Portfolio Entry: Alternative university access for year 12 students

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the trial of Portfolio Entry, an alternative method of entry to the University of South Australia for year 12 students. In 2004 the University invited ten schools in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, a region with one of the lowest rates of university participation in Australia, to trial a student selection process involving the development of a portfolio of evidence for consideration for entry in 2005. The evidence was required to address a set of specified entry criteria which demonstrate potential for success at university. The paper outlines the rationale for the approach in terms of the literature, describes the rigorous design of Portfolio Entry and reports on the results of the trial and its evaluation.*

Keywords: *university participation, socio-economic disadvantage, equity*

Introduction

The University of South Australia has a strong commitment to equity and a national reputation for innovative practices in the area. This paper outlines an initiative which focuses on increasing university participation rates for students in a particular geographical area with low socio-economic indicators.

The University of South Australia recognises that the current practice of selecting secondary school students into university on the basis of a Tertiary Entrance Ranking (TER) derived from the Year 12 South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) is particularly limiting for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In particular, the University is concerned about higher education participation rates of students from the northern suburbs of Adelaide, a region with some of the lowest participation rates in the country (Stevenson, McLachlan and Karmel, 1999). An alternative entry for year 12 students, known as Portfolio Entry, has been developed to address this issue.

In 2004 the initiative was trialled with two programs of the University, with seven students gaining entry. The students developed a portfolio of evidence addressing a set of six entry criteria, demonstrating that they had investigated the career options of the program of study and providing supporting statements from appropriate members of the community. The small numbers are reflective of the very tight timeframes

under which the trial was undertaken and also the intention of the university that the approach should not be seen as replacing the Tertiary Entrance Ranking but rather that it be complementary to it for particular students. Perhaps more significantly, it also reflects the small numbers of students who have aspirations for higher education in this area.

The approach values a broad range of achievements and experiences, both academic and non-academic, in order to provide an inclusive but intellectually rigorous way of measuring potential for success at University. This approach provides a finer measure of selection because it allows a range of attitudinal and experiential aspects to be taken into account, something not possible through the standard selection processes using the TER. Staff of the participating schools and the South Australian Department of Children's Services (DECS) have been enthusiastic supporters of the trial.

This paper begins by discussing the social and educational context that inspired the conceptualisation of Portfolio Entry. It then outlines the design, implementation and outcome of the first Portfolio Entry Trial 2004-05. Finally, the paper considers some issues for the next phase of the trial, based on the evaluation involving participating students, teachers, staff of the University and DECS.

Context

Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds have about half as much chance, on average, of completing school, proceeding to university or TAFE, and graduating with a degree or diploma, as those from backgrounds of high socio-economic status (Harvey-Beavis & Robinson, 2000; James 2002, Teese & Polesel, 2003). In the northern suburbs of Adelaide, however, we have amongst the lowest rates of higher education participation in Australia (Stevenson, MacLachlan & Karmel, 1999). As Table 1 indicates, people living in the affluent eastern suburbs, for example Burnside, are up to seven times more likely to attend university than those from the economically disadvantaged outer northern suburbs, for example Elizabeth. Despite a range of initiatives introduced by University of South Australia over the last ten years, recent data indicates that the proportion of 19 to 21 year olds from Elizabeth participating in university is continuing to fall, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data for 2001 recording 7.2%.

Region	**University**	
	Rate %	Rank (out of 290)
Burnside	53.4	11
Salisbury	14.3	254
Munno Para & Gawler	12.5	269
Elizabeth	7.6	288
South Australia	22.4	-
Australia	24.2	-

Table 1. Regional Participation in University for 19-21 year olds (based on 1996 data) (Stevenson., MacLachlan, Karmel, (1999).)

Taking action to redress inequitable participation rates acknowledge that higher education is a critical means for furthering community development and well-being in low socio-economic areas. The benefits of higher education to the individual include increased employment rates, higher average salaries, increased

social status, and overall economic security (Teese & Polesel, 2003; Tranter 2004). Furthermore, if young people pursue tertiary education, they are more likely to have access to their preferred careers and to be engaged in highly skilled and highly paid jobs (Teese & Polesel, 2003).

As well as benefits to the individual, higher rates of participation for students from low socio-economic backgrounds can enrich higher education institutions by increasing diversity in the student population, with these institutions benefiting from a greater range of experiences and cultural values (Nunan, George & McCausland, 2000a). A diverse higher education student population has broader outcomes with society '… more economically and culturally productive because (they) use and extend the talents of all' (Nunan et al., 2000a: 86).

The current practice of selecting secondary school students into university on the basis of their TER, derived from the Year 12 South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), aggravates the significant disparity in higher education participation rates. Masked by an illusion of neutrality and impartiality, the TER is an authoritative measure that rewards the cultural resources characteristic of the most economically powerful groups in society (Teese & Polesel, 2003).

Where higher education places are limited and access is based on relative merit, the chance of significant shifts in higher education participation by low socioeconomic groups is extremely low. There must be both winners and losers in a zero sum game and the high success rates of students attending private schools and public schools in high socio-economic areas come at a cost to students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Teese, 2000: 3). 'In a system of relative merit,' Teese points out, 'failure cannot be eliminated, merely exported' (2000: 3). This is borne out by Commonwealth higher education statistics which indicate that there has been a slight decrease in the proportion of students from the lowest quartile of socioeconomic status between 1991 to 2004 (from 14.7% to 14.4%) despite a wide range of policy initiatives across the higher education sector.

The TER approach requires students from low socio-economic backgrounds to participate in an artificial academic competition that overlooks the negative influence of poor initial achievement at school, poorer literacy skills, lower self-esteem, lesser school resources, family economic insecurity and limited knowledge of tertiary education (James 2002; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003). In addition these students struggle with the discouraging effects of stereotyping because they come from a community which is highly stigmatised (Tranter 2004).

Furthermore, under current funding arrangements, schools in low socio-economic areas are less likely to have the range of Year 12 subjects that would improve their capacity to compete for a position at university (Teese & Polesel, 2003). Combined with a culture of academic non-achievement, lowered expectations, and the distraction of a critical mass of disengaged students (Tranter, 2004), these factors effectively exclude the majority of students at schools in low socio-economic areas from higher education.

In order to address these issues, in 2004 the University trialled Portfolio Entry for students in 10 schools from a significantly disadvantaged area in the north of metropolitan Adelaide. The approach takes a totally different view of selection, requiring students to provide evidence that they could succeed at university. It recognises that the only way to break the current low rates of participation is to provide an alternative selection process which focuses on achievement rather than ranking.
The discussion below outlines the conceptualisation and design of Portfolio Entry under the guidance of the Pro Vice Chancellor: Access and Learning Support and in consultation with the Department of Education, and Children's Services (DECS) and the Northern Adelaide State Secondary Principals Network.

Portfolio entry design

Students from targeted schools are invited to prepare portfolios of evidence which support their application to the University. The evidence includes:

1. learning activity which demonstrates six entry qualities
2. exploration of career pathways relating to the program of study
3. supporting statements from significant members of the community, including at least one school teacher

Portfolio Entry is supported by software, developed by staff of the University's Online Services. This software enables students to create an electronic portfolio consisting of their achievements and experiences and to submit it to the University for assessment.

1. Entry qualities

The six entry qualities are based on the University's already established Graduate Qualities (see Nunan, George & McCausland, 2000; Nunan et al., 2000a) and a set of descriptors developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in the UK (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2004). The Portfolio Entry criteria include:

1. Body of knowledge (as specified by the University Program for which the student is applying)
2. Information literacy
3. Problem solving
4. Working with others
5. Working alone
6. Communication

Each of these entry criteria is accompanied by a number of detailed descriptors to guide students' collection of evidence.

Portfolio Entry has been designed to be program specific, assessing students' potential to succeed in the particular program for which they are applying, rather than as a general mode of entry to university. The Portfolio Entry design therefore includes the participation of university program representatives in order to identify the requisite program-specific criteria and also to assist with selection.

2. Exploration of career pathways relating to the program of study

Students are asked to provide evidence that they have explored career pathways associated with the program for which they are applying. This may include: work experience undertaken through school, paid or voluntary employment, visits to work places, interviews with members of particular professions, web searches and attendance at university open days and careers fairs.

This requirement aims to encourage students to consider carefully their program choices, and the suitability and desirability of the career pathways associated with these choices. It requires explicit and deliberate transition planning by students, aiming to avoid exits caused by uninformed and/or inappropriate program choice (McInnis & James, 1999; Peel et al., 2004).

3. Supporting statements

Finally, students are asked to collect statements to support their application from members of the

community, including at least one statement from a school teacher. These statements are to address issues such as the student's motivation, interest in the area of study, ability to study at university, capacity to be self-directed and capacity to work with others.

Collecting the evidence

Portfolio Entry requires students to classify the evidence of their activity in one of two ways: learning experiences (not assessed) and learning achievements (formally assessed). The activities may include work undertaken as a part of their senior secondary studies or as extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Students are prompted by a proforma to reflect on how these have contributed to their learning.

1. Learning experiences

Learning experiences are activities that have not been formally assessed but have made a contribution to a student's learning. This is an acknowledgement that much useful learning occurs outside formal assessment frameworks. Examples include: voluntary or paid employment, activities associated with school or community clubs/associations, school work that has not been formally assessed, sporting activities, or visits to industry or work places.

2. Learning achievements

Learning achievements are activities that have been formally assessed by a qualified person. These activities may include: school assignments, tests, certificates provided through TAFE or other VET providers, activities assessed through community organisations such as First Aid, Scouts or cultural groups and lifesaving or coaching certificates.

Features of portfolio entry

Portfolio Entry has a number of specific features which suits it to selection for university. In particular it:

- assesses a wide range of skills necessary for success at university including motivation, independence, time-management and enthusiasm for the program of study
- promotes exploration of the career pathways available through the program of study
- values a wide range of learning experiences or achievements relevant to the program including community-based and industry-related activities, and any subjects undertaken in years 11 and 12 regardless of the combination of courses and their Higher Education Selection (HESS) status.
- requires no additional assignments to be completed
- can serve as a safety net for students who are on a TER track, in the event that their TER score is not high enough to secure a place at university
- uses an intellectually rigorous selection process including the notion of 'entry qualities' which is consistent with the University's approach to graduate qualities.

This paper now turns to outline the implementation of the first Portfolio Entry Trial undertaken in 2004-05.

Implementation of the portfolio entry trial 2004-05

In May 2004 the University approved the first trial of Portfolio Entry for 2005 entry and Year 12 students from ten state schools in the northern suburbs of Adelaide were invited to participate. A total quota of fifteen places was identified across three University of South Australia programs – Visual Communication, Computer and Information Science, and Nursing.

From the ten participating schools fifty-four students initially nominated for the Portfolio Entry Trial, although several didn't ever register. Students either self-selected or were nominated by teachers. In the latter case, students were targeted on the basis of their perceived potential to complete a Portfolio and to succeed at university and/or because they had expressed an interest in one of the three University of South Australia programs on offer but were considered unlikely to qualify through a TER.

Two three-hour workshops, held at the University, were offered to these students and their teachers. The workshops provided a comprehensive introduction to the Portfolio Entry initiative, the entry criteria and methods for collecting evidence to meet these criteria, the software and the three university programs available. Students were also able to practice entering activities onto the software using the computer pools at the University. Department of Children's Services (DECS) and university representatives and teachers circulated amongst the students, answering questions, prompting discussion and providing feedback.

The University provided ongoing support for teachers and students throughout the trial. A Reference Group, involving representatives from the University, DECS and participating schools, met regularly and a project officer supported the Reference Group and provided a liaison point for teachers and students as queries arose. The project officer provided progress reports on portfolio development for the schools which enabled teachers to target additional support to participating students as required.

Support was provided to students in schools by a designated teacher or school counsellor, some setting aside a time-slot each week to meet with the students for this purpose. In most cases this role was in addition to their usual school commitments. The contributions of these school contacts, in combination with the support structures provided by university and DECS representatives, were critical to the smooth implementation of the trial.

The Reference Group nominated a selection panel for each of the University of South Australia programs, to assess the completed portfolios and a small subgroup consisting of the pro vice chancellor, program director and DECS representative met each short-listed applicant.

The student support staff of the University's Learning Connection developed a comprehensive support and orientation program for all students who were admitted through the trial. Portfolio entry 'buddies' were appointed to provide peer enrolment and other support.

Outcome of the portfolio entry trial 2004-05

Of the 46 students who actually registered for the Portfolio Entry trial, eleven completed Portfolios. All eleven applications were approved for entry on the basis of their portfolios.

- The eleven students came from six of the ten targeted schools
- Seven (all female) applied for Nursing and four (all male) applied for Computing
- None applied for Visual Communication
- Four students received offers on the basis of their TER and seven, three in Nursing and four in Computing, on the basis of Portfolio Entry
- The trial has provided valuable opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between the University, the school sector schools and DECS

Of those who did not complete a portfolio, most withdrew early in the process with teachers indicating a wide range of reasons for this withdrawal, including exit from school, change of plans for the future,

lack of motivation, self-discipline or time, or the decision to rely on their TER. Of the small number who had progressed well, three were offered full-time employment opportunities in computing (their program of choice) and one became sidetracked by part-time work. A summary of the outcomes by school is outlined below.

SCHOOL	Submitted Portfolio	Good Progress	Some Progress	Little/no progress	Total
School 1	1	0	2	1	4
School 2	5	1	2	2	10
School 3	1			1	2
School 4	0			2	2
School 5	0		3	5	8
School 6	1				1
School 7	1	3		3	7
School 8	0		2	5	7
School 9	0			3	3
School 10	2				2
Total	**11**	**4**	**9**	**22**	**46**

Table 2 Portfolio Entry Outcomes by School 2004-2005

At this stage it is too early to determine the full impact of Portfolio Entry on the university participation rates for these schools. For School 2 above, however, the number of students admitted through Portfolio Entry is equal to the total number who enrolled at any university in 2004 and it appears that the number of places offered to that school have at least doubled in 2005.

The seven Portfolio Entrants who successfully obtained a university place solely on the basis of their Portfolio can therefore be seen to represent a significant shift in university enrolments for some of these schools.

Future of portfolio entry

Students gaining entry into the University through Portfolio Entry will be closely monitored in the short term and a further evaluation will occur at the end of Semester 1, 2005. A longitudinal study will also be undertaken, carefully tracking the relevant statistics for the cohorts of Portfolio Entrants as well as gathering qualitative data including the students' experiences at University.

The evaluation of the first phase of the trial was conducted at the end of 2004. The results of the evaluation were overwhelmingly positive, with all stakeholders agreeing that, despite the very tight timeframes, it had been extremely successful. A number of issues were raised including expansion of the programs available, additional documentation and workshops and minor changes to the software.
On the basis of the evaluation the first phase, at the end of 2004 the University agreed to continue the trial in 2005 for 2006 entry. A business program will be added to those available in 2004 and three more schools will be invited to participate. Further extensions of the initiative will need to be formally

approved through the University's normal academic processes.

Portfolio Entry is an equity initiative targeting a group of schools in a specific geographical location on the basis of a particular set of socio-economic indicators. It is not intended that it will become more generally available as a means of entry for Year 12 students as individuals or to cohorts of students from other schools.

Conclusion

Increasing participation of low socioeconomic groups in higher education is a major goal of the Australian higher education sector. In response to the failure to improve the statistics nationally, and consistent with the University's equity mission, the University of South Australia has implemented a trial of an innovative alternative selection process for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged schools in the northern Adelaide region.