# MEASURING AND IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS AND RESPONSIVENESS OF DEAKIN UNIVERSITY'S INCLUSIVE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Report of Year 2 of a project funded through the Deakin University Participation and Partnerships Program 2012

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# Measuring and improving the effectiveness and responsiveness of Deakin University's inclusive support programs

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# Executive Summary

This report documents the findings of the 2012 component of a three-year research project funded through the Deakin University Participation and Partnerships Program (DUPPP) entitled *Measuring and improving the effectiveness and responsiveness of Deakin University's inclusive support programs* (2011 – 2013). The DUPPP focuses on students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The 2012 component of the project entailed a university-wide survey to students in their first year at Deakin from low socio-economic backgrounds. The survey was followed up with interviews with respondents who volunteered to participate further in the research.

This report chronicles the factors that enable and constrain – enhance or detract – from the success, fulfilment and participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds at Deakin University. These factors can be summarised as follows:

### Enabling factors

Students reported that good teaching and teachers; attendance at lectures and tutorials; IT infrastructure; the library resources and library staff; as well as a range of support services enabled them to succeed and be fulfilled in their courses at Deakin University. These factors were augmented by assistance and advice from peers; supportive and encouraging families, partners, friends and employers and sources of financial assistance including scholarships and financial support from parents, employment or partners.

### Constraining factors

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds cited a number of factors that inhibited their studies and fulfilment at university. These mainly included a lack of money and constant struggles with making ends meet; the need to spend longer hours in paid part-time work than was desirable in order to finance their studies; workload stresses (some of which were exacerbated by employment commitments); feelings of isolation and loneliness; coping with the transition from secondary school to tertiary studies – including managing different pedagogical styles of teaching, online learning, time-management and self-directed learning accountabilities.

There were instances where students' responses were contradictory, with some respondents finding the same factors either enabling or constraining. For example, while most students cited their academic teachers and resources such as IT infrastructure and library facilities as being positive enabling factors, others cited problems they had or were experiencing with these very same factors. These are reported here, although respondents citing these as constraining factors were fewer than was the case for the positive comments.

Respondents in this research provided a large number of ideas about the services, practices, policies and learning cultures at Deakin University that were positive and should be maintained or enhanced, as well as ideas for improvement and suggestions for new initiatives.

A most concerning finding was that despite an enormous range of support services and programs that are offered through the university as a whole, through faculties or divisions or through the Deakin University Students' Association – very few students were aware of them. Despite the positive commentary received from those who used the services, clearly these provisions are insufficiently advertised, promoted and publicised.

The students' experiences and perceptions cited in this report demonstrate the resilience and determination of this cohort to succeed in academia, while portraying personal difficulties and obstacles they have to overcome or contend with in order to pursue their university goals. The report provides a basis upon which continued equity reforms can be mounted to ensure that Deakin University lives up to and builds upon its reputation as an inclusive and equitable university for all students.

# Recommendations

The ideas and suggestions documented in this report lead to two overarching recommendations:

- That the ideas and suggestions included in this report be considered by the Equity and Diversity Unit for discussion amongst the faculties, divisions and services areas of Deakin University in order to enhance the participation, inclusion, success and fulfilment of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.
- That a strategy be devised to ensure that the entire range of support services and programs offered through the university as a whole through faculties and divisions and through DUSA be more effectively advertised and publicised such that they come to the attention of all students.

# Section 1

# Measuring and improving the effectiveness and responsiveness of Deakin University's inclusive support programs

## 1.1 Introduction

Raising the participation rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds[1] was a recommendation of the Bradley Review into Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008) and has been taken up by the federal government as a priority goal for Australian higher education. The current policy target is for 40% of all 25-34 year olds to hold a Bachelor degree or above by 2025[2] with a 20% participation rate of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (DEEWR, 2010).[3]

There is ample research evidence to conclude that a strong correlation exists between socio-economic status and student achievement at all levels of education (e.g. Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett, 1982; OECD, 2008; Perry and McConney, 2010). Research evidence demonstrates demographic and familial patterning and resilient intergenerational trends in workforce participation and social dependency rates (Boese & Scutella, 2006; Department of Treasury, 2010; Miller Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2010). The Australian government's aim is to ensure that workforce participation rates are consistent with or exceed those of other high performing countries (Access Economics, 2009; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009; Skills Australia, 2010). Education is viewed as a critical factor in achieving this goal (Skills Australia, 2010) since workforce participation is enhanced through secondary schooling completion and the attainment of tertiary qualifications (Kennedy and Hedley, 2003).

Approximately 9 per cent of students in higher education are from low socio-economic backgrounds – a figure little changed since 2000 (Universities Australia, 2008). For the purposes of this project, the definition of socio-economic status is that assumed by DEEWR (2009, p. ii)[4]:

> *... socio-economic status is defined broadly in terms of social, cultural and economic resources, the extent to which individuals and groups have access to these resources and the relative value ascribed to the resources held by different individuals and groups.*

Since 2009 there has been an 18.9% increase in enrolments of Australian students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Hall, 2012b). Victoria is leading the way amongst the Australian states with an 11.1% increase, which is highly favourable when the national average is 5.8% (Hall, 2012b). Deakin University has a recognised track record in this area:

> *Deakin University has a diverse student body with regional and low SES participation proportions above the Victorian higher education average. One quarter of its students are admitted through the Special Entry Access Scheme, for people from disadvantaged backgrounds.* (Palermo, Marr, Oriel, Arthur & Johnston, In press)

It is well established that low socio-economic status is a factor that can work against educational access, success, retention and completion in several important ways. For example:

- Students from high socio-economic backgrounds are three times more likely to attend university than their low socio-economic counterparts (Universities Australia, 2008)

- Socio-economic status has an impact on students' aspirations to attend university. In the majority of OECD countries, including Australia, 15-year-olds from the lowest SES quartile are about half as likely to aspire to tertiary study compared with their peers from the highest SES quartile (OECD, 2008; DEEWR, 2011)
- Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds often receive more parental support for their participation in higher education than their counterparts from low socio-economic circumstances (Brand, 2009; James, 2000; Roksa & Potter, 2011)
- Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have parents who have attended university which advantages expectations and participation in higher education (Chesters, 2010)
- Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to spend their time during adolescence in ways that enhance their academic attainment, health and well-being (Ferrar, Olds, Maher & Gomersall, 2012; see Stone, 2012)
- Many students from low socio-economic backgrounds would prefer to enter the paid workforce as soon as possible rather than continue with further education (Auditor-General, NSW, 2012; Blake, 2007; Teese, Clarke & Polesel, 2007)
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australia who enrol in tertiary education often prefer TAFE or vocational education courses over university courses, believing they offer a preferable route to a rewarding career (James, 2000; Marks, G., Fleming, N., Long, M. & McMillan, J. (2000)
- There is often external pressure for low socio-economic students to enter employment or vocational courses over university studies (Universities Australia, 2008; Teese et al, 2007)
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are often less confident about their educational ability and performance than their counterparts from higher socio-economic backgrounds (James, 2000; Shulruf, Hattie and Tumen, 2008)
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds often have lower levels of academic performance in secondary schooling than their higher socio-economic counterparts (Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A., and Vignoles, A. 2010; Khoo and Ainley, 2005; Teese et al, 2007)
- Students from low socio-economic circumstances are often less socially integrated in university life than their middle class peers (Rubin, 2012)
- Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to move out of home by the age of 20 than their higher socio-economic counterparts (Pedrosa, Dachs, Maia, Andrade & Carvalho, 2006)
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have access to smart technologies than their counterparts from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, McKay, 2012.)
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to drop out of university (see for example Malik, 2012; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012), thereby earning $1.5m less over their lifetimes compared with average university graduates (Robinson cited in Hall, 2012a)
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are likely to have lower ATAR scores and are more likely to drop out of university due to dissatisfaction with their courses and university experience (see for example, Malik, 2012)
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds who do not participate in higher education have reduced social capital, demonstrate reduced levels of civic participation (Brand, 2009) and are shown to have lower lifelong economic and health outcomes (MacBeath, Gray, Cullen, Frost, Steward & Swaffield, 2007).

An average of one in five students drop out of courses at more than a third of Australia's universities while attrition rates at some universities are much worse (Milburn, 2012).[5] This drop-out rate includes students from low socio-economic backgrounds who, as stated above, are more likely to abandon their studies than students from other social cohorts (see Malik, 2012; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012).

It will no longer be acceptable for universities to justify high attrition rates as part of a 'weeding out' process based on ability. The Lomax-Smith review into universities' base funding, analysed ATAR scores and attrition rates, concluding that increasing the numbers of students in higher education will incur enrolments from new cohorts that are less academically prepared (DEEWR, 2011; Hall, 2012). Some commentators suggest that university entrance standards are now too low (see for example Maiden, 2012), that 'social engineering' in higher education by lowering entry requirements undermines standards and leaves students 'struggling' in degree courses and that attempts to ensure that university enrolments mirror population norms are misguided (e.g. Sewell in Paton, 2012).

Despite such controversies, many policies and much energy has gone into improving the participation rates of low socio-economic students in higher education as an issue about social equity, but to date Australian statistics indicate that little headway has been made towards achieving participation improvement goals (OECD, 2011; Universities Australia, 2008). Clearly this is unacceptable in terms of social justice and in meeting the federal government's targeted enrolment policy mandate. Inequality is deeply rooted in the history, cultures, policies and practices of higher education institutions and existing overt and covert influences wield enormous impact on how individuals will negotiate and fare through their higher education studies. Universities Australia (2008) goes so far as to say that: "major change in improving access and equity for low socio-economic groups is not readily available" (p. 3). Other commentators are also pessimistic about the prospects of improving participation rates for the 'disadvantaged' (see *The Economist*, October 1, 2012). In sum, despite many policy initiatives in recent years, broader post secondary participation has not benefited all sectors of society equally.

Some researchers suggest, however, that ongoing early intervention and affirmative action programs have been effective in promoting students from low socio-economic backgrounds entering university, being successful in their studies, and finishing their courses through to graduation (Chowdry et al, 2010; James, 2000.)

The federal government's agenda for increasing the participation and attainment of low socio-economic status students is designed to increase social inclusion and national economic productivity as well as educational performance (DEEWR, 2010c). It is based on the assumption that economic and social changes are making educational attainment more important than ever before (Ainley and McKenzie, 2007).

DEEWR's goals for higher education participation provide ideas for 'closing the gap'. The goals seek to achieve "successful" and "confident" learners. "Successful" learning refers to essential skills, abilities, capabilities and motivations: being literate and numerate, being creative and able to think critically, being motivated to reach one's full potential, being successful in completing a higher education degree and being engaged in lifelong learning, for example. "Confident" learners refers to the values and social abilities of learners, such that the things they know and can do are translated into productive, healthy lifestyles: cited as being optimistic, possessing self-esteem and respect for others, being creative users of information and technologies, maintaining healthy lifestyles, behaving ethically and being able to embrace opportunities and make informed decisions (DEEWR, 2010b). These goals provide grist for curriculum, instructional, cultural and policy reform.

The federal government has committed funds to universities through the *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program* (HEPPP) to encourage and enable achievement towards these policy goals. This report relates specifically to a research project aiming to raise the participation rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds who have traditionally been under-represented in Deakin's enrolment. The project is funded through federal funding distributed through the *Deakin University Participation and Partnerships Program* (DUPPP).

This report emerges as a part of a three-year study (2011-2013) measuring the effectiveness and responsiveness of Deakin University's inclusive support programs for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and making recommendations for improvement. Specifically, this report discusses the results of a university-wide survey of low socio-economic students and interviews that occurred in the second year of the research program (2012). This report presents students' perceptions about how their participation and success at university can be enhanced by elucidating enablers and detractors to their current studies.

## 1.2 The Research

This DUPPP project aims to investigate policies, programs, practices, services and learning cultures that support and enhance Deakin University's commitment to equity, access and inclusive provisions for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Its purpose is to ascertain the policies, practices, programs, services and learning cultures that enable and enhance, and those that detract from or limit the equitable participation, representation and successful learning experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds at Deakin University. The project has a secondary aim of enhancing Deakin University's profile and strengths in its provisions for equity, access and inclusivity for all students, irrespective of their background. Thirdly, the project aims to contribute to Deakin's organisational learning to inform future policy and practice.

Specifically the project investigates students' responses to their Deakin experience to ascertain:

- the service/program/support provisions that enable and enhance academic success and fulfilment
- aspects of support – or lack of support –which limit or detract from academic success and fulfilment
- students' ideas and suggestions for support provisions they believe would be helpful, but which have not been developed or are not available at the current time, and
- other factors that require strategic responses for positive benefits for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

This three-year project was approved by the Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Advisory Group in 2011 (Approval ID: HEAG (AE) 11 - 77).

### 1.2.1 The survey

A confidential questionnaire was administered during May-June 2012 to students from low socio-economic backgrounds in the first year of their courses at Deakin University. The students who formed our target audience were identified by the Student Finance Division as being from low socio-economic circumstances. (Many of these students had applied for scholarships for financial assistance and had to supply proof of their financial circumstances.) Students' email addresses were made available to the researchers and through this means targeted students were invited to participate in this project. At no time were the students told that they were specifically selected due to their low socio-economic status. This second-year phase of the research project sought to uncover the views and perspectives of students in the first year of their studies, as well as their experiences at Deakin University. Students undertaking the first year of their courses were targeted because their pre-enrolment expectations and ambitions would be fresh in their minds, and similarly, initial reactions to university culture, practices and experiences would be recent thereby enabling easier identification of students' needs and Deakin University's emergent equity issues. One hundred survey responses were received.

The survey comprised three components: demographic data; Likert scales and open-ended qualitative questions:

***The demographic data***: sought included information such as postcode, location (metropolitan, regional, rural, remote), living status (living independently/with family/sharing, etc.), gender, language spoken at home, place of birth, Australian residential status, economic resources (e.g. employment [including hours worked, type of employment], grants and other sources of income support), care obligations, schooling sector and type attended for secondary schooling, parent/s' employment status (employed or unemployed)/occupation, IT access outside the university. It also included questions about the Faculty and course in which low socio-economic status students are enrolled (including online, external students), the campus they attend and the year they expect to graduate.

***Likert scales:*** The second component of the survey consisted of statements to which students responded - strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, to unable to rate/undecided. The statements were specially

prepared for student appropriateness (see for example, James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Teese, Clarke & Polesel, 2008; Universities Australia, 2008), and sought to address:

- the support provisions provided by Deakin University that students find useful – those which enhance their academic success and fulfilment, and
- aspects of Deakin's support provisions or practices that are not useful or which detract from their achievement of academic success and fulfilment
- students' assessments of their academic progress, learning engagement, and the kind of learning culture they are experiencing at Deakin University.

Students were also asked to identify any of Deakin University's support programs or services that they had used.

***Open-ended qualitative questions:*** The third component of the survey was a set of open-ended questions seeking further explanations to the Likert scale responses. Through the open-ended qualitative questions we were interested to learn of ideas for improvement to existing support provisions, other factors that require strategic responses for positive benefits, as well as ideas and suggestions for improvements or change. The survey is included in Appendix 1.

### 1.2.2 Interviews

Last, respondents were invited to self nominate for participation in follow-up interviews that occurred after the survey to clarify and augment the data. A total of 21 students attended follow-up interviews.

Responses were collated by item and coded by content to generate a summary of the most frequently cited responses. Further analysis examined responses by faculty, sex, and other data user characteristics as cited above.

A *Project Advisory Committee* (PAC) previewed and discussed this report before submission to the *Equity and Diversity Unit* prior to publication.

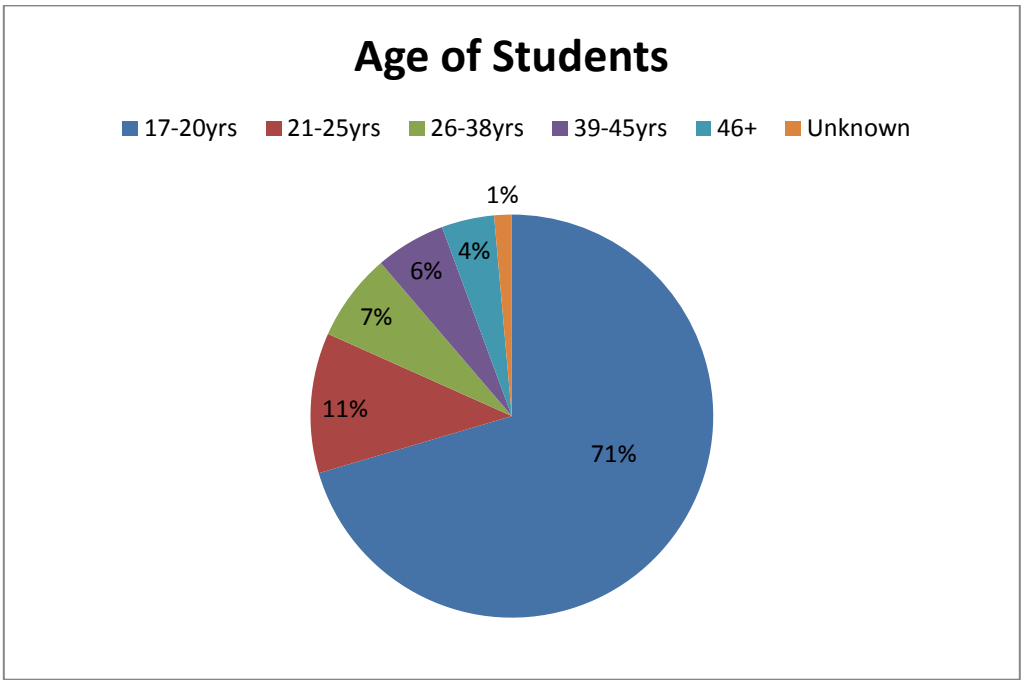
# Section 2

## The cohort of low socio-economic students in the first year of their courses at Deakin University

All but one interviewee was the first in his/her family to attend university. Statistics about the survey cohort are discussed below.

## 2.1. Age

The survey respondents were primarily young first year students who were entering Deakin University after their secondary schooling. Seventy one per cent of students were in this category and aged between 17 and 20 years of age. Eleven per cent of students were aged 21-25 years; 7 per cent from 26-38 years; 6 per cent were aged between 39 and 45 years and 4 per cent were over 46 years of age. One per cent did not provide this data in their survey response.




*The majority (71%) of respondents are between the ages of 17-20 years old - first year undergraduates. N=100*

These data suggest a broad scope of first year students in terms of age and while the great majority are young and straight from school, there are many with previous life experience and the range of responsibilities that go with maturity and age.

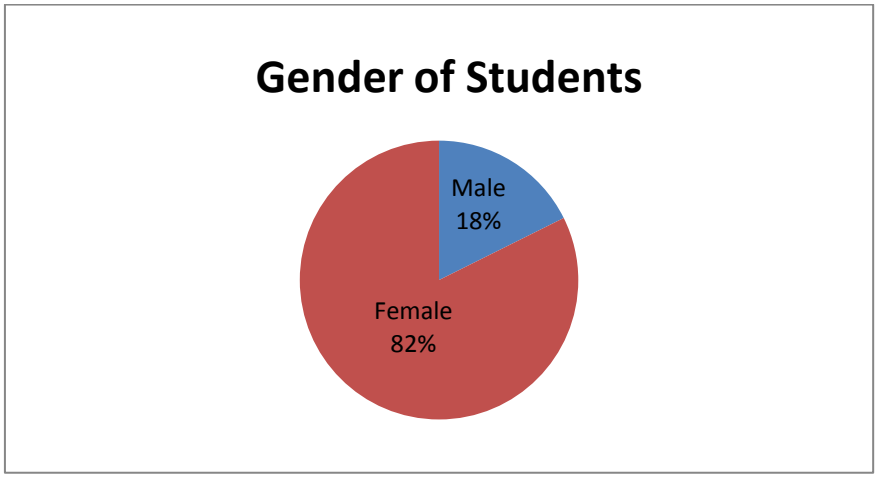
The data correspond with Deakin's overall age statistics, with this sample being just slightly younger (17-20 years) compared to the median age for commencing students of 21 years. University-wide the average age of

students is 22 years. However, mature aged students from low socio-economic backgrounds represent a higher percentage of enrolments than Deakin University's average age for students in the first year of their courses.

## 2.2 Gender

The data were derived overwhelming from female students. Eighty-two per cent of responses were from women with only 18 per cent from male students. This does not correspond with Deakin's overall gender statistics of 60.3 per cent females and 39.7 per cent male enrolments, with the discrepancy also present in the first year cohort, which comprises 61.3 per cent females and 38.7 per cent males. A number of suggestions could be posited for this gender discrepancy, such as female students being more willing to give their time, more responsive to requests for information and / or more concerned about having a say in making improvements in their university (see for example Sax, Gilmartin, Lee, & Serra Hagedorn 2008; Smith 2008).

The majority of young women interviewed after the survey believed the reason for the gender discrepancy in responses was due to boys' general lack of maturity compared with their female counterparts and / or a general 'laziness' or 'apathy' amongst young male students.




*The overwhelming majority of respondents were female (82%).*
*Overall, there is a population of 61.3% female students at Deakin University (all years). The higher percentage of female students represented in this survey may reflect that they are more willing to participate in surveys than male students and are overrepresented in disadvantaged groups.*

## 2.3 Regional, rural and remote students

Just over half of the students were from the greater metropolitan area of Melbourne; 45 per cent resided in regional, rural or remote areas (including in states other than Victoria). Thirty-seven per cent of the sample were from a regional area, whilst 8 per cent were located in a rural or remote area, hence more students in the survey sample were from regional, rural or remote areas than the general Deakin population (22 per cent live in regional areas whilst 1 per cent live in remote or rural areas). The higher percentage of regional students represented in this survey may reflect that they have higher needs and are over-represented in disadvantaged groups.

The variables that reflect the socio-economic status of a region (income, occupation, educational qualifications) (Stevenson, Maclachlan & Karmel, 1999) are important factors for Deakin University which has metropolitan, regional and rural campuses and hence a large geographical 'reach' across Victoria. Deakin University's

reputation for engagement with rural and regional students, however, is highlighted in a recent DEEWR report (2010a, p. 70) entitled *Good Practice in Regional Higher Education Provision*:

> *Deakin has 34,500 students across four campuses, two of which are located in regional Victoria, at Geelong (Head office) and Warrnambool. Deakin is cited in the AUQA Good Practice Database as an exemplar of strategies for rural and regional engagement. It is Victoria's major rural and regional higher education provider … In 2007, it had the largest number of domestic student enrolments at Victorian regional campuses (48.2% of the enrolments; the next largest was only 18.6%) and the largest number of students with a regional home address (24.5%).*

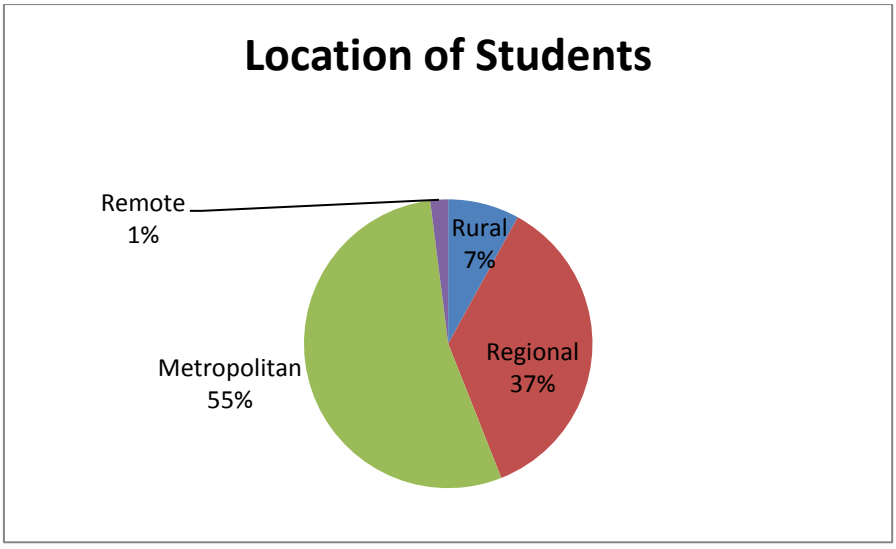
As stated above, just under one half of the survey respondents from low socio-economic backgrounds come from regional or rural areas, mostly in Victoria, but also in other states. Statistics from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations reveal that:

> *Of the Australian population aged 15-64 years, 27.9 per cent live in regional or remote areas, whereas only 19.2 per cent of the higher education student population indicate that they are from regional or remote backgrounds. Hence the Deakin University statistics cited above are much higher than for Australian population averages. Regional and remote access and participation rates, as measured by administrative data, have deteriorated over the last five years. (DEEWR, 2010b, p. 1)*

Observations from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (in DEEWR, 2010c) are also pertinent to considerations of rurality and remoteness:

- Tertiary participation rates are higher in metropolitan areas
- Participation rates decrease progressively the further the distance from capital cities
- TAFE plays a large role in regional areas (although enrolment rates are lower than for regional universities such as Deakin and do not make up for the shortfall in post-school participation rates)
- Regional cities with universities such as Geelong have higher [university] participation rates than regional areas that are not geographically close to a university.

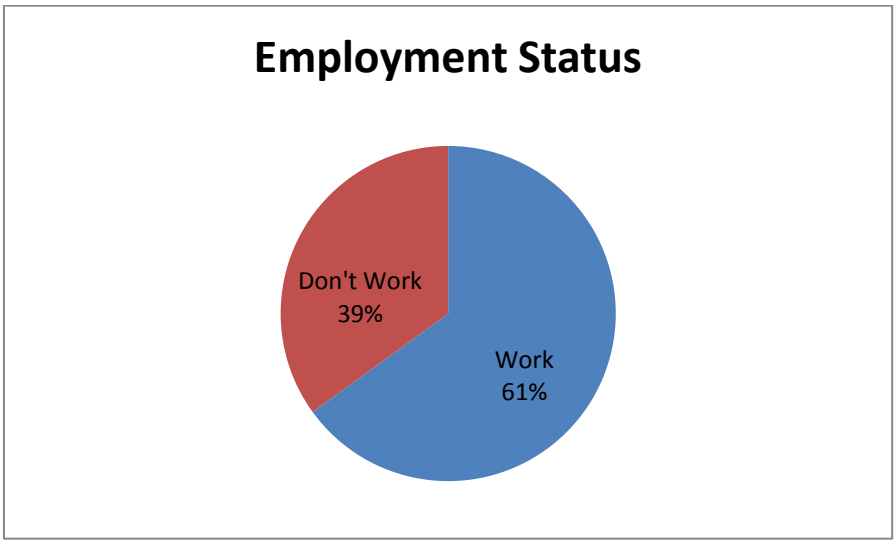
Regionality and rurality are often inextricably linked with socio-economic status (see for example, ACOSS, 2010; James, Krause & Jennings, 2004; Kryger, 2008; Marks, G., Fleming, N., Long, M. & McMillan, J., 2000; State of Victoria, 2010; Stevenson et al, 1999). Location is also of particular relevance to Deakin University, which has a higher percentage of regional and rural students than most Australian universities and is playing a large part in providing access to them.




The majority of respondents live in a metropolitan area (55%), 37% live in a regional area, and 8% live in a rural or remote location. Deakin University reports that 76% of its students are metropolitan based, 22% are regional and 1% live in remote areas. The higher percentage of regional students represented in this survey may reflect that they have higher needs and are over-represented in disadvantaged groups.

## 2.4 Employment status

Two thirds of students surveyed were undertaking paid work to support their studies. Most students in the first year of their Deakin University courses are in the part-time paid workforce, including those who receive other benefits. Students work as shop assistants, cafe workers, bartenders and restaurant waiters, aged care and disability assistants, kitchen hands, office workers, dog groomers, house cleaners, home and personal carers, baby sitters and tutors. Sixty-one per cent of students undertake paid work with the majority working under 30 hours a week. Students who did not work were predominantly supported by their parents, lived at home or in Deakin's residential accommodation, were supported by a working partner or were social support recipients.




*The majority of respondents were employed (61%). Most of this work was part-time – under 30 hours a week.*

## 2.5 School background

Of the one hundred students who participated in this research, 73 per cent had attended a government secondary school, 14 per cent had attended a secondary school in the Catholic education sector and 13 per cent had attended an independent secondary school.

## 2.6 Parents' occupation

Students were asked to state the occupations in which their parents worked. There were many more occupations cited for fathers than for mothers. These included three engineers, two teachers, two police-officers, two farmers as well as a range of other occupations such as security officer, electrician, social worker. Interestingly, there were 14 cases where students listed their father's occupation as N/A (not applicable), which may indicate single parent homes headed by the mother. Six fathers were unemployed.

Mothers' occupations fell into more distinct categories. Six per cent were listed as 'housewives' or 'home duties'; four were teachers, four were farmers, many were described as 'administrative officer / receptionist / officer worker', or as 'sales consultants / shop assistants'. Others were 'nurses / disability aides or carers'; two were artists, one was a gardener. Most students came from backgrounds where both parents were in the paid workforce.

## 2.7 Sources of information about university

Students were asked how they found information about Deakin University and how came to choose Deakin as the university in which to enrol.

Students reported that parents, school career advisors, teachers, other relatives or friends were the sources of information and encouragement to attend Deakin University (as mentioned earlier, all interviewees were first in their family to attend university). However, many students expressed that they were the only ones of their Year 12 group in secondary school that continued to university. For example:

> ***Student**: I was always told that if I wanted to get somewhere – get a good career – that I'd have to get a higher education after year 12.*
>
> *Interviewer: where did you get those messages?*
>
> ***Student**: Partly from my parents but mostly from my career advisors at school.*
>
> *Interviewer: And your friends from school – have most of those ended up at University as well?*
>
> ***Student**: The bulk of them are at TAFE.*
>
> *Interviewer: Why do you think that is?*
>
> ***Student**: Because they were interested in doing trades and the school that I come from doesn't have a big lead-in to university culture.*

This student is suggesting that a culture of classed expectations existed in her secondary school community, which made TAFE a more comfortable post-secondary option for many of her friends (see also James, 2000; Marks, G., Fleming, N., Long, M. & McMillan, J., 2000).

Another student conducted his own research prior to choosing Deakin University as his study destination:

> *I took Deakin up for three reasons: I liked their advocacy approach for disadvantaged communities, that seemed to be a strong thing that I looked at … They offered scholarships … that was a second consideration. A third consideration was the online sophistication compared to what I saw elsewhere. Also the fact that I didn't have to travel – there was no compulsory aspect to travelling which was extremely important because the other places, although they offered online, they [the courses] were only partially online – you had to travel. I felt that Deakin offered a very sophisticated, extensive option that was available and I didn't have to travel. So for all those reasons I chose Deakin: basically excellence and convenience and good quality.*

## 2.8 Ambitions

Students were asked what courses they were enrolled in and what ambitions they held for their future after graduation. Students came from all faculties (but not all courses) and all indicated a strong ambition to finish their course and enter the career of their choice. Many were interested in pursuing further study after graduating from their first degree. A few mentioned their desire to shift into another course or to do a further degree within another faculty. A few were unsure where their futures lay.

Predominantly, however, students in this research were enrolled in arts, teaching, nursing and social work courses while none were enrolled in engineering, technology or medicine. This suggests a strong correlation between low socio-economic status and employment choice, with ATAR scores attained also playing a part in the courses available for low SES student enrolment (see Palermo, Marr, Oriel, Arthur & Johnston, In press).

# Section 3

## Research findings

## 3.1 What contributes to your academic success and fulfilment at Deakin University?

This section focuses on students' responses to the question, "What contributes to your academic success and fulfilment at Deakin University?" The most common responses included:

- Teaching and support from academic staff
- Having access to online courses, lectures and other resources
- Library resources and library staff
- Peer support
- Attendance at lectures and tutorials
- Support programs.

Students indicated that their learning outcomes and attitudes towards their studies were influenced positively by the people, resources and learning culture they encountered at Deakin University.

### 3.1.1 Teaching and support from academic staff

In answering this question students acknowledged the efforts and calibre of their teachers; the effectiveness of the teaching they encountered; the content and presentation of lectures; the accessibility of teachers to obtain advice, further information or learning support; online teaching feedback provisions; and the materials recommended as course texts. Some applicable comments include:

> *[My success is dependent on] support from teachers - being able to communicate properly with Deakin staff.*
>
> *The lecturers … are very good. Coming online, video chats and things like that. I think that's brilliant; that really, really helps because we get feedback and have interaction, so that's been good. Coming back after an assignment can give you feedback quickly so that's been really good. I'm very impressed with how Deakin is dealing with my study.*
>
> *The lecturers are really good – they come on really regularly on the discussion boards, have an e-Live session. They've actually been really good.*
>
> *I have very good lecturers. They are helpful and know their stuff. They recommend textbooks and other readings and materials … They have made my study much easier. I've been lucky.*

### 3.1.2 Technological resources

Deakin University's IT facilities and capabilities are appreciated by students in the first year of their courses. Wi-fi capabilities, Deakin Studies Online (now known as Deakin Cloud) and programs such as e-live are perceived by students as making their studies easier and more suited to their lifestyles and study needs. Students comments revealed they appreciated face-to-face and synchronous learning alongside asynchronous / virtual learning opportunities where they could interact with fellow students via on-campus, mobile and online means. The convenience afforded through online technologies is appreciated. (Not all students expressed confidence in using technologies in their studies, however. A few individuals indicated that they only had access to adequate computer access while at the university and others expressed being less than confident about their IT skills – see Section 3.2 this report.) Some relevant comments included:

*The new DSO is brilliant.*

*The DSO [Deakin Studies Online] discussions are good for answering questions and clarifying issues.*

*… the discussion boards/cyber support on DSO are useful … and the Wi-Fi available across the campus is infinitely useful.*

*I like the online / off-campus study.*

*Online coursework makes life and studying much easier. I work and I really couldn't juggle everything without being able to study when it suits me.*

### 3.1.3 Library

The library was rated highly amongst students, with library resources being perceived as highly comprehensive and library staff as helpful and knowledgeable. The library's support courses also received positive feedback. Students said:

*I think the library is a fantastic source of books and have found that useful so far.*

*I have been able to get help from the library staff. They know where to find things and the library study courses were extremely good.*

### 3.1.4 Attendance at lectures and tutorials

While fewer students are said to attend lectures and tutorials than in the past (Massingham & Herrington, 2006) many comments suggested that face-to-face attendance and participation was highly worthwhile. Students find their face-to-face learning experiences to be occasions when they can more fully focus and engage with their learning field and course content, their teachers and fellow students. Having face-to-face access for feedback, advice and assistance is perceived by several students as essential to their success at university. Students said:

*The lecturers and tutorials are always interesting – really worthwhile.*

*I learn more when I turn up [to lectures] and concentrate than when I don't. You get to learn what's important and why. It's fascinating – much more interesting … You can get the lecture online afterwards but I would never be bothered. I know it's best for me to turn up, listen, take notes – I know I learn better that way.*

Students' comments also suggested that through their coursework they were developing generic skills such as study skills, time-management skills, research skills, knowledge of academic writing conventions, IT skills, etc. For example:

*I've learnt a lot more than just my course - I know about studying at university. You know – there are ways of doing assignments – things that you've never had to do before … I've learnt some of that from the library but also from the lecturers … one went through what we had to do and where we could get help … It feels like a whole level of higher standards that we've had to learn.*

### 3.1.5 Support programs

A few students mentioned receiving positive support through the library study/advisory courses, the 'Ask' programs offered (e.g. *Ask Jan* in the Faculty of Arts and Education whereby a sessional staff member is accessible [in a given location] for students to receive academic help and advice), the peer network programs (e.g. peer assistance and student support), and advisory support from the Deakin University Student Association (DUSA). Although few in number, these comments were highly positive:

*Jan (Ask Jan) has been fantastic. I feel more confident when she reads through what I've got to do and looks at what I've done and gives me suggestions about what I need to do next … This is helping with my grades…*

*PASS – it's a great idea. We can help each other a lot of the time.*

### 3.1.6 Peer support

Collaborations and networks with peers were reported as factors that contributed to success at Deakin University. The students who felt connected to the university in ways that extended beyond their courses expressed the highest levels of satisfaction. Being involved in the social and cultural life of the university provides students with a sense of belonging and a stronger sense of personal fulfilment. Furthermore, students were cited as being a source of support to enable and enhance academic success. One student explained that she looked forward to attending university in a way that she had not appreciated attending high school, explaining "I'm learning something that I really want to learn and do with other students who have the same interests, so I'm more positive about being at uni than I was at school", while another suggested that students finding elements of their course difficult were able to rally together to help each other:

*The students got together at the lectures and [decided to] swap notes because we were struggling.*

This finding suggests that the social engagement of students in universities is critical in supporting and retaining them at university (see for example Norton, 2012; Rubin, 2012). Extant research suggests that students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be less socially integrated in university life than counterparts from

higher socio-economic backgrounds (Rubin, 2012). Sharing the university experience appears to be critical – otherwise university life can appear alienating and insular (see Section 4 of this report).

For support and advice students expressed an overwhelming preference for face-to-face, one-on-one access to teachers and support staff.

### 3.1.7 Trimesters

A handful of individuals referred to Deakin's unique trimester system when answering this question. They appreciated being able to complete work at a quicker rate and at their own pace. For example, one student said:

> *I like the ability to study via the trimester system and pace my studies in a part-time mode throughout 12 months. Brilliant!*

**-o0o-**

The data suggests a strong relationship between low socio-economic students' perceptions of Deakin's learning environment and the teaching they encounter and their learning confidence and outcomes. Students' comments suggest that the factors that most influenced academic attainment also influenced their levels of satisfaction and feelings of connectedness with this university.

Factors outside of Deakin University that students believed to be supportive and enabling of their success and fulfilment at university included:

- Support from family and friends (seen as vital)
- Personal willpower and dedication to study
- Good study habits and time management skills

Students mentioned their own resolve and determination to succeed as being an essential attribute to do well in their coursework. Words and phrases used to describe their personal characteristics included: diligent, persevering, dedicated, committed, enthusiastic. They talked about their 'will to achieve', 'sense of determination', 'winning attitude', 'sense of responsibility', while having 'high personal goals and standards'. Hence many students could see that while many factors aided their achievement and success at Deakin, they also took credit for possessing the personal 'grit' and determination to accomplish their goal of a attaining a tertiary degree, leading to employment in a future profession (although not all students were clear about where their course would lead them). Many respondents gave themselves credit for having acquired the appropriate and necessary study skills and drive that were essential for their academic success during their years of schooling while continuing to hone these at university. Indicative comments included:

> *… determination and the will to succeed.*

> *A proactive and positive approach to study, plus prior study habits.*

Students mentioned their own efforts to augment their studies with other educative activities such as undertaking courses external to the university, attending symposia or information events and participating in activities and groups connected with their field of study. For example, one student extended her own tertiary education through:

> *Attending literary events, publication and writers' support networks.*

Having a supportive family or spouse was mentioned as being highly important, while friends and employers could also be supportive by providing encouragement, time and flexibility to enable a student to study and succeed. For example:

> *I couldn't do this without my family – there's no way I could even think about studying.*
>
> *My partner supports me otherwise university would not be possible for me.*

The availability of financial assistance was critical for many students being able to attend university. Comments surrounding this issue concerned both money and geography as the following commentary illustrates:

> ***Student**: Living at the Residential College helped me attend Deakin, without a doubt. Coming here would've been quite an effort to commute. I've got a housing grant through the university – a scholarship which is $70 a fortnight called a Housing Support Grant. That helps quite a lot with the payments to be on Res and buying my food. Without that it would've been impossible to attend. It's $450 per fortnight to live on Res - $225 a week and you get three dinners and four lunches with that. Not all meals are covered so you've got to factor in more food each week and a bit of petrol.*
>
> ***Interviewer**: Do you have a job?*
>
> ***Student:** No. I get quite a lot of income support as well from Centrelink – that covers all my costs. If I didn't have those things it would be very difficult for me to attend or to do what I'm doing now. I guess the money comes into it again, if I hadn't had the support with the university scholarship I wouldn't be able to be here.*
>
> ***Interviewer**: Was it easy to apply for the scholarship?*
>
> ***Student**: Yes, it was just filling out a couple of forms and giving all the information.*

One student simply summed up the external factors that were enabling her study as "supportive friends, family, employer and government assistance."

Interviewees were also asked about outside factors they believed would further enhance their current lives at university. Responses included having more money, possessing a car, more childcare support, better computing equipment or mobile devices, more support for home duties and more time.

## 3.2 What limits your academic success and fulfilment at Deakin University?

Students were asked what factors limited their academic success and fulfilment at Deakin University. The most common responses included:

- Lack of personal motivation
- Teaching and learning issues (not being given enough direction or feedback)
- Loneliness and lack of a support network
- Financial issues
- Facilities

- Workload stress.

Some of the findings in this section contradict those reported earlier, indicating that every student will have a different experience in their first year at Deakin University which can be attributed to personal attitude and initiative, the teaching experiences encountered, access to resources, levels of assistance and support and personal circumstances – all of which are unique.

### 3.2.1 Lack of personal motivation

Many students took personal responsibility for limiting their own success at Deakin University due to a lack of personal motivation, personal organisation or time management skills. Representative comments revealed:

> *The only person that can limit my success at Deakin is myself.*
>
> *Deakin is making it possible, 'real' for me to achieve my goals and dreams. I need to make sure I don't limit my success through lack of organisation or laziness.*
>
> *I can put [failure] down to bouts of un-motivation.*

A few students suggested that family commitments constrained their study success, with childcare being a major factor:

I've got to be full-time for my kids. Sometimes that means they come before studying.

When you've got children, it's much harder to find the time to study on top of work and home tasks. Study happens after their bedtime when I'm not at my best.

### 3.2.2 Teaching and learning issues

While there were predominantly positive reports on Deakin University's teachers and teaching experiences, there were a few individuals who were not satisfied, who believed that this factor limited their academic success and fulfilment. Such students said:

> *The teachers can be a bit rude sometimes and seem like they have no time for some students.*
>
> *One of my teachers hasn't answered my emails or comments on DSO. Every time I go to her office, she's not there. I've had to do this course so far with no help from her.*

Some first year students commented on the very different nature of university studies compared to their experiences at secondary school. Moving from a structured and monitored educational environment to one where structure depends on and emphasises individual initiative and personal efforts. For example, one student said:

> *It's a lot more on you to do things; you have to be motivated to go to classes, there's no one checking up that you're doing the work. I did struggle with some early classes … If no one is pushing you, you don't feel obligated to do things; you don't feel pressured. At first it was easier to not go to class, sleep-in, that kind of thing. When I did - then you realise that you've fallen behind and then you go 'I have to go to a class' … I'd go to a tute and attend a lecture and have no idea what was going on.*

Another student stated that he was being influenced by the behaviours of his housemates, which interfered with studying:

> *My housemates were intent on having fun almost every night so in the first month I was just pulled along and my studies almost failed.*

The different pedagogical styles and the higher numbers of students in classes experienced at university was commented on, for example:

> *It's such a difference in teaching styles … some times there can be a lot of students in the class and no one gets their one-on-one time. If there were smaller study groups … I think it would be much better.*
>
> *The lecturer just talks and you only get a chance to say you've got a problem through DSO because there are so many people – so you have to keep your problem until after the lecture.*

Students said they felt ill prepared for the very different learning environment evidenced in secondary and tertiary education. For example:

> *I had no notion of what university life would be. It was scary! Coming from High School which is structured, where you don't have to fend for yourself … it was totally different.*
>
> *I would have benefited from having a better awareness of what to expect – what uni is like – uni life and what learning at uni is like …*
>
> *It's a lot more solo than I expected. It's very different to high school. You must rely on yourself … there's no one there to remind you when things are due.*

Some were finding it difficult to learn new skills and knowledge required to undertake their courses, for example:

> *We didn't learn about Harvard Referencing. I didn't know about citations. No one helped us in it. I didn't know if Library could support us. We need a referencing course: poor referencing really affected my marks.*

Still other students complained that their course simply repeated what they had learnt while enrolled in secondary education, for example:

> *… it's the same work that we learnt in our Cert [certificate] 3 and 4 [course]. It's repeating the stuff that we learnt in that. In the first year, with our main principal subject, it's like Cert 4 all over again. It's given us a bit of a head start. We're not as overwhelmed as the other students in the course who haven't done anything in this background before.*

Comments suggested that the standards expected of first year students stretched some to an extent that they find it difficult to keep up, for example:

> *… there are a lot [of students who can't keep up] actually… Some of them are falling behind and they just don't understand the majority of it.*

*I reckon there are a lot of people who are struggling. It's all up to you and no one helps. If you don't know something it's like – too bad.*

A mature-aged student expressed concerns about the learning environment including complaints about the university's administration systems, the distracting behaviours of some younger students in lectures (including playing music, talking and 'mucking around'), a lack of follow-through from teaching staff and a need for both support and advice:

*The 'it's your problem, not mine' nature of things wastes time and effort – it would be so much simpler if someone could just tell you what you need to know.*

Other students expressed concerns about the structure of their courses:

*I found timetabling tricky. Many of my subjects are on the same day back-to-back. It would be good to have them spread out over a few days.*

*I didn't realise about course pre-requisites and I'd like Industry based learning.*

*My exam timetable is very inconvenient.*

One student explained that her poor language skills limited her success and fulfilment at Deakin University. This student wanted more academic support to write assignments of higher quality. We suspect that this is a much larger problem across the entire university, especially with many students being from non-English speaking backgrounds. This has not been taken up further in this research given that it did not surface as a major factor, but this is not to say that it is an important point that should be pursued further in future equity, access, diversity and inclusion research.

### 3.2.3 IT issues

Some students who were not familiar with online learning expressed concerns about a lack of support to improve their online learning skills and knowledge. For example:

*I think everybody is adjusting to DSO and the more they use it the more fantastic they find it. If a lot of the learning were supported through that, it would be really helpful. I just need someone to show me what I have to do – but it's all DIY.*

*I've had challenges with the Library, searching for journals and databases. It would be good to have one-on-one sessions with the Librarian to learn about search engines.*

*And the online environment is very overwhelming. It's wonderful but there's a wealth of material. It becomes easy to use but the only way it becomes easy to use is through practice and you don't get that practice initially. You have to keep doing it. Practice is repetitive. In the beginning when you start you're extremely slow – you're overwhelmed with all this information and it's very difficult to know where to begin. There's really no consistent person that you can go to. I would've liked maybe someone in the (course) department [to talk to] not just someone from IT.*

One off-campus student expressed concerns about the website and the teaching to support it:

> *The search function on the Deakin website is rubbish. An announcement on DSO [would be helpful], when the student account comes up, so we know when the assignments are due, so we know the timeframe, what we have to do for the week, what's due, reminders; something really interactive, really responsive. I've voiced my concerns, I've told the lecturer what I thought and offered solutions. Not to say 'here's the problem and you fix it'. I've said 'here's the problem and I think this is how we can fix it' and I've been told 'no can do'. This unit has no e-live tutorials and I've been told 'No, we can't do it'. The fact that I found the podcast hard to understand, I asked if we could have i-lectures available. I was told 'No they weren't available'. I don't know whether it's true or not but they said that there was something wrong with the technology in the room but I find that hard to stomach because you've got both Burwood and Geelong running the same course. That sat really badly with me.*

Several comments were made about how difficult it was to find information on the university's website, for example:

> *There's so much on [the website] you don't know where to start – sometimes staff say the same thing!*

### 3.2.4 Loneliness and lack of a support network

Many first year students' comments revealed feelings of isolation and loneliness (see also James et al, 2010). University campuses are large and can be alienating for students who have no friends or acquaintances to call on. Data revealed they do not know anyone on site and do not know where to turn to for help. These students expressed the need for more one-on-one assistance – for someone to take them in hand and help them to get familiarised with their new lives at university. Online learning is also a lonely experience for some students and can exacerbate feelings of isolation. Some salient comments included:

> *I don't know many people, and therefore if I am having trouble; it is hard to ask people for help.*

> *There is a lack of personal connection with mentor support and connection with academic staff - online learning can be lonely.*

> *It would be great to have [more social interaction] because… it's absolutely isolation; I'm very left out - the lack of personnel, the lack of connection. That is the major deficit. There is no one – or I was not aware, maybe there are people but I certainly wasn't aware of it – of anyone I could connect with, like a student advisor that could just provide that connection and support. Someone from (course Department) that I could ring and just speak generally about the course and my concerns, but there wasn't anybody.*

> *There is a sense of alienation even though I've been involved on the DSO and communicating with students that way, it's not great. The actual apparatus – the chat rooms – don't always work and sometimes I think there's too much placed on that as a means of overcoming the isolation.*

An off-campus student believed that despite Deakin being a leader in online education, the focus is mainly concentrated on on-campus enrolments:

> *There's an off-campus Distance Student website that sends out interactional things but I don't think anyone ever goes on that. I don't think it's ever really updated. Some of the stuff on that is so old, from years ago, so that's useless if it's meant to help you.*
>
> *I find there will be sport competitions for on-campus people but there's nothing coming out for off-campus people. There's no day where you all come together for a picnic or sporting thing. Something like that would be really good. There's nothing like that. We're very out of it if you know what I mean – we're left out of the loop.*
>
> *It's hard to make friends, harder than I expected.*
>
> *It feels like [other students are] your colleagues, not your friends. You can have conversations about the work and casually ask people how their weekend was; it's not the same as meeting up and having a good time with people.*
>
> *As a mature age student, socially it is difficult. We don't have that many groups. There is a mature age club but you contact it and nothing happens!*

Many studies indicate that students who form social connections with their peers, tutors and lecturers integrate better into university life than those who do not (Coates, 2008; Tarica, 2012). Hence, this is one of the most concerning findings of the research.

### 3.2.5 Financial issues

Unsurprisingly, the issue of finances was forefront in many students' minds. Students were concerned about the course debt they were incurring, about the cost of living on top of study costs, the cost of childcare, text books and other course materials, car parking and local transport. A user-pays higher education system appears to be weighing heavily on students who are already socio-economically disadvantaged. Some pertinent comments included:

> *We still have to spend a lot of time to study because for us the tuition fees are really expensive so we cannot fail any subjects.*
>
> *For me personally, I think they choose pretty expensive textbooks. Because you don't get that payment from Centrelink until the first 3 or 4 weeks into each trimester. I find I have to just 'wing it' for the first couple of weeks and then pick up the books. We have a $250 book [in my course]. Books are available from the library but they're normally all on loan, so it's best to own your own.*
>
> *You're spending hundreds of dollars on books that you only need for a couple of months. If you can use that at the Library, it's great.*

*… there is a lack of funding for the Library to be able to purchase so many copies of those [text] books. There are so many people that use those textbooks at any given time. That's probably one of the limiting factors.*

*Money is a constant worry. I really worry – if things get too bad, I'll have to give up uni.*

*My greatest difficulty…is the financial aspect. I've carefully considered and as much as I'd like to keep on going at uni next year, financially I don't think I'm going to be able to do it. I feel that they weren't giving enough scholarships out.*

*Financial support is probably one of the biggest factors. Taking a full-time study course, and being committed to a sporting team, as well as being involved in various clubs/events (e.g. Amnesty International) leaves me little time left for work, and because I rely on public transport, that time is even longer. To try and find a job flexible enough for my uni hours and other commitments is difficult. Yet, without a job I have very little money even for basic things like groceries, textbooks/resources and travel. I think this limits, or at least makes studying, much harder, particularly when you have to wait for your next pay before you can buy items you need for study.*

*It's expensive just getting here and the tram takes ages. I can borrow my parents' car but then the car park tickets cost a lot (if you can get a car park).*

Scholarships, social services payments and support from family were sources of financial assistance.

The most common factor that students cited as curtailing their academic success and fulfilment was the time they spend in paid employment in order to afford their courses (see also Devlin, James and Grigg, 2008). For example, one student stated:

*I keep increasing the hours I work [in paid employment], but that's affecting my uni work – no doubt. I could get better results if I didn't need to work, but – I need the money. It's a vicious circle.*

Another student's story about having to undertake a compulsory unpaid work placement as part of her course illustrates another problem:

*I was shift at Myer casually, about five hours a week. At the moment I'm probably doing about 40 [hours] but that's going to change because I have to do a placement for my course. So that's going to drop a lot. I have to do at least three days a week placement…*

*I have to do that for two trimesters. It will start in July and go to November and then next year I do it full time. Next year I have to do it again. It will be 1000 hours in total. That's unpaid, which makes it really hard. That's why at the moment I'm trying to work as much as I can to get some money. [Placement is] 3-4 days of unpaid placement a week for 12 months and I'm finding that a bit of a worry…*

*That's the big issue...I had my Youth Allowance and then working occasionally at Myer. I don't really know how I might end up having to have a placement 3-4 days a week and on the extra days probably work at*

*the Café. I don't want to do that because that means I'll never get a day off. I still need money – everything is going up…*

*I'm on Youth Allowance at the moment but the way I'm going I'm probably going to lose it. My job is still reasonably new. Depending on what I earn, I'm probably going to lose it, which is a shame. That's obviously going to make things a lot harder, especially when the placements start.*

### 3.2.6 Workload

Some students were struggling with the workload in their courses. They said:

*I'm doing a full-time course and they say that it's ten hours per unit online but I think it's much more than that. I would say it's double that.*

*There's weekly ongoing material – in a number of units there's far too much to take in and at the same time keep up with and then do your assignments as well.*

*All the assignments are due in at the same time. Why? Couldn't the lecturers organise the dates so they're staggered a bit? But it's all-out effort all at once and I'm always wishing I had more time to make each assignment a bit better. Now – all of them are rushed.*

*We have to spend at least more than ten hours to study otherwise we feel like we're a little bit behind and now we always rush, rush. It seems like we are burned out.*

*[A friend said] 'I just need a six month break' – she was working so hard to keep up - and a few months later she just dropped out altogether.*

Some students expressed psychological distress about achieving lower academic than they would like. For example:

*I get really stressed. There's all the reading and some of it isn't easy reading – it takes ages just to understand it. I've started to feel anxious about just 'not getting' some stuff and getting further behind all the time. I'm finding this hard.*

*I've had to really work hard to keep up. I'm staying up late and I've done a study plan, but I'm finding it really hard. I'm falling behind…*

*It's me - my own inability to fully understand work, and inability to contact tutors.*

### 3.2.7 Facilities and services

Other comments about constraints to academic success and fulfilment referred to transport, social facilities or resources and services:

*Parking is a big one. I wish there were more public transport options.*

*The car parking is very stressful. Never enough car parks unless you arrive really early in the morning before everyone else.*

*… another one would be parking. I know that when you do drive to the uni…it's not so much if you have a class in the morning as there's parking then but in the afternoon everyone is pretty much aware that you won't get a park. More people will miss lectures in the afternoon because they know when they get there, there won't be any parking left so they prefer to stay home and listen online. Face-to-face is better as you take it in a bit better than when you're listening online.*

*… the lack of services to get to Waurn Ponds and that's another difficulty as to why many first year students find it annoying getting to this campus alone, if they don't live in this area.*

*I find the Library never has any free computers. I went in there in between classes, hoping to get some study done and print a few things off, and there were no spare computers I could find. While it's not always so busy, you should be able to have access to a computer/printers readily. I heard there was another place to print things off, but I don't know where that is - if there is, it's not promoted enough.*

*The Library is always full of students and it's really hard to get access to a computer. If you've got an hour between classes where you've got to look something up for your next class, you just can't rely on that.*

*In the first month of trimester the library was about half full but during exam periods it's fills up over the maximum probably. If I come in with my laptop I can hardly find a space.*

*We need more computers.*

*The Housing Service is not helpful.*

*A lounge or drop in centre would be nice. Hot water and microwave facilities would be good. We need somewhere to go where people can sit and talk to their friends. There's not a lot of space to even sit down.*

One student compared Deakin University with another university:

*Melbourne Uni has 500 clubs and they have all these student activities. Every day you'll have five barbecues going on at once, you can go and meet people and that's just really missing from Deakin. It's quite empty, there's not a lot going on [socially]. We don't really have a culture here I don't think… aside from obviously the drinking, if you're not really interested in the drinking.*

### 3.2.8 Lack of knowledge about Services/Programs

One of the most concerning findings in this research is that most students had little or no knowledge of the support services and programs that were available to them. Students were asked about their use and perceptions of the following programs:

- Counselling services
- Disability Resource Centre
- PASS (Peer assisted study sessions)
- DUSA (Deakin University Students' Association) Advocacy Service
- DIS (Undergraduate Drop-In Station)
- Student Life workshops and tutorials
- Succeed@Deakin
- WIL (Work-integrated learning support bursary)
- Study Skills (workshops)
- Library Skills (workshops)
- Host Program (Orientation)
- Ally Network
- Ask Jan/Ask Mark/Ask Louise (Faculty of Arts and Education studies support program)
- Peer Mentor Program (faculty specific)
- Student Representatives and Volunteer program (DUSA)
- Academic Advocacy and Students' Rights (DUSA)
- Deakin Legal Service (DUSA)
- DUSA Welfare Services
- Student Media (DUSA)
- Social Engagement (DUSA - e.g. 'O' week)
- Sports activities and clubs (DUSA)
- Accommodation: Smythe Place Rooming House (DUSA).

The great majority of students said they had never heard of the services. Such support services appear to be poorly advertised, publicised and promoted since they are not coming to the attention of many students.

> *No, no, no. I hadn't heard of those things until I did the actual survey and I could see that there were resources I could've gone to.*
>
> *I have never even heard of most of the Support Services you're talking about. I find that for an off-campus student there is a need for consultation/collaboration with real people and that this is not being provided by Deakin at this point.*
>
> *I didn't know about the Introduction to Deakin Study Skills course.*
>
> *There is so much information. If you're not really sure where to look…it's overload. I'm not surprised I haven't heard about these support services. No one's bring them to our attention.*
>
> *There're a lot of services that the university offers that you don't really know about them until you kind of need them and then you have to figure it out yourself.*
>
> *We feel a lack of support. We don't know who to ask. I have absolutely no idea who to contact if I'm having trouble in my course.*

*Students are scared of asking questions – whenever we ask there's no answer.*

*Many people undertook that [peer mentor] program on the first day but then they found it pointless because there wasn't really much to offer them.*

*I feel like I'm in the dark with a lot of things and I want to know a lot more about what Deakin has to offer, what a lot of students are doing. It would be great if you could have Services where we could just talk about those kinds of things.*

Students who did use support services appeared to find out about them by accident or through informal means:

*I saw an "Ask Jan" notice on the toilet door.*

*Someone in my course told me about the DUSA tutors.*

*I saw a poster about the Library courses when I visited the Library.*

*I thought that the university could let us know about what's available by emailing us.*

Other suggestions about support needs included the need for further assistance from students who have been at Deakin longer, with 'O-Week' being cited as a perfect opportunity to organise such arrangements. Students said:

*I didn't see many volunteers in the red t-shirts during the first weeks – that would've helped – more student ambassadors.*

*O week was great but only once a year and the events are expensive.*

*O week seemed to be focused around drinking.*

*It wasn't much about 'orientation' – just orienting us into drinking.*

*Some people I noted did not attend O week at all so they were not aware of such services [on offer].*

*I'm disoriented. I find it difficult to find all the Campus facilities.*

*I'm still so confused where to go. Orientation didn't help.*

*We need more Orientation to combat loneliness; orientation for special groups such as mature-aged or off-campus students.*

### 3.2.9 Religious-adherence issues

Two student expressed concerns about adherence to their religious beliefs being difficult at Deakin University:

*We don't have TV. It's our Church, we're religious and don't watch TV. That's an issue sometimes.*

*We pray several times a day. Sometimes I don't bother going to the prayer room – it's too far away – but I get strange looks as I pray out in the open*

**-o0o-**

Students' suggestions for improvement included:

- A greater promotion of all support services and programs
- A more effective/useful orientation to university program
- A greater use of students' personal email addresses for communications and information dissemination
- More opportunities to meet other students
- More social activities and social gathering areas/facilities
- More parking
- More computing facilities
- More one-on-one support
- Increased sources of financial support.

# Section 4

## Conclusion

Australia has embarked upon a radical new higher education policy agenda that establishes free market principles at the foundation of enrolments, funding and institutional rankings. The *My University* website launched in 2012, provides comparative data about each institution to aid student (consumer) choice and promote competition in the sector. In addition, the funding Compacts that have been negotiated between each institution and the federal government clearly ferment each university's market positioning, strategic goals and guide headway towards institutional achievement of government priority targets.

The federal government's targets initiated through the Bradley Review (2008) create incentives for universities to perform more effectively in equity areas. Deakin University appears to have more experience and be better equipped than many universities to cater for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and to meet federal government enrolment and completion targets (Palermo, Marr, Oriel, Arthur & Johnston, 2012).

However, the research uncovered in this report provides valuable information from students in the first year of their courses from low socio-economic backgrounds that will enable Deakin University to further fulfil its aims, strategic goals and enhance its corporate values.

Respondents to this research have alerted us to what assists and enables their studies, and what factors distract or interfere with their success and fulfilment. Students have provided ideas about Deakin University's services, practices and policies that should be retained and enhanced, as well as offering suggestions for changes or additions to existing provisions so that their particular needs are better served. This report presents evidence to inform future reforms.

The findings call for inter-related changes to policy and practice to achieve improvements for low socio-economic students' access, equity and inclusion. In sum they demonstrate that student behaviours and attitudes, teaching effectiveness and institutional support and resources are the most useful success-contributing factors for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Of major concern is the fact that despite a comprehensive range of support programs and services being offered by Deakin University, very few students are aware of them and therefore, few within the survey cohort used them. This indicates not so much a need for more services or programs per se, but an urgent need to publicise and promote those that currently exist so that they come to the attention of all students.

The students' comments also suggested that they are ill-informed about university life before commencing their courses. All students interviewed were the first in their family to attend university. They had little in the way of prior knowledge about how tertiary studies, university campuses and life in higher education would be dramatically different from that experienced in secondary schooling. In particular, the research raises concerns about students' feelings of isolation and loneliness, difficulties with 'do-it-yourself' study regimes, while often also juggling a lack of money and part-time employment with course requirements.

The research indicates that students' responses are hegemonically gendered and classed. These findings will form the basis for the third year of the research program.

## Notes

1. Elsewhere I have criticised this term as one that is derogatory and unhelpful in equity discussions (Starr, K. 2011a and 2011b; see also Foley, 1997).
2. This policy is not without its critics. For example, Skills Australia predicts that a 40 per cent target will increase the number of graduates working in jobs that do not require tertiary degrees (Norton, 2012).
3. University enrolment caps have been removed from 2012, enabling universities to increase their student intake. As a result, in 2012 Deakin University increased its first round offers by 10.7 per cent.
4. Previously, the SES of higher education students has been determined by the geographic area or postcode of the student's home address, using the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation. An improved measure of SES is being developed by DEEWR to support the Government's equity in higher education agenda. While this measure is being developed, an interim measure is being used by DEEWR based on a combination of SEIFA information for Census Districts (a more precise geographic basis than postcode), combined with information on Centrelink payments to university students (DEEWR, 2011, p. 104).
5. According to 2010 figures from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations approximately one quarter of first-year domestic students abandon their studies at Victoria University, Murdoch University and the University of New England. More than a third withdraw from courses at Charles Darwin University, Central Queensland University and the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. Only two of the nation's 39 universities – Melbourne University (7 per cent) and the Australian National University (9 per cent) – have single digit dropout rates for first-year domestic students (see Milburn 2012, p. 1).

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# Appendix A – The Survey

**1. Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey. We are seeking your opinion about what service/support provisions enhance the academic success and fulfillment of Deakin students and what provisions – or lack thereof – detract from your academic success and fulfillment and ways in which Deakin's services/support provisions could be more inclusive of all students.**

**This survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Please mark the appropriate space to respond to the closed items in the survey. Please provide your comments to the open-ended questions.**

**Please complete the survey by 17 September. All data obtained will be confidential and anonymous. No individual respondents will be identified.**

***2. PART ONE: Demographic information (this information will NOT be used for identification purposes):**

**How old are you?**

***3. Are you:**

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female

**4. What is the postcode of your current residence?**

***5. Is your location:**

- ◯ Metropolitan
- ◯ Rural
- ◯ Regional
- ◯ Remote

**6. What are your housing arrangements?**

- ◯ Independent
- ◯ Living with your Family
- ◯ Sharing

Other (please specify)

***7. Where is your place of birth?**

**8. What is the language spoken in your home?**

**9. What is your Australian residential status?**

- ◯ Australian Citizen
- ◯ Permanent Resident
- ◯ International Student

***10. Do you work?**

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

**11. If you marked 'Yes', how many hours a week do you work approximately?**

**12. If you marked 'Yes' to question 10, please state the title of your job/s:**

**13. Do you have any other sources of income support such as grants or parental support?**

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

**14. If you marked 'Yes' to question 13, please state the type of other income support you have:**

**15. Do you have any care obligations for others eg. children/elderly parents?**

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

**16. If 'Yes' please provide details of your care obligations.**

**17. What is the name of the Secondary School or equivalent that you attended?**

**18. In what schooling sector was this school?**

- ◯ Public
- ◯ Private
- ◯ Catholic

**19. Could you please state your parents' current or former job occupation? If unknown, please mark N/A.**

Mother

Father

**20. Do you have access to the Internet off-campus?**

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

**21. Please state the name of your Course and the Faculty that you are enrolled in:**

Course

Faculty

**22. Which campus do you attend?**

- ◯ Burwood
- ◯ Geelong Waterfront
- ◯ Waurn Ponds
- ◯ Warrnambool
- ◯ Online/external student

**23. What year do you expect to graduate?**

**24. In what career/job would you like to work at the completion of your course?**

**25. Through this section we are interested to learn of ideas for improvement to existing support provisions, about other factors that require strategic responses for positive student benefits, and of students' ideas and suggestions for improvements/change. Please click on the appropriate button to mark your response.**

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Don't Know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I have high expectations about being supported by Deakin University Services to be a successful Deakin student | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| I am finding my studies challenging/difficult | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| I am confident I will be successful in completing my coursework satisfactorily | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| I need to use a University Support Program eg. 'Ask Jan' | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| I find study support services to be useful | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| I find study support services to be unhelpful | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**26. Have you used any of these Deakin support services? Please tick as many as applicable. If you haven't used any support services, please leave all responses blank.**

- ☐ Counselling Service
- ☐ Disability Resource Centre (DRC)
- ☐ PASS Program (Peer Assisted Study Sessions)
- ☐ DUSA Advocacy Service
- ☐ Undergraduate Drop-In Station (DIS)
- ☐ Workshops/Tutorials offered by Student Life
- ☐ One-on-one consultation offered by Student Life
- ☐ Succeed@Deakin
- ☐ Work Integrated Learning Support Bursary (WIL)
- ☐ Study Skills
- ☐ Library Skills
- ☐ Host Program (Orientation)
- ☐ Ally Network

Other Service (please specify)

**27. Have you used any of these faculty-specific support services? Please tick as many as applicable.**

- ☐ Ask Jan/Ask Mark/Ask Louise [Arts and Education]
- ☐ Peer Mentor Program [Faculty specific]

Other (please specify)

**28. What limits your academic success and fulfillment at Deakin?**

**29. What limits your academic success and fulfillment OUTSIDE of Deakin?**

**30. What contributes to your academic success and fulfillment at Deakin?**

**31. What contributes to your academic success and fulfillment OUTSIDE of Deakin?**

**32. In what ways could Deakin's support services be more useful, accessible and inclusive?**

**33. In what ways could Deakin make university life more enjoyable/interesting/beneficial for you?**

**34. Please list any general ideas and suggestions for change and improvement.**

Thank you for completing this survey. Please complete this Survey by 10 September 2012. All inquiries about this Survey should be directed to Jackie Ingleby at jingleby@deakin.edu.au.

# Appendix B

The semi-structured interview base questions:

- What are the barriers and detractors to their academic success and fulfilment (internal and external)?
- What are the enablers and enhancers to their academic success and fulfilment (internal and external)?
- In what ways can Deakin's services/support provisions be made more useful, accessible and inclusive?
- In what way Deakin could make university life more enjoyable/ interesting/ connected to other areas of life?
- Ideas and suggestions for change and improvement.

**WARRNAMBOOL**
**CAMPUS**
Princes Highway
Warrnambool Victoria

**GEELONG**
**WAURN PONDS CAMPUS**
Pigdons Road
Waurn Ponds Victoria

**GEELONG**
**WATERFRONT CAMPUS**
1 Gheringhap Street
Geelong Victoria

**MELBOURNE**
**BURWOOD CAMPUS**
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood Victoria

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