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**Teaching students from
low socioeconomic backgrounds:**
A brief guide for University teaching staff



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This guide offers some suggestions about teaching students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds who are enrolled at Deakin University. The advice is based on a research project conducted with successful Deakin University students from low SES backgrounds in 2010.

How do I know which students are low SES?

Some staff may wonder how they know whether or not they have students from low socioeconomic (low SES) backgrounds in their class and if so, how to find them and assist them. However as Deakin University's Widening Participation Plan (2010) states:

While it is necessary to define students from low SES backgrounds at a policy level, for measuring performance and allocating funds, it is very difficult, and potentially undesirable, to target students from low SES backgrounds individually for support at the institutional level (p. 4).

What do I need to do differently?

The Widening Participation Plan further suggests that '... instead of singling out students from low SES backgrounds, and stigmatising them in the process' (p. 4), we should 'move ... away from a focus on individual students to one that focuses upon inclusivity' (p. 4), noting that 'varying ... methods of teaching can benefit all students, not just those from particular target groups' (p. 5).

The findings from the 2010 Deakin research confirm that the key elements of effective teaching low SES students align entirely with the research on effective university teaching generally. This means that effective teaching practice will benefit all students, however, there are a number of specific aspects of effective teaching that are particularly useful for low SES students.

What is the key advice about teaching low SES students?

The interviews with low SES students at Deakin indicated that there are four major aspects of effective teaching and teachers that have particularly assisted them to succeed in their studies. These are:

1. Teachers who are approachable and available to guide student learning.
2. Teachers who are enthusiastic, dedicated and have rapport with students.
3. Teachers who use language and examples that students can understand.
4. Teachers who provide clear expectations in relation to assessment.

Illustrative quotes from the Deakin University research related to each of these aspects of effective teaching, are provided below.

1. Effective teachers are approachable and available to guide student learning

The most frequent teacher attribute reported as helpful by low SES students was teacher approachability and availability to guide learning. Thirty-nine of the 53 successful low SES students interviewed (74%) mentioned this factor as helpful to their learning. Illustrative examples of comments include:

I think it does come down to how approachable the lecturer is in terms of just their manner as well as their ability to communicate with students, and that students feel at ease just being able to either give them a phone call or to drop them an email. I think ... it does make it easier if you've got someone on the other end of the phone that's approachable and flexible in terms of their capacity and ability to communicate with students. (079)

I think if you have a lot of questions you can ask them easily. They are easy to approach, but I think it's just things like discussing assignments, what is expected ... and ... if you are after more than what is being taught, you can approach them, and they will expand on the subject for you. (013)

The following comments point to how a teacher's approachability and availability to help provide guidance contribute to students' understandings of the expectations of them, particularly in relation to assessment tasks:

Being able to approach my lecturers, that's probably a major thing. Some lecturers I felt like I couldn't approach, but the ones I could approach I feel like I was able to get a better reading on what they expected, and that's been able to help me. (036)

[the lecturer]'s very approachable for an assignment so I've been to see him in the library, he's helped me out, or if I popped up to his office and discussed about what aspect I should I take on my assignment, I get home and there's an email with some pointers. (036)

A small number of comments indicated an exceptional level of availability by staff, for example:

... the ... lecturer, she even called at the start of the semester ... she phoned to see that I was all right with all of the course materials, and found out if I'd thought about what my first assignment was, gave me some ideas on where to get further information that would help me with it, which was really helpful, and she said 'Anytime, you can call if you need any help ...' (060)

It should be noted that students were adverse to 'spoon-feeding' and particularly valued high standards and expectations.

2. Effective teachers are enthusiastic, dedicated and have rapport with students

The second most frequent category of response related to teachers/teaching was 'enthusiasm, dedication and rapport with students'. Twenty-seven of the 53 students (51%) mentioned this factor as helpful to their learning. Some of the typical comments included:

[The lecturer is] really fantastic. She's just passionate, she makes it interesting ... (047)

[A lecturer] who actually wants to teach, like they actually care what they are doing, they are not just there for a job. (033)

They were both really friendly, easy-to-get-along-with type lecturers, and they sort of bridged the gap between the lecturer down the front and the 'you' as a student up the back. (021)

The comments pointed to a depth of commitment to teaching and to learning that the students felt and benefited from. One comment indicated a significant commitment by a teacher to an individual student, that the student has noted,

‘Even when I was the only student at an eLive [online] session, he continued the session with me as the only student. So he dedicates his time to that.’ (086)

The impact on students and their learning of lecturer enthusiasm, dedication and/or rapport can be remarkable, as one student explained:

‘[The lecturer’s] style of teaching was so inspiring. He created a voracious appetite for learning in me.’ (088)

Research undertaken by Marsh and colleagues points to the impact of teaching enthusiasm on student engagement and learning. Marsh and Roche (1996) summarise suggestions and recommendations from, among other sources, award winning university teachers in relation to demonstrating enthusiasm.

Some of these suggestions include:

- Varying the pace and type of teaching and learning activities you use in class
- Focusing on 5 or 6 different students each time you teach and teach as if you were talking to them individually
- Asking students to provide constructive feedback on your presentation skills, and
- Looking after yourself, including avoiding excessive stress, in order to maintain a positive attitude to teaching.

3. Effective teachers use language and examples students can understand

Teachers’ use of language and/or examples were reported by 26 of the 53 students (49%) as important to their learning and success. Comments indicated a range of aspects of communication that students valued, from making learning fun to integrating conceptual material with ‘real-world’ examples and otherwise making effort to communicate about the material with students:

Definitely, the teachers that actually ... refer to the slides but they explain things in their own words as well, they are the best lecturers. You get some that just literally read what is on the slides, and it’s kind of like, ‘Well, I could just read that’, whereas half of them start explaining it and put it into real-life context and that sticks in my head a lot better than just reading the slides. (025)

One particular teacher that we have, when they give a lecture they’re very specific to giving examples that relate to say uni students or undergrad students. Like say going out on a weekend opposed to something sort of boring that you’ll kind of forget about. (100)

I found statistics very intimidating and was very stressed out about it, but always found that after I listened to the lecture and the way he’d explained it, and he’d throw in these funny examples, it always helped me, and it always concreted. (090)

We had a lot of visual aids as well, pictures as well. I found I could remember things easily, because it was just a picture in my mind. (037)

[These two lecturers] put everything into language you can understand, even when it’s something that’s quite difficult. (049)

My tutor's been really, really good when I ask simple questions, just putting it in simple terms for me if I'm struggling to understand something. (100)

This finding in particular aligns with previous research on the experiences of low SES students at university. Effective teaching of these students requires a conscious and deliberate use of language by teachers to assist students to understand what is being taught. This does not equate with 'dumbing down' the curriculum but instead points to the value of clear communication and of the use of familiar vocabulary, as well as to the use of explanations and examples to which students can relate. Using straightforward language helps avoid students feeling excluded through hearing language they cannot easily interpret.

4. Effective teachers clarify assessment requirements

Nineteen of the 53 students (36%) referred to teachers' clarifications of assessment requirements as helpful to their success in study. The following were typical comments:

I think really clear instructions are always good. I think a marking guideline is very helpful ... And some of [the lecturers] are really good at explaining what they want and you can put your assessment around that, whereas others, you still feel a bit vague until you get back your first assignment and then you've sort of lost, potentially lost, a lot of marks. (069)

I think, not just the task itself, but actually information around how to go about the particular task ... [such as] a detailed overview of how the assessment will be structured ... is always helpful ... So you're not just handed the question itself and said, 'Here, write your 3000-word essay on this' ... (079)

Some students found examples of successful assessment tasks and formats particularly helpful:

One of the most helpful things I found is, they pulled out a series of pages that had examples, particularly in how you present your assignment, ... [including] 'What do you use double quotes ... [and] single quotes for?' And examples of each, listed all the fonts, the margins, spacing, the paragraph spacing, double lines, all that kind of stuff ... so that every time when I do an assignment I go back and I refer to that and I double-check every single thing that I do ... (096)

What really helps sometimes is when lecturers put up examples of ... the type of work that they're looking for ... That actually helps, because then you can see how other students have responded, have cottoned on to what they want. And then way the assignment's set out will be similar ... so you have actually got a bit of a template to follow ... (099)

The students quoted here were concerned about being fully informed as to the academic requirements of them: content, structure, format and marking criteria. Their comments reinforce the importance of teacher availability and approachability and corroborate existing research identifying low SES university students' unfamiliarity with the student role and its academic expectations (Collier and Morgan 2008; Devlin 2010; James, Krause and Jenkins 2010). Their comments also suggest that students themselves are aware of this lack of familiarity and its consequences in terms of lost time ('you know the amount of time that saves is just incredible') or lost marks ('you've sort of lost, potentially lost, a lot of marks'). The dilemma of 'trying to work it out for yourself' when you don't know 'where their heads are at and what

they're looking for' is summed up by this student's remarks:

What helps as well is they've given you a bit of an outline, a little bit more guidance on what they want from your assignment, as in, 'These are the things, the headers that we'd like you to cover', so you've got a little bit of a work plan ... It just gives you a little bit more idea of where their heads are at and what they're looking for. Otherwise you feel like you're guessing a lot, trying to work it out for yourself what you think they're asking you for ... (061)

The centrality of effective teaching for low SES student learning

Having been asked questions about themselves, their families, their friends, and the staff at Deakin, when asked to indicate to whom or what they would give an award for helping them most as a student, the most frequent response was one or more lecturers or tutors. A typical response:

She's a lecturer, and I had her for my very first first-year subject and it was probably from her and her input and her help and support that's enabled me to continue on. Right from the word go having someone that helpful to start with was really good. (096)

These most highly appreciated teachers exhibit multiples of the attributes and practices that students found helped them succeed in their studies: they were approachable and available to help guide learning; were enthusiastic, dedicated, and related well to students; communicated concepts in language students could understand and used examples to which students could relate, and explained the course and assessment requirements clearly.

What about standards?

It is important to note that implementing these aspects of teaching does not mean compromising academic standards; indeed, low SES students identified intellectual challenge as contributing to their success:

There's been certain lecturers along the way who have just been very inspiring ... they're actually challenging you to think (069)

Two particular [lecturers] come to mind that they were actually tougher in terms of the way they marked and the way that they spoke to you. They didn't spoon-feed you the information and I actually like that, because it makes you learn more. (025)

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Appendix 1: Methodology for research

The research on which this guide is based was funded by a Deakin University Strategic Teaching and Learning Grant Scheme grant in 2010 and received ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited using a database obtained from the Planning Unit listing students who had enrolled in 2010 after having successfully completed at least one year of part-time or full-time study and whose home addresses had postcodes that the Australian Bureau of Statistics identified as indicating low socioeconomic status, using the Index of Education and Occupation. The recruitment email was sent to the first 1025 students on the list and 128 students responded indicating their interest in participating. Given the limitations of resources available for the study, the first 100 respondents to reply were included in the interview cohort. The interview schedule appears in Appendix 2 of this document.

Interviews were held face-to-face at Burwood and Geelong Campuses and by telephone in May and June 2010. Nineteen students withdrew and a further 28 were excluded because they did not meet the study's second criteria of low socioeconomic status; that is, being first-generation university students. This reduced the final number of participants to 53 students: 17 from Burwood Campus; 8 from Geelong Campus; 1 from Warrnambool Campus; and 27 who were studying off campus. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with student names replaced by a number. HyperRESEARCH qualitative data analysis software was used to analyse the data and to identify recurring dominant themes.

Students were asked to report some of the things that had helped them to learn while they had been a student and, as a follow up question, whether there were particular teachers or teaching styles that had been more helpful than others.

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

1. Can you tell me about some of the things that have helped you to learn while you have been a student at Deakin?
2. Have there been particular aspects of your experience at uni that have helped you to get through units?
3. What else has helped you succeed at Deakin?

Prompts

4. Are there particular teachers or teaching styles that have been more helpful than others?
5. What has helped you do well in assessment tasks?
6. Are there people in your life who have been helpful? Who? How have they been helpful?
7. Are there aspects of your financial arrangements or circumstances that have made things easier for you to study?
8. Are there student or other services that have assisted you to succeed at uni?
9. If you had to give an award to a person, service or thing that has helped you most as a student at Deakin who or what would it be?
10. If you had to give advice to a student (from your old school/home town/suburb/area) coming to Deakin about succeeding as you have done, what would you suggest to them?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about how you have succeeded as a student at Deakin?

