as being fundamental to the success of the scholarship recipients.

These findings are consistent with those discussed in the literature in identifying that while scholarships and other forms of financial incentive are essential, they are only part of the solution (James, 2007). This paper highlights the importance of building cultural and social capital as a necessary part of the equation in facilitating participation of students from low SES backgrounds in Higher Education.

Limitations

It is important to recognise that this study is based on the experience of those students who have already accessed Higher Education and been successful in gaining a scholarship. It was neither within the scope of this study to identify the experience of those who were unsuccessful in gaining entry, nor to access students who may have unsuccessfully applied for a scholarship.

However, this limitation was partially addressed with the selection of participants for interview based on their multiple levels of disadvantage. It can be argued that the complex experience of these participants might provide voice and some insights into the barriers to Higher Education for those who were unsuccessful in gaining entry.

Future Directions

Future research might explore the implications of widening participation on the organisational culture of universities to ensure the better utilisation of the strengths of students with lived experiences that are outside the conventional mainstream. Measures to encourage social inclusion may need to be monitored to ensure the successful learning experience of students from low SES backgrounds. For example, regardless of policies espousing the valuing of diversity and equal opportunity, those who are unable to conform to the dominant culture due to race, class, gender, and sexuality, might reasonably expect to experience exclusion (Foucault, 1975, Young 2000). Future research directions might therefore include an exploration of preventative measures that further encourage social inclusion.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the combination of cultural and social capacity partially built through the Uni-Reach student equity program, as well as access to financial capital provided by equity scholarships, underpin the successful learning experience of scholarship recipients at Griffith University.

The study identifies two main conclusions:

1. Equity scholarships enable overall retention by increasing financial capital, and
2. Equity scholarships facilitate the widening of participation by targeting those with the least financial, cultural and social capital.

The second finding is consistent with that identified by other researchers as to the critical imperative of building cultural and social capital with targeted outreach programs to encourage early aspirations (Krause et al., 2009).

The findings of this study coincide with the announcement of the Commonwealth Government's 10 year reform agenda that introduces a revised scholarship system for people from low socio-economic backgrounds. The findings support those identified in the reform agenda including increased efforts to raise student awareness of Higher Education and aspirations through targeted outreach programs in schools, increasing the number of scholarships and other forms of financial incentive and support, first-year transition programs, and the recruitment of mature-age students.

While the reform agenda is designed to increase financial capital for low income students, this paper highlights a renewed focus for Griffith University's equity scholarships in building social and cultural capital to facilitate widening participation and retention of low income students from a range of equity backgrounds.

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