



Local Knowledge and the Classroom
Reflections from North West Tasmania

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Participation Targets?

- *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (2009) sets a series of targets to increase 'participation' in higher education, particularly for under-served groups, with \$437 million in funding over 4 years. The aim is that by 2025:
 - 40% of all 25-34 year olds will hold at least an undergraduate qualification,
 - 20% of undergraduate enrolments will be of people of 'low socio-economic status'...
- **But... who are these 'targets'?**
- **What happens when 'non traditional' students enter the classroom?**
- **What does 'participation' in university mean from their perspectives, and how relevant is it to them?**

Cradle Coast campus

- **Located in Burnie, North West Tasmania, in a region with low HE participation':**
 - **In 2006 only 47% of the population aged 25-64 in NW Tasmania held any form of post-school qualification.**
 - **Only about 7% held a bachelors degree or higher.**
- **As of June 2010, the campus had 830 students:**
 - **Across a wide range of courses, most u/graduate**
 - **73% female**
 - **Average student age 32; age range from 18-71.**
 - **Average EFTSL around .5**
 - **57 graduands in 2009 (first ever @ Cradle Coast)**

Stories from Our Pioneers...

- **The Bachelor of Regional Resource Management, established in 2006, was the first course to be offered completely from the Cradle Coast campus**
- **In 2008, we asked then third-year students to reflect on the course and their experiences. There were 11 students (excluding those deferred) enrolled in the third year in Semester 2, 2008.**
- **Most were from 'non-traditional' student backgrounds.**
- **Their motivations and experiences of university are a source of data for understanding drivers of participation.**

2008 Cohort Profile

- *Methodology: Knowledge Partnering. Students decided what would be said, recorded, presented.*
- *Outputs: Cohort Profile and Key Messages.*
- *Timeline: October-December 2008*

The 2008 Third-Year BRRM Cohort:

- 64% male, 36% female
- **Mature-aged: Average age 39 ...ranged from 20s-50s**
- **82% grew up in the region... & 64% had lived interstate.**
- **82% had children, most still living at home**
- **82% had no previous university experience; 45% came with a TAFE qualification**
- **All had previous work experience in diverse industries; several had run successful businesses**

Their Motivations for Study

Motivations for entering university (multiple):

- 1) a desire to gain a formal qualification, whether for career or personal reasons (55%);
- 2) a general desire to study, learn, extend oneself, and explore – including ‘testing the water’ for further study (45%); and
- 3) a desire to develop thinking skills and ability to speak the ‘language’ of certain professional groups (27%).

Motivations for choosing the BRRM Degree:

- 1) Located in the region
- 2) Content of the course

Experiences and Key Messages

- Nearly all of the students talked about learning at university as a process of *broadening their perspectives*, while at the same time recognising and developing their *existing* knowledge and skills.
- University was about learning new things, but also about *learning what they already knew*. It included *learning from each other*.

'I can relate some of the things in the class to life experiences. Many of my exam answers are about things that I've actually done.'

'Being in a bunch of people that really turn and pull and have tug of war with each others' ideas – I've never experienced that before.'

'(The BRRM students) had all been somewhere and done something, and were willing to share it.'

'I look at issues with a deeper and broader lens now.'

'University has helped me put those skills in a box so I can organise them so they can be used.... If you don't have them in a box, you don't know you have them....'

Learning is... 'an adventure, an exploration.'

- The process of academic thinking and writing was generally *foreign* and meant a steep learning curve.

'I didn't realise you had to say what anyone else thought.... Once you got over the shock that this was what you had to do, you had to figure out how to do it!'

- Students faced *family and community pressures*, in terms of workload and the cultural context of their decision to study.

'You're not productive unless you produce something'

'They understand that education is important – but they start to question it when you're not out the door at 8am.'

'Why give up work and income to go back to school?'

'Uni isn't the real world. I do have to go home to my real life... It's a luxury to have time to think.'

- *Debating ideas* with others in a safe environment was a key aspect of the learning experience:

'These people (fellow students) have really changed my perspective, I've looked at things from their different perspectives.'

'I've become critical, not in a bad way, analytical – why does this work? What's there that you can't see?'

The Next Generation: First Year Students in 2010

- **Regional Science A and B - 2010 First-Year Cohort**
Enrolments doubled in 2010 due to new course structure & community development stream
- **Student Profile**
 - Wide age range, all mature-age.
 - 2010 students came from diverse backgrounds: building trades, journalism, massage therapy, homemaking, modelling, retirement, hairdressing, shopkeeping, local government, manual labour, nursing, and arts & craft (one was a former homeless person).
- **Motivations for joining the course**
 - Located in the region: *offered mostly face-to-face on the campus*
 - Content of the course: *the community development major and regional science offerings.*

Knowledge Partnering in the Classroom

The meeting point of different kinds of knowledge

Local and experiential knowledge
interacting with codified knowledge.

- Mature-aged students see the bigger picture; they can reflect on / relate material to real life.
- They very much appreciate that they are not empty vessels to be filled with content - they wish to use their skills and 'debate'.
- They are very diverse.
- But they are keen to work together and use the skills of the group to deal with real problems.

Lecturer's Observations

- The current students are an enthusiastic bunch overall but generally need a lot of encouragement and nurturing (primarily due to cultural barriers and the amount of time spent out of the education system).
- Issues with 'writing' and 'transition to uni' cultural issues are still predominant
- Face-to-face learning is attractive to them.
- They are open to new technologies.
- They like case studies (real world implications) and appreciate 'applied' or 'grounded' learning.
- They appreciate the Knowledge Partnering approach.

Students' Observations

- 'Everyone in the class had different perspectives'
- 'Practical' course material was appealing: 'We can relate to it. You're getting us to think about our 'common knowledge'.'
- 'Academic' language in other units was a challenge, both *understanding* it, and its perceived *relevance*: 'Nobody talks like that.' (Except 'academics'.)
- Socialising and 'hearing people's stories' is important. Coffee, networking: 'Happy students are good students.'
- Major projects and group work were opportunities for 'putting tools into practice': 'You do learn a lot.'
- Students came out with 'new perspectives' as well as 'understanding' of academic content: 'Your layman's terms help us understand.'

Significance for Teaching Practice

- The participation agenda ('massification' of HE): Moves us away from the 'ivory tower', the 'white collar' image ... and the 'blank slate'!
- New students bring and seek *perspectives, stories, debates, diversity, real-life issues....* They want learning to be *grounded, relevant, and translated to their language and cultural context.*
- Teaching opportunity: To *intentionally and actively* bring students' local and experiential knowledge *into the learning process.*
- Learning as Knowledge Partnering in the classroom: not just 'building on' prior knowledge, but creating meeting points for different *kinds* of knowledge.

