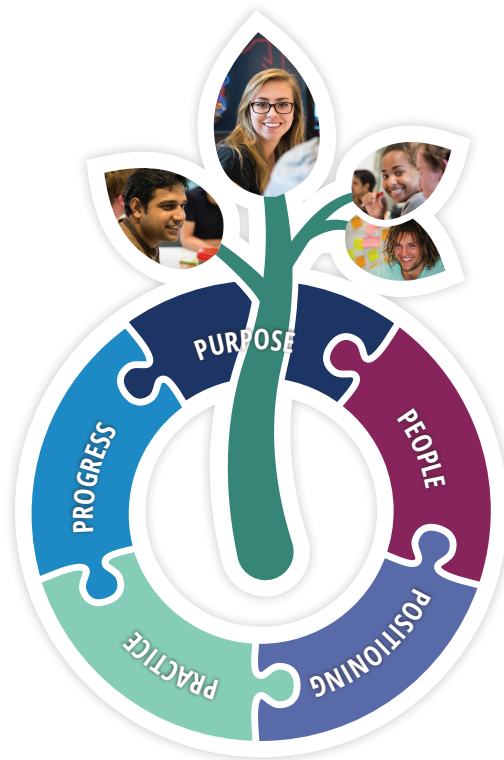


Developing and Supporting Student Leadership (DaSSL)

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CASE STUDY:

Student Leadership for diversity and equity: Assessing the inclusivity of UniPASS

An application of the 5Ps Framework for Developing & Supporting Student Leadership (DaSSL) in Higher Education

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INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT:

Curtin University is Western Australia's largest university with 61,000 students (30% of whom are international students) and 4,200 staff, across seven campuses. The institution is ranked 271st on the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and is known for innovation, collaboration with business & industry, being future focused and for producing career-ready graduates. Curtin has a strong focus on equity and diversity and has been the highest ranked university nationally for three years 2013 – 2015 under the Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) Pride In Diversity (PID).

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM OR INITIATIVE:

UniPASS started in 2011 and is a peer learning program which adheres to the PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) Guidelines for Best Practice and is accredited by the National Centre for PASS, University of Wollongong. Each semester, UniPASS supports approximately thirty units/subjects that have a high fail rates, across all five faculties. The program currently employs and develops approximately fifty students as casual Peer Learning Facilitators (also known as PASS Leaders) each year. UniPASS has been nationally recognised with three peer learning awards, and is active in research around impact on student retention, motivation and leadership, and the successful UniPASS online Facebook model.

APPLICATION OF THE FRAMEWORK TOOL:

The UniPASS program was originally funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships (HEPP) program, a Commonwealth initiative to improve access to higher education for people from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. While principles of equity and diversity have always been core to UniPASS culture, we wanted to formally and more comprehensively assess our performance in this respect. To do this, we decided to use the DaSSL 5Ps Framework focussing specifically on Principle 3 of the DaSSL Framework, Equity & Diversity, and exploring all five domains through this lens in relation to the UniPASS program. We (the Manager and the Coordinator of UniPASS) met to discuss and work through the questions in the DaSSL Framework Reflection Tool. We drew on a range of institutional policies, procedures and practices to consider these questions in depth. For example, we looked at our operational procedures in the light of the Curtin University equity and diversity policy and strategy. We examined our experience in relation to concepts learnt from Courageous Conversations about Race workshops and training for the Ally Network (which promotes an inclusive university culture for people of diverse sexuality and gender identities). We reflected on relevant committee meetings we were involved with, namely, the Curtin Transgender Guide steering committee, the Ally Pride Steering Committee, and the Higher Education Participation Program Operational Group.

Through discussions and reference to the sources above, we felt well placed to evaluate how well UniPASS performed in relation to inclusivity, equity and diversity. This process highlighted areas where the program was performing well and also where we could strengthen our processes to better put equity and diversity principles into practice.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE 5PS REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

PURPOSE

Through the reflection process, we realised that while UniPASS staff have a strong commitment to inclusivity principles, the program needed to have diversity and equity goals more firmly embedded into its key objectives, in order to celebrate diversity in leadership development. This explicit recognition of equity and diversity goals will enable the program to more comprehensively achieve the PASS goal of inclusivity, while supporting the creation of truly safe and supportive learning spaces.

PEOPLE

As students from marginalised groups are key stakeholders in UniPASS, we actively recruit for diversity, applying equity considerations to balance out the effects of privilege, ensuring that those leaders who do not identify as part of a marginalised group are aware of how best to support students from backgrounds different to their own. We allow more time during the interview for candidates who have English as an additional language, creating a safe and comfortable interview environment and appointing on diversity and equity grounds where a candidate is equally competitive. Reflecting on and evaluating the program in relation to recruitment strategies suggests that UniPASS is doing very well in this respect, but could be improved by formalising this in recruitment and employment documentation. We actively promote free training on cultural awareness for all Curtin staff (including student employees), and have also paid our peer educators to attend Ally Network training, as well as institutional online training which covers diversity, discrimination, and appropriate workplace conduct. As supervisors, we ensure that we also hold ourselves to account by attending relevant training opportunities.

POSITIONING

As noted above, we actively recruit from equity groups which enables the program to authentically engage with students who are also from these groups. This engagement is further strengthened by our practice of promoting high performing peer educators from diverse backgrounds to the role of Senior Peer Learning Facilitator. This role is key to our program and offers significant leadership development opportunities for students from priority groups who might not otherwise be able to access such opportunities. In addition to strong classroom and professional skills, these staff are required to model exemplary attitudes and behaviour around inclusivity and equity. Since they are still peers of the regular peer educators, they provide vital social role modelling and have a significant positive influence on the inclusive culture of the program. We also select units to support that have a higher representation of students from diverse backgrounds (e.g. Curtin's Indigenous bridging program and the general bridging program which is predominantly for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and First in Family students).

PRACTICE

Developing and maintaining a culture of inclusivity in UniPASS has been a key strategy in managing the program. We have explicitly built the principle of diversity and equity into the systems and processes of UniPASS. For example, working closely with the student leaders/facilitators we monitor the language used in the office and readily intervene when this is not appropriate. We also encourage student leaders/facilitators to support, challenge and monitor each other, as well as challenge aspects of the program that fall short of our diversity values. Professional development sessions include discussions about managing diverse classrooms and learning styles, referring students to other services, and making complaints. As supervisors we regularly check in with students from diverse backgrounds and equity groups to monitor their development as peer educators, as well as their academic progress, recognising that some students may need extra support and mentoring.

PROGRESS

It has become apparent that, while diversity and equity principles are strongly represented in the development of our peer educators and support for students, most of our measures of progress in this space are informal and observational. Without appropriate measures our progress in diversity and equity is limited and our reporting on it is marginal. We do produce reports related to HEPP funding but equity reporting has not been part of our standard reporting. To remedy this situation, we have had a script written for the university database that can extract students who attend UniPASS and meet diversity and equity criteria. We can then measure the impact UniPASS has had on engagement, representation, and academic progress of these students. It would be expected that if we continue to uphold equity and diversity principles in our program culture, and enhance the training of peer educators around equity and diversity, then the engagement and success of these students should increase.

LEARNINGS:

The guided reflection process provided by the DaSSL Framework has helped us to sharpen our awareness about how the UniPASS program addresses inclusivity. We have learned that while the program is performing very well overall in this respect, there is room for improvement in some areas. For example, we have come to understand that while we believe that equity and diversity principles are ingrained in the fabric of the program, they could be more explicitly articulated as key objectives if we are to realise the potential of UniPASS. In reflecting on the program, we have been able to identify both our achievements and the areas to strengthen.

In relation to achievements, we have identified that UniPASS is performing strongly in supporting student leadership development with students from marginalised or less privileged backgrounds. This is evidenced through the diversity represented in the peer educators employed and our strong working relationships with other equity practitioners due to the requirements of HEPP funding. We have realised that our focus is significantly wider than the mandated HEPP focus on students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students, and regional and remote students. This is probably because considerations for these students leads to a program culture and conceptual framework that extends to other marginalised and/or minority groups, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGTBIQ) students, women in Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM), mature aged students, as well as students from non-English speaking backgrounds with a range of religious and ethnic affiliations.

Our peer learning program provides some exemplary leadership development opportunities and demonstrates our understanding that to meet the needs of diverse groups we need to actively support potential leaders from within these groups and put in place deliberate support initiatives for these students to thrive. We were exceptionally proud when one of our ATSI peer educators won a National award for Outstanding New Leader in 2013. More recently, the program played an integral role in developing Curtin's Gender Transitioning Guide, demonstrating how program level leadership initiatives can have whole of institution impact. Contributing to the Gender Transitioning Guide was also a process which we believe facilitated the support and development of a transgender student-leader during their transition. Over the last three semesters we have had very high levels of engagement and academic success in supporting the predominantly first-in-family and low SES students enrolled in the UniReady bridging program. Attendance and grades for this cohort are significantly higher than the UniPASS program averages. We believe this achievement is due to the successful recruiting and development of facilitators from diverse backgrounds who, apart from being highly skilled in peer education, are able to adapt the delivery of the program to the needs of UniReady students. Through promotion, professional development, and paid training, we are recognising and rewarding high performing student leaders, and this increased profile has had positive effects on the norms of inclusivity embodied in the UniPASS culture.

Nevertheless, despite our achievements, we recognise that the program could do more to support students who haven't been successful in gaining employment with UniPASS and that this 'failure' could have a negative impact on students who have had to overcome more than most to get to university. However, we have come to acknowledge that there is a limit to the support that the program can provide. For example, recently we made the decision not to appoint a transgender student and a Chinese student because their level of confidence and application of peer learning skills were not developed enough for them to be successful in the role. This decision was primarily motivated by concerns for their wellbeing. While these candidates had the potential to develop into PASS leaders with sufficient time and management support, the support that would have been required was of such a high level that the program did not have the capacity to provide it. We believe that employing these students without providing the support they needed would likely have had a negative impact on their development.

NEXT STEPS:

Our next steps include articulating the benefits of diversity for building leadership capacity and the procedures that we use to enable this by more explicitly articulating them in Operational Manuals and training documents. One insight for improvement is to include more professional development training on working with diverse classrooms, and to run our learning styles and cultures workshop more regularly.

We also plan to generate more awareness of the success that UniPASS is having in building student leadership for diversity. We will do this by communicating with more stakeholders through annual reports and university promotions as they occur.

Another area for action is exploring how we can better refer and support students between programs, to ensure they find the development opportunities best suited to their needs and do not 'slip between the cracks'. Having realised that UniPASS is one of the most demanding leadership development programs at Curtin, and that the realities of managing such programs in the current university environment, mean we are unable to offer a position to all students looking for leadership development, we are looking to develop closer links with other less demanding leadership building programs.

The program will further benefit with managers and coordinators staying informed of developments in the equity and diversity space through stronger engagement with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

ASSOCIATED RESOURCES

GOOD PRACTICE ARTEFACT(S):

The following resources can be accessed through the DaSSL project website (dassl.edu.au)

UniPASS Group Interview Run Sheet

An exemplar of DaSSL Good Practice Principle 3b: "Recruitment and training processes reflect inclusivity and diversity"

UniPASS Group Interview Marking Template

An exemplar of DaSSL Good Practice Principle 1b: "Student leaders are recruited, trained and supported in an equitable, transparent and consistent way"

LINKS

Courageous Conversations about Race

URL: eesj.curtin.edu.au/resources/conversations.cfm

Curtin Ally Training

URL: life.curtin.edu.au/health-and-wellbeing/ally-training.htm

Curtin Ethics Equity and Social Justice

URL: <http://eesj.curtin.edu.au>

Curtin University Pride in Diversity 2015 award

URL: www.pid-awei.com.au/content/uploads/2015/08/PID_AWEI_2015-WEB.pdf

Gender Transition at Curtin University – Trans* Support

URL: eesj.curtin.edu.au/local/docs/Trans.GuideFINAL.pdf

Pride in Diversity Australian Workplace Equality Index

URL: www.pid-awei.com.au

National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

URL: www.ncsehe.edu.au

UniPASS academic peer support

URL: life.curtin.edu.au/learning-support/unipass-study-sessions.htm

UniReady Enabling Program

URL: futurestudents.curtin.edu.au/undergraduate/entry/flexible/uniready