Engaged outreach: using community engagement to facilitate access to higher education for people from low socio-economic backgrounds

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Despite ongoing equity initiatives, there is still a clear discrepancy in regards to access to higher education for potential students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper reports on an action research initiative that has developed a model of engaged outreach as an alternative approach to traditional university outreach. Engaged outreach uses the principles of higher education community engagement to develop stronger relationships between universities and their local communities for the purposes of increasing aspiration and access to higher education. The project was designed using a reflective, collaborative process with local Pacific Island immigrant communities living in an area of high social deprivation in southeast Queensland, Australia. Research progressed in three key stages, which together form the basis of the proposed model of engaged outreach. While it is acknowledged that the success of engaged outreach will depend on its implementation as a long-term strategy, preliminary results from this pilot project suggest that it demonstrates real potential to address this important but seemingly entrenched issue in Australian higher education.

Keywords: community engagement; equity; higher education access; outreach; socio-economic disadvantage

Introduction

National data continues to demonstrate that people from a low socio-economic background remain significantly under-represented in Australian higher education (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006). This is despite the myriad of outreach programs that have been developed by universities over the past two decades, usually in partnership with local high schools. There is clearly scope for new approaches to be tested.

This paper reports on an action research project focusing on ‘engaged outreach’, an alternative approach to increasing the participation of people from a low socio-economic background in higher education. The research involved working with two Pacific Island immigrant communities in an area of high socio-economic disadvantage in the southeast of Queensland, Australia. The concept of engaged outreach draws from methodological considerations of ‘engaged scholarship’, with the intent to develop stronger relationships between a university and its local communities through an action research
process (Cuthill, in press). Starting from the assumption that traditional university outreach programs are too narrowly focused to target the full range of key players who influence a person’s decision to attend university, engaged outreach seeks to promote a framework based on active engagement with multiple stakeholders, who work collaboratively to address factors impacting on higher education access. By working directly with a broad range of stakeholders, it is suggested that there is greater potential to initiate change by raising community awareness of, and aspiration towards, higher education, through developing a sense of ownership for collectively identified actions.

This paper provides an overview of the action research process used to develop the concept of engaged outreach and reports on the results of the research to date. After a review of the policy context and relevant literature, the action research and engagement processes used are presented. Research results are then described, followed by a discussion of the research implications and an outline of the engaged outreach model.

**Policy context**

Two important and interrelated perspectives, social justice and economic prosperity, drive the urgent imperative for more equitable access to higher education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This issue became a focal point of public policy in countries such as Australia, the UK and the USA following World War II. Promoting an opportunity structure through educational attainment was a critical part of these early policies. The publication *A fair chance for all*, a Department of Employment Education and Training (1990) discussion paper, promoted development of a National higher education equity framework that continues to underpin equity objectives in Australian higher education. The framework identifies six key equity groups (Coates & Krause, 2005). These groups, identified as disadvantaged in terms of their under-representation in higher education, are (1) people from a low socio-economic background, (2) people with a disability, (3) people from rural or isolated areas, (4) people from a non-English speaking background, (5) Indigenous people and (6) women, particularly in non-traditional areas of study and double degrees (Postle et al., 1997).

Implementation of the framework has been monitored by national performance indicators developed to measure access, participation, retention and success among the six equity groups (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004b). At the same time, universities were also required to develop annual equity plans aimed at improving participation (Postle et al., 1997). In the past 15 years a broad range of outreach programs have been implemented in Australian universities, many of which have focused on university-school partnerships. While there have been some increases in higher education participation by particular equity groups, 2007 access rates for people from low socio-economic background remain persistently low, with only a 15% participation rate despite making up 25% of the general population (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 28). Despite many initiatives (for example, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme), higher education participation remains inequitable, particularly in terms of access rates for people from a low socio-economic background (James, 2007; James et al., 2004b).

**Socio-economic status and higher education access in Australia**

The under-representation of students from a low socio-economic background in higher education has been the subject of much attention and it is clear that this
under-representation arises from factors other than ability (Dobson & Skuja, 2005). Recent research suggests a complex interaction between multiple factors including economic costs and other interrelated variables such as support networks, information provision and understanding and aspiration (Slack, 2003). Lack of appropriate support networks within families, schools, peers and the community has been found to constrain access (Harvey-Beavis & Robinson, 2000) and has been linked to limited family experience with, and/or understanding of, higher education (Andrews, 1999; Young, 2004).

For some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle. These are the students for whom the culture of the institution is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting (Krause, 2006). For instance, people from low socio-economic backgrounds might lack the social and cultural capital required to ‘talk the talk’ and ‘walk the walk’ at university (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003), as well as the social networks that provide avenues for participating in casual out-of-class conversations and the appropriate literacy skills necessary to navigate their way through the complex university terrain (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). Indeed the concept of social capital, taken from the work of Bourdieu (1986), is increasingly recognised as playing a significant role in the higher education experiences of students, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, both in terms of choice (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002) and university outcomes (Walpole, 2003). The low participation of this group is particularly inequitable in a post-industrial society, where knowledge is a fundamental form of capital that contributes to positive health and well-being outcomes.

Aspiration has also been identified as a key factor determining participation of people from a low socio-economic background (Marks, McMillan, & Hillman, 2001). A longitudinal study from 1995 to 2001 followed a Year 9 cohort of over 13,000 students and concluded that the ‘self-concept of ability, parental aspirations for the student’s education and students’ aspirations …’ impact on tertiary entrance outcomes (Marks, McMillan, & Hillman, 2001, p. ix). For many people from low socio-economic backgrounds, higher education is simply not part of their cultural worldview. This issue is highlighted through levels of parental education, which are the most reliable predictor of educational aspirations of young people (James, 2002; Zappala, 2003). What results is a self-reinforcing cycle of intergenerational disadvantage where low education levels (of parents) contribute to ongoing socio-economic disadvantage, which in turn collectively shape the aspirations of their children and impact on their educational outcomes. While the inter-relationship between variables that constrain access for people from low socio-economic backgrounds is not clear, there is a strong suggestion that raising aspiration might be a key leverage point for addressing equitable access issues for this group (Ferrier, 2006).

**Engaged outreach – an alternative approach**

The under-representation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education has primarily been addressed through the implementation of a range of outreach programs developed as partnerships between universities and local schools, usually at the high school level (Clarke, Zimmer, & Main, 1999). Some of the programs have included visits to schools by university personnel, open days and academic enrichment activities (Ferrier, Heagney, & Long, 2008). While there have undoubtedly been some place-specific successes, the slight proportional decline in
low socio-economic representation across the higher education sector suggests that these school-targeted programs have failed to achieve any significant breakthrough. It is our contention that traditional university outreach programs are too narrowly focused and fail to target the full range of key players who influence an individual’s decision to attend university. As a result, alternative models are required.

Higher education participation by potential students from a low socio-economic background is influenced by a complex set of interrelated factors across all six Department of Education, Employment and Training identified equity groups (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004a; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Additional complexities face individuals who occupy more than one equity group, such as individuals from a low socio-economic background who are also from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD). In addition to the factors that impact on socio-economic background, these individuals may also experience issues relating to English language proficiency (Andrews, 1999; Reay et al., 2005), cultural or religious barriers (Abbas, 2002) or structural barriers, while refugees often experience further difficulties (Hannah, 1999). However, results of research conducted by Marks (2007) indicate that once students access university, low socio-economic background does not negatively impact on course completion.

This highlights the issue of multiple disadvantage in higher education participation and the need to target the full range of stakeholders who influence the decision to participate in higher education. Alternative initiatives that can be applied at a systemic level are needed. Engaged outreach represents one such approach, based upon the premise that in order to make significant inroads towards raising the aspirations of potential students and their families, innovative programs are required that involve universities and multiple stakeholders3 working collaboratively within their local context. This approach draws largely from Gibbons et al.’s (1994) description of Type 2 ‘engaged research’ as being applied, transdisciplinary, collaborative, network-driven and directed towards achieving ‘common good’ outcomes while maintaining high quality research standards. Holland (2005) argues that such scholarship is being widely adopted by universities around the world both, ‘… as an expression of contemporary research methods and as a reinterpretation of the role of higher education in creating public good’ (p. 11, italics in original). What this signals is an emerging paradigm shift from somewhat paternalistic notions of ‘knowledge transfer’ to communities, to a more collaborative paradigm of ‘knowledge creation’ with communities. As such Gibbons et al. (1994) argue that ‘universities are coming to recognise that they are now only one type of player, albeit still a major one, in a vastly expanded knowledge production process’ (p. 11).

Research design

The overall aim of this two-year study was to develop an alternative approach to increasing access to higher education based on the principles of higher education community engagement (Cuthill, in press). Research focused on the issue of multiple disadvantage and targeted people from a low socio-economic background who are also from CALD backgrounds. The aim was to shift outreach models from a traditional, school-based focus to identifying, engaging and collaborating with the full range of stakeholders who impact or otherwise influence the decision to go to university (Figure 1).

The theoretical implications of the term ‘engagement’ direct that research be developed and implemented collaboratively with stakeholders, with particular regard
for people from CALD communities (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hoatson & Egan, 2001). As such, the research adopted a community-based participatory action research approach (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003) using primarily qualitative data collection methods (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005). This research approach is identified through both its emphasis on participatory processes involving diverse stakeholders and its focus on applied outcomes.

The specific focus for the research was young people and parents from CALD backgrounds living in the Western corridor of Brisbane in southeast Queensland (Australia). The corridor contains a number of areas of socio-economic deprivation, with comparatively high rates of unemployment and public housing. It also has high rates of people with a disability, Indigenous people and those from CALD backgrounds. Research specifically aimed to explore the attitudes, understanding, expectations and aspirations, relating to higher education, of potential students and their families from CALD communities. Initial research provided a foundation to work collaboratively with two identified communities to develop innovative approaches for immersing outreach activities directly into those communities.

The research progressed in three key stages and utilised a range of qualitative methods including informal stakeholder meetings, field notes, semi-structured interviews, workshops, working groups and a steering committee to collect primary data (Figure 2).

Stage 1: preliminary scan

Stage 1 involved a preliminary scan of the Western corridor to explore issues relating to access to higher education for CALD communities and to select two communities interested in working with the university on this topic. This stage of data collection involved informal meetings with 76 diverse public, private and community sector stakeholders, who were recruited via snowball sampling (Neuman, 2006). The snowball sampling process involved initial participants being asked to identify additional participants who were working within or knowledgeable about the broad focus of the project. This particular sampling technique has the advantage of providing access to what would otherwise be a largely inaccessible community, however, it is acknowledged that gaining access to a representative cross-section of the particular community, using this technique is less likely. Project presentations were made at key venues, such as churches, as part of this process.
Figure 2. Summary of research process and findings.
Towards the end of the preliminary scan it became apparent that Pacific Island communities would form the community of study. It was recommended by Pacific Island stakeholders that a community liaison officer be employed to help the research team engage with the communities. Such a strategy would ensure that the research was conducted in a culturally appropriate way and would encourage participation of community stakeholders. Additional funding was secured to employ two part-time liaison officers, one Samoan and one Tongan, to work with these two largest Pacific Island communities in the Western corridor. The initial task for the liaison officers was to undertake community mapping of the study area, to identify key church and community leaders and community groups. Once the mapping was complete, letters were sent to each identified stakeholder outlining the project and requesting an opportunity to meet. The liaison officers and project research officer then undertook a series of meetings to explain the initiative, to gather further information where possible and to enlist the support of community representatives. The liaison officers also initiated a series of regular meetings with local Pacific Island school liaison officers, to keep them updated with regards to project progress and to inform parents and other community members about the project.

Community leaders’ groups
The community liaison officers identified community and church leaders from the Tongan and Samoan communities, who were invited to participate in two Pacific Island Community Leaders’ Groups. It was envisaged that members would become community champions for the project and would act as ambassadors assisting in the dissemination of project information to other, harder-to-reach stakeholder groups in the community. Initially the Tongan and Samoan Community Leaders’ Groups met separately, but members subsequently requested joint meetings. Four community group leader meetings were held during the course of the project.

Stage 2: primary data collection
Stage 2 commenced once the specific communities of study, the Samoan and Tongan communities, had been invited and agreed to participate in the research. This stage involved primary data collection with young people and parents from Samoan and Tongan backgrounds, to explore their attitudes, understanding, expectations and aspirations towards higher education and identify key constraints impacting on access. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, with separate interview schedules developed for young people and for parents. All interviews were conducted in English. Thirteen interviews were conducted with young people aged 13–18, seven of whom were female and six male. Eight of the young people identified their cultural background as Samoan, one as Samoan/Tongan, three as Tongan and one as Tongan/Australian. Seven mothers and seven fathers (not related to the young people who participated) were also interviewed; seven identified as Samoan, six as Tongan and one as Tongan/Australian.

Stage 3: developing a collaborative response
Having identified a range of issues impacting on higher education access, the action research process moved towards the development of collaborative responses to
address identified constraints. The broad aim of engaged outreach is to directly connect universities with their local communities, forming relationships that extend the traditional university outreach focus beyond schools. As such, the aim of this final stage was to explore innovative approaches for immersing outreach activities directly into Pacific Island communities. However, as the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues constraining access became clear, it was apparent that an effective response would require the involvement of a broader group of stakeholders. The third stage of research therefore began with a stakeholder analysis. Informed by both the Pacific Island community liaison officers and the existing participant network, the following groups were identified as having a potential interest in working together to improve access to higher education for young people from a Pacific Island background (Figure 3).

Meetings were held with representatives from each stakeholder group. Research findings were presented and stakeholders were invited to collaborate with the University, Pacific Island communities and other stakeholders in the development of appropriate responses. Responses were identified through two action planning workshops. The first workshop discussed identified constraints on higher education access and ways in which to address these. The second workshop produced detailed implementation plans.

Data analysis

Field notes from the preliminary scan were coded and the codes were explored for potential linkages or associations. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and checked by the researcher for accuracy; three interview transcripts were excluded due to concerns over the reliability of the data, resulting in 24 interviews being
included in the analysis (11 young people and 13 parents). The full transcripts were thematically coded. It is acknowledged that interviews did not include a broad representation of these diverse communities. This was due to both political issues within these communities and resource constraints within the project. However, it is argued that triangulation of the diverse data, collected through the preliminary scan, semi-structured interviews and community workshops, when linked to existing research reports, paints a valid and reliable picture of the issue within the specific region of focus.

Limitations

Four interrelated issues, primarily relating to the cultural and community context of the project, constrained the research. These include limitations relating to the initial 12-month timeframe, which was quickly identified as insufficient to build sufficient trust and understanding to establish a genuine, long-term relationship. Extra funding was secured to implement a two-year project. Research fatigue due to previous negative experiences of research participation was also evident. Pacific Island community representatives in the study area demonstrated an initial reluctance to become involved in what was seen as ‘yet another research project’, although this was overcome in time. A third limitation relates to the challenge of securing reliable participation, partly due to differences in cultural norms between the Anglo-Australian research team and participants from Pacific Island backgrounds. Adaptation and flexibility were required from both cultural groups to overcome this issue. Finally, there are concerns over the validity of some data in terms of reliability and possible sample bias. These concerns are largely attributed to factors such as participants who were reluctant to ‘lose face’ by talking openly about their attitudes to and understanding of higher education and may instead have provided socially desirable responses. It is also possible that interview participants may have possessed a higher degree of cultural capital than might be found in the population as a whole.

Results

Stage 1: preliminary scan

Three broad themes relating to higher education access and CALD communities were identified through the preliminary scan. First, and significantly for this study, it was confirmed by participants that across a range of CALD communities, access to higher education is an issue for people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Second, the lack of recognition of overseas qualifications and prior learning was a barrier to higher education for adults, due to the complexity, time and cost of getting qualifications recognised. Many first-generation immigrants with children reported having ‘given up’ on their own education, instead placing great importance on their children’s education. The third theme related to English language proficiency and the time required to reach a level appropriate for tertiary level study.

The preliminary scan also identified that immigrants from a Pacific Island background collectively form one of the largest communities in the Western corridor, with relatively high numbers of newly arrived immigrants. However, an undetermined number of individuals from a Pacific Island background are effectively invisible in official statistics, as many arrive from the Pacific via New Zealand and, hence, are counted as New Zealanders in Census data. The exact size of the population is unclear.
Higher education access was reported as a key issue for Pacific Island communities in this area, with perceived low levels of aspiration, expectation and understanding about higher education. Concern was expressed about the lack of young people from these communities accessing higher education. Community members expressed a willingness to form a partnership with the University to address access issues. The decision was therefore taken to work with the Samoan and Tongan communities, the two largest Pacific Island communities in the Western corridor.

Stage 2: primary data collection

Once communities of study had been identified, the next stage of the research involved primary data collection to explore the attitudes, understanding, expectations and aspirations of young people and parents towards higher education and to identify constraints impacting on access. Results indicate that members of Pacific Island communities in the area of study generally have a positive view of participating in higher education and many parents and children who were interviewed expressed aspiration towards this goal. However, some participants argued that while this aspiration is expressed, it is unclear whether higher education is genuinely valued and prioritised accordingly, with many young people and their families primarily focused on seeking employment as soon as they have finished school. This is reflected in the findings that the current post-school pathways for young Pacific Islanders were reported to be in low or unskilled positions, which afford little opportunity for career development. Based on a triangulation of data from existing research (Mafi, 2005), the interviews and the preliminary scan, five key issues were identified which may affect young people’s decision to undertake further study upon finishing school:

(1) Cost and financial considerations are a significant issue, particularly as many families in the study area are on lower incomes and may also have obligations to support family members in Australia and overseas.

(2) Parental involvement in children’s education was often reported to be minimal and this was considered to have a negative impact on educational outcomes. The lack of involvement is largely due to parents’ limited understanding of the Australian education system and the lack of available information about how parents can better support their children with their education.

(3) School engagement and attainment was reported to be a major issue. Many young Pacific Island students are disengaging at school, which is impacting on their ability to achieve good educational outcomes. It is believed that this is in part due to the Western education framework; its methods of teaching and learning are not necessarily suited to the learning styles of Pacific Island students, who are more practically and collectively-orientated. It may also be related to issues such as English language and literacy, even for students born in Australia, but who speak a language other than English at home. This in turn can contribute to a lack of connection with learning, as can the perceived relevance of the curriculum.

(4) The perceived value and benefit of higher education can also impact on access. While higher education is reported to be highly regarded, it is also seen as something that requires a great investment of time and money. It may mean that while higher education is a stated priority, in reality other things may take precedence.
There are relatively few tertiary-educated role models from Pacific Island backgrounds in the region of study at the current time. The small number of teachers from Pacific Island backgrounds also means there are few direct role models within schools.

Underpinning each of these issues is a lack of accessible information available to help young people and parents learn more about education and higher education in Australia. In addition to these constraints, a range of contextual factors were identified in the data, which are summarised in Table 1.4

What is apparent is that the issues facing young Pacific Islanders in the Western corridor are complex and multidimensional and higher education cannot be considered in isolation from other individual, family, community, cultural and structural factors. It is not our intention to explore the full range of contextual factors in this paper, although it is important that these are acknowledged.5

Stage 3: developing a collaborative response

To respond to the identified constraints impacting on higher education access, two action planning workshops were held, which were attended by a range of stakeholders with an interest in working collaboratively to address these constraints. Three key strategies were developed:

(1) to provide accessible information to parents, young people, community leaders and schools about higher education;
(2) to provide better support to Pacific Island students at school, to ensure they can reach their full potential; and
(3) to raise aspiration and motivation among young Pacific Islanders to consider higher education as a post-school pathway.

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<th>Settlement issues</th>
<th>Spheres of influence</th>
<th>Social issues</th>
<th>Community strengths and interests</th>
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<td>Racism and discrimination</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Settlement process</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Strong social capital</td>
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<td>Migration status and invisibility in official data</td>
<td>Obedience</td>
<td>Access to resources and information services</td>
<td>Culture</td>
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<td>Recognition of overseas qualifications</td>
<td>Family loyalty</td>
<td>Cultural adjustment</td>
<td>Community</td>
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<td>Access to settlement and English language support</td>
<td>Sharing and caring</td>
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There was general agreement among workshop participants that these three areas should form the key focus for the collaborative response. Working groups comprising interested stakeholders were subsequently formed to progress strategy implementation. It was agreed among stakeholders that these three working groups would act independently of the university project team. In essence, any ongoing initiatives were part of a flow-on effect that is commonly generated through action research. However, administrative facilitation and representational roles were undertaken by research team members to support this flow-on activity.

Strategy 1 focused on the provision of accessible information relating to higher education. An information DVD has been developed, which aims to provide accessible information about the higher education system in Australia and includes testimonies from Pacific Island students and graduates. Strategy 2 explored how appropriate support can be provided to ensure Pacific Island students are able to reach their full potential at school. The Moreton Pacific Island Education Reference group, comprised of government, community, school and university representatives, has been established to progress this work. In its first year the group has developed a comprehensive Pacific Island framework for action in education, a guide to assist schools to improve the educational outcomes of young people from Pacific Island backgrounds.

The third strategy focused on developing an event aimed at building students’ aspiration and motivation to consider higher education as a post-school option and is an example of successful collaboration between the University and community. The result of this collaboration has been the development of an outreach event called PolyVision: Pacific youth of tomorrow. Based on the Dream fono concept developed by the University of Auckland, New Zealand, the program involves a range of interactive activities as well as small-group sessions led by Pacific Island university student mentors (Scull & Cuthill, 2008).

Collaborative partnerships have been in place throughout 2007, to guide the implementation of the identified strategies. Working groups have achieved impressive outcomes. The PolyVision working group has established an event aimed at building aspiration among young Pacific Islanders, the information DVD has been developed and distributed and the Moreton Pacific Island Education Reference Group has taken an important first step with the production of a practical guide for schools aimed at improving support to Pacific Island students. It is anticipated that these groups will continue to progress these strategies over the coming months.

**Discussion**

Through an extended process of engagement, this action research project is in itself an example of engaged outreach in practice. It has achieved a number of tangible outcomes in a relatively short time. Research identifies a number of contextual factors and key constraints impacting on higher education access for young Pacific Islanders. Through collaborative action with a range of stakeholder groups, strategies to address these constraints have been developed and implemented. They now require further refinement and extension for a significant period, in order to achieve the original stated aim of the research of increasing access to higher education for people from CALD backgrounds in areas of high socio-economic deprivation.

Research suggests that by working with relevant stakeholders, utilising existing relevant community structures and disseminating relevant information in appropriate
ways, there is potential to bring about real change relating to higher education access. This is largely due to the ownership that stakeholders feel towards initiatives in which they have played a key role in developing. The engaged outreach process developed through this project is comprised of three broad but distinct stages:

(1) Understanding the community of study and initial contact: Engaged outreach needs to start from an informed position and universities therefore should ensure they have a detailed understanding of the communities they seek to collaborate with. As the level of information required to gain an in-depth understanding is unlikely to exist, the first stage of an engaged outreach approach is likely to consist of a process similar to the preliminary scan. The scan for this project utilised informal processes to collect ethnographic data about potential partner communities. It initiated the building of relationships with a range of potential stakeholders.

(2) Understanding issues relating to higher education access. Key to facilitating increased access is a comprehensive understanding of current community attitudes and aspirations towards higher education and of the specific constraints impacting on higher education access. The collection of primary data from potential students, parents and broader community members helps to increase understanding, while further engagement activities such as workshops, presentations and meetings help to raise community awareness about the engaged outreach program.

(3) Development of a collaborative response. Following data collection and analysis, the next stage involves the development of collaborative working relationships with interested stakeholder groups. This involves a number of sub-stages, namely:
- identification of stakeholder groups;
- action planning;
- establishment of working groups to progress strategy implementation; and
- implementation, monitoring and potential revision of identified strategies.

These three stages of engaged outreach are presented as a general guide and will necessarily require adaptation to the particular context of the outreach initiative.

Based on the findings of this research, the concept of engaged outreach demonstrates real potential in addressing the seemingly entrenched issue of under-representation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian higher education. It is important to note that engaged outreach must be viewed as a long-term strategy. As evidenced through research described in this paper, an engaged outreach approach requires a minimum of two years to set the foundations for relationships based on trust and mutual respect. While the project ran for two years, direct engagement with Pacific Island communities in the area of study has only been occurring for approximately 15 months. During this time, it has been possible to build some strong relationships between the university and members of local Pacific Island communities. While this provides a strong foundation for ongoing relationships, what is described should be considered a starting point for a longer-term engagement plan. As such we argue that engaged outreach strategies should be based on a minimum five-year plan if they are to have a realistic prospect of raising the proportion of students from a low socio-economic background in higher education. This project has
completed the first steps in such a plan. Current strategies will need to be further refined as relationships continue to develop.

There is still keen interest among community members to continue their collaboration with the university. However, such engagement is time-consuming and, without ongoing institutional support to develop initiatives and assist in the maintenance of the relationship, it will struggle, despite the good intentions of all involved. In an internal report to The University of Queensland it has been recommended that the University continue its engaged outreach via the development of a Pacific Island outreach and support program, central to which will be the recruitment of a Pacific Island liaison officer.

Conclusion
Access to university is one pathway to help break intergenerational cultures of social disadvantage. While the higher education community engagement agenda has been advanced in Australia in recent years, the potential of innovative initiatives to address higher education access, such as described in this paper, remain relatively unexplored. Increased recognition of the way in which the decision to participate in higher education is influenced suggests it is time to rethink the way in which Australian universities both conceptualise and operationalise their outreach programs. This pilot project has trialled an alternative approach to outreach, which recognises the need to actively involve all stakeholders who might influence an individual’s decision to undertake higher education. The results suggest that collaborative partnerships between universities, their local communities and other stakeholders can lead to positive outcomes. It is possible that such relationships also contribute to increased higher education access, although it is too early to reach this conclusion based on the current project. To address this, further large-scale research is planned using the engaged outreach framework to focus on a collaborative regional level response involving three universities, government agencies, community groups and the private sector as partners, with a common goal of addressing the issue of under-representation of people from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education.

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Notes
1. The term ‘Pacific Island’ is used in the reporting of this research, and is broadly used to refer to Polynesian countries, particularly Samoa and Tonga.
2. Non-English speaking background has been generally replaced by the use of culturally and linguistically diverse background, which includes immigrants from non-English speaking countries and refugees. Indigenous populations are not included.
3. Stakeholders are broadly defined to include individuals and agencies with an interest in or who are potentially impacted by an issue.
4. Many of these contextual factors are not unique to Pacific Island communities and may potentially affect other immigrant communities.
5. Detailed discussion on these contextual factors will be published separately.
References


