

# **CQ Connections – Breaking through the barriers to tertiary education**

**Olive Mallory – Coordinator CQ Connections, Central Queensland University**  
**Mary McKavanagh – Counsellor, Central Queensland University**

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the findings of research which was conducted to identify the barriers to accessing and succeeding at tertiary study, as perceived by year 11 and 12 low income students from five Central Queensland schools. The findings of this project has the potential to assist the future direction of Central Queensland University recruitment policies and procedures by providing demographic data that will enable recruitment programs to be inclusive of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and by providing information enabling perceived barriers to university study to be addressed. The paper incorporates a description of CQ Connections which is an equity program conducted at CQU aimed at increasing the access, participation and success of LSES students at CQU.

## **Background**

The National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) in a review of the National Higher Education Equity Framework, stated that people from rural and remote areas, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are still severely under-represented in higher education (NBEET 1996). Research has identified a number of reasons for the low participation rates of rural and remote and low-SES students in higher education, showing a considerable overlap between these groups. Some identified reasons are a lack of exposure to and experience of tertiary study in the family resulting in an undervaluing of tertiary study and knowledge on how to articulate to university. Linked to this, especially for rural and isolated students, is a lack of role models in their small communities and awareness of career opportunities that exist outside their communities (Patton & McMahon, 1997). Patton & McMahon (1997) also identified the difficulty low-SES students have in perceiving the links between tertiary study and future career opportunities. Limited post secondary options may result from the restricted choice of subjects (Teese et al, 1995) and the limited range of subjects available in rural schools (PCAP1997).

Despite a strong commitment to access and equity practises, students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are still under-represented at CQU as is the case in all Australian universities. To further address the issue, a range of equity programs have been initiated by tertiary institutions over the last eight years. In 1996, CQU initiated CQ Connections, which aims to improve the access, participation, retention and success rates of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Experience at other universities demonstrated that simple entry schemes had little effect on the participation rate of the target group. Therefore the CQ Connections program has adopted a more comprehensive approach.

## What is CQ Connections?

CQ Connections has developed a three tiered strategy by integrating outreach, access and support to achieve long term systemic change to the participation and success rate of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The **outreach** component of CQ Connections is aimed at demystifying university study so that the target group and their families become more familiar with tertiary education and the career opportunities resulting from further study. The outreach activities conducted by CQ Connections include:

- school visits by university staff and student role models to participate in class activities and conduct sessions on specific topics such as goal setting and study skills;
- follow up newsletters, phone conferences and e-mails by CQ Connection co-ordinator to school staff, students and parents to answer queries and clarify information;
- campus visits by class groups to participate in Faculty conducted sessions related to school curriculum or participate in careers markets and/or discovery day;
- Uni Experience which is an on campus four day residential activity to provide students with the first hand experience of university life, study, course information and career outcomes;
- Shadowing which allows high school students to attend lectures and practical sessions with a current university student for several days to experience university study and interact with “real” university students and lecturers.

The **access** component of CQ Connections involves students completing a purpose designed application form which is reviewed by a panel briefed with the entry criteria. The primary criteria is low income and then other disadvantages are considered. The entry process incorporates special consideration to assist students to gain entry into a preferred course which compensates for their relative educational disadvantage. Not all applicants require special consideration to gain entry. Students who are assisted to gain entry are not advised of the “forced entry”.

Once students are admitted to CQU through the CQ Connections program, an extensive range of **support** is provided to assist students with the transitions to university, to understand and meet academic requirements of their course and provide ongoing support throughout their study. These supports include a special orientation program for CQ Connections students; regular lunches to facilitate networking and peer support; appropriate and timely workshops; effective referral to existing academic support units in the University, individual tutorial assistance, loan of computers and resources, personal counselling and advocacy. All CQ Connections students receive a textbook grant in the first year of their study and several residential scholarships are awarded to students who have to live away from home to attend university.

## **The Research**

### **Method**

All year 11 and 12 students in five Central Queensland schools were invited to participate in the research. The schools were chosen to represent the diversity of economic and cultural circumstances experienced in the region. All the schools chosen are schools targeted by CQ Connections and from different locations in the region. Because of the research focus the schools chosen had a higher than average population of low socioeconomic students as defined by the Education Department's Special Program Schools Scheme which rates schools using the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage. The schools will not be named in the research paper but rather referred by the following classification to protect the anonymity of the participants:

- Disadvantaged
- Disadvantaged Isolated
- Urban
- Isolated
- Rural

Ethical clearance and permission to research was applied for and received from the University Ethics Committee, Education Department – Performance Measurement Office and the school community of each school.

### **Materials**

Two separate surveys were developed based on research and consultation with school and university staff. The first was designed to establish demographic data and was completed at home by the student. The second part was aimed at determining the student's perceptions about their parent's values and their own values concerning tertiary education. This part of the questionnaire was completed independently at school. Several focus groups were conducted in the Urban and the Disadvantaged school at the school several weeks after the surveys were completed. There was a total of 18 participants in the focus groups.

### **Procedures**

A total of 698 questionnaires were sent home with all year 11 and 12 students in the five high schools. Questionnaires were completed by 155 students. Details of response rates for each participating school are displayed in table 1 below.

*Table 1: Responses by school*

<i>School</i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Total Students</i>	<i>Response Rate</i>
Urban	20	283	7%
Disadvantaged Isolated	37	85	43%
Disadvantaged	41	95	43%
Isolated	16	40	40%
Rural	41	195	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>698</b>	<b>22%</b>

## Results

The average age of respondents was 16 with 65.2% female and 34.8% male. The majority of participants lived in a designated rural area, were born in Australia, had an Australian family background and spoke English at home. This is consistent with the ABS demographic data for the region. Over 80% of participants will need to relocate to attend university.

A slightly higher percentage of participants than the national figures lived in single families. Four of the 155 participants lived independently.

In relation to family income over 50% indicated that their family received less than \$27000 per year indicating that a high percentage of participants are on low income. However only 29% receive Austudy and 5.8% receive Abstudy. The researchers were not able to identify reasons for this through the data they gathered.

The following data demonstrates that the majority of participants have no family experience of university study. Numerous studies reveal that children from tertiary educated professional parents are significantly advantaged and more likely to complete tertiary study themselves and those without tertiary experience in their family are least likely to complete tertiary study.

Father not completed university	88.4%
Mother not completed university	90.3%
No siblings attending university	81.3%
Siblings not completed university	89%
First in family to attend university	79.3%

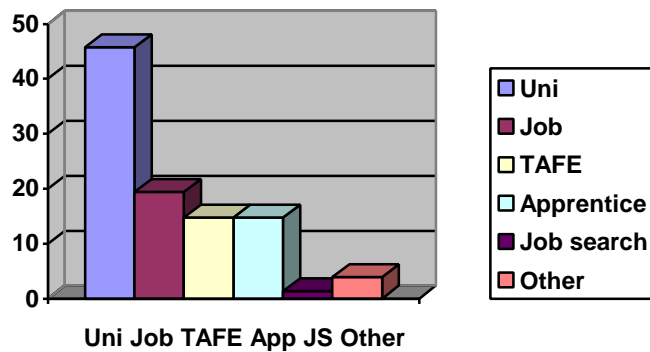
The recent research conducted by Western et al (1998) to determine an appropriate means of measuring socioeconomic status of tertiary students has suggested that both occupation and education of parents are important elements of socioeconomic status. An analysis of occupational data and education of parents indicates that a high percentage of participants in this study would be classified by Western's criteria as low socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Post School Options

Participants were asked to prioritise their post school preferences from the list of options indicated below. A total of 45.8% of participants indicated that their first post

school preference is to attend university. A further 14.8% chose TAFE as their first preference. When compared with QTAC figures which indicate that in 1996 only 26% of all Queensland year 12 state school students applied to QTAC to attend TAFE or University; there seems to be a huge difference. Based on historical data it seems many students would like to go on with further study but do not even start the first step by applying to QTAC.

*Figure 1 Post school options first preference*



Participants were asked if they thought they had the freedom to choose what they wanted to do after completing school. The majority (65.2% agreed and 29.7% somewhat agreed) thought they had the freedom to choose while 5% of participants thought they were not able to freely choose. The majority (58% agree and 29.7% somewhat agree) of participants also agreed that their parents would encourage them to go to university even if they (the parents) were unable to offer financial support. However 10% of participants did not agree with this statement. 5.8% of participants considered that if they chose to go to university it would be against their parents wishes.

Twenty statements were listed and participants were asked to indicate if they agreed with them. The statements were designed to elicit the students' underlying beliefs about university study. These statements were again listed in a different order and slightly reworded and the students were again asked to indicate which of the statements they considered reflected their families' beliefs about further education. Comparison of the responses indicated that there did not appear to be a great degree of variation between the students and their perception of parental attitudes. For most of the statements it seemed that the students perceived their parents to be more positive about the benefits of tertiary study than they were themselves. The statements which seemed to indicate the most concern were related to the costs of studying and text books, the implications of the HECS debt and the lack of assurance of a job after completing study. Students also seemed to indicate a lack of self confidence at being able to access and complete tertiary study.

Although the majority of participants perceive that they have the support of their parents to go to university the focus group discussions indicated that the subtle influence of family values, attitudes and educational experience still seems to influence the choice of young people. For many of the participants they wanted a "good job" when they left school and their perception of a "good job" appeared to be influenced by their parents' employment area. For students attending the disadvantaged school, getting a trade was

considered a “good job”. Fewer students at the urban school considered a trade as a “good job”.

A comparison of the focus group discussions in the disadvantaged and urban school highlighted that students in the disadvantaged school seemed less prepared or willing to make decisions about their post school options than the urban school. One student in the disadvantaged school stated that most students at their school would wait and see what OP they got and then make decisions about what to do. Students in the urban school seemed more pro-active about what they were doing after year 12. The students at the urban school also appeared to have more positive tertiary educated role models in their family or close associations who had an influence on their choices, than the students at the disadvantaged school.

## Conclusions

Attending university after year 12 is the preferred option from 45% of participants. This is the single most popular option. The QTAC historical statistics indicate that only half of these students will follow up with this preference. Also only 54% have nominated preferences other than going to university. Why do they not want to go to university? For the majority of participants, family attitudes to university study does not appear to be a barrier but there is a gap. Parents want their children to go onto tertiary study but it appears that they lack the experience, confidence and know how to facilitate that happening. This was confirmed through the discussion in the focus group and with parents of students participating in the CQ Connections Uni Experience.

Concern about the cost of text books and having to be dependent on income support for another 3 to 4 years without assistance from their parents indicates that finance is a barrier. Participants were also concerned about accumulating a HECS debt and still not having an assurance of a job after the investment of time and money. Students from low socioeconomic background also appear to lack the confidence in themselves to access and successfully complete university study.

There is a gap in our traditional way of recruiting and disseminating information about our course and career outcomes is not bridging that gap. How do we compensate for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds lack of family experience, cultural know how and information about tertiary study. We need to do it differently. CQ Connections has used an informal personal approach and experiential programs for year 11 and 12 students. However this needs to begin with younger students to overcome the lack of family experience and knowledge. It is intended to begin activities in several targeted schools with younger students and maintain this link through all high school years. The programs need to be informal and student focused using where possible current university students who have come from that school. The programs need to relate current curriculum with university courses and identify the links between courses and careers.

There is a need to continue offering financial assistance in the way of text book grants and residential scholarships. The universities also need to look at ways of offering more up front scholarships, as having the money while studying is a major concern for students from low income backgrounds. Individual support in the transition from school to tertiary is also important to assist students, so they know before they start university

there is someone there to assist and support them through the uncharted waters of university life and study. The presence of this support has shown to develop students' self-confidence and reduces the attrition rate.

## References

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