Equally Engaged: Demystifying Tertiary Study in the Creative Arts to Equity Communities

The number of students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds in Australian universities is only 15%. A federally funded, nationwide program to raise participation rates of students from low SES backgrounds aims to stimulate interest, highlight career possibilities and promote understanding of university. The program also aims to improve retention and completion rate of those students.

This paper provides a case study and preliminary evaluation of Queensland University of Technology’s (QUT) Creative Industries Faculty’s (CIF) outreach programs to low SES school students, operating since 2012. Programs are conducted across the disciplines of Advertising, Dance, Drama, Media, Digital storytelling, Music and Entertainment. Presenting the arts and creative industries as a viable study / career pathway is particularly challenging to low SES groups. However, the focus on the creative industries aims to broaden understanding of arts and creativity, emphasising the significance of digital technology in the transformation of the workforce, providing new career opportunities in the creative and non-creative sectors. CIF’s outreach programs have been delivered to hundreds of students and this paper presents a case study and evaluation of several programs.

One of the key aims of the Widening Participation program is to shift attitudes in school students who may not typically see the advantage of attending tertiary education. The value of many creative arts disciplines here is that they have the capacity to work on an emotional, embodied level where attitudinal change is more likely to occur. Moreover, as Harland and Kinder (2004) note, arts education has the potential to offer cultural, educational and even economic inclusion. So in this regard, the Creative Industries Faculty with its array of art and design based disciplines appears to be at something of an advantage to meet the goals of the WP program.

On the deficit side however, is the perception – and reality to some extent, that studying for a career in the arts is the road to financial ruin. While it is clear that many artists do not make an adequate living, there is also growing evidence of new and emerging creative careers that technological innovations have produced. Research conducted in 2011 found that the cultural industries is one of the fastest-growing, most dynamic segments of the national economy. It directly employs 531 000 people (Cunningham 2011). This is an upward trend occurring since 2006
and is well above the growth rate in the Australian workforce in general, it confirms the trend of past two decades: that the creative sector is rapidly emerging as an economic force to be reckoned with (ibid). This is the message we try and get across to our students when we present our programs, and of course we try to find ways to get this important message to the students’ families. There is also an increase in creative jobs in the non-creative sector, for example, web design in a medical company. For clarification, the creative or cultural industries, as well as traditional arts disciplines also include design-based industries such as graphic design, architecture, interior, games and advertising.

The development of the Creative Industries Faculty’s programs is a collaboration between academics, postgraduate students who deliver the programs and the WP co-ordinator. The idea of university students delivering the program in schools is that because of their age and experience, they are more likely to engage the school students and be in a better position to sell the WP message, for example by personal anecdote of how they got to university and the obstacles they had to overcome. Our evaluation data, a one page survey administered to school students and teachers at the conclusion of programs has certainly confirmed this point. Many students comment on the “awesomeness” of the facilitators and are sometimes singled out as the best feature of the program. Employing QUT students also aligns with the university’s graduate outcomes and professional learning. Students receive training and are renumerated for their work.

The Faculty’s in-school programs are offered once a week from a period of three to six weeks. Most involve the production of an artefact eg: a graphic novel, a digital story, a dance, a multimedia advertisement. Funding also supports school arts programs such as end of year and touring performances with production assistance from QUT students. Many programs are integrated within the school curricular and help to meet curriculum needs such as enhancing digital and visual literacy, and may form part of assessment tasks.

The programs have received favourable feedback from students and teachers, and it appears that the main message is getting across. In response to the survey question: I have learned that uni study will open up a range of job opportunities 85% of year 8-10 students agreed in 2014. In response to the question: I am motivated to do my best at school so I have more choices when I leave 81.2% of the same cohort agreed. Comments by students support the success of the WP message for many, as detailed below.

[The program] helps me think about uni. Now I know what I will do in the future. Yes, this was awesome!"
It is fun and creative and I love all this kind of stuff so I had a great time doing it, and [now] **know I have the opportunity to do what I love.**

I like how it teaches you about what you do if you **choose to do that course at uni by doing activities** that you wouldn't usually have the opportunity to do.

All universities in Australia have implemented a raft of strategies in order to raise the participation rates of students from low income families. While our evaluation data bodes well, it is just one of many programs the university runs to meet the aims of Widening Participation. Furthermore, it is important to remember that equity strategies such as this must be sustainable and require repetition and follow up to be truly effective in the long term.

**References:**
