



RESEARCH PAPER

Music and visual arts service learning in Sydney schools: school and university partnerships to widen participation in higher education

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This paper presents findings on university students' perceptions of an undergraduate service learning unit of study designed to engage university and school students in collaborative music and drawing workshops in six primary and high schools in Sydney, Australia. It is based on a two-year project in an Australian university in 2012 and 2013 that offered first year university music and visual arts students the opportunity to partner with identified low socio economic schools (LSES) in Sydney. As each of the schools involved in this project has different types of music and visual arts programs, and different policies and uses for service learning work, ways that engaging in the partnership differs between them. To explain this, the perceptions of the university music and art students working with each of the schools are reported and are derived from survey and focus group interviews (n=35). In addition, school and university staff members' comments (n=9) on their perceptions of the university students' response to the workshops conducted in the schools is reported. No school students were interviewed or surveyed in this project's investigation. The results of this mixed-method exploratory study indicate benefit to university students' understanding of widening participation and the justification of service learning programs in university undergraduate degree programs as part of their learning.

Keywords: school/university partnerships, widening participation in higher education, service learning, music and visual arts, curriculum based strategy, community engagement

Introduction

This paper describes an intentional curriculum based strategy to introduce music and visual arts undergraduate students and staff to a service learning unit of study. The unit of study was implemented in 2012 and designed specifically in response to an institutional strategy to widen participation amongst school students from LSES by increasing familiarity with the higher education culture. Part of the community engagement of the program is for first year university students to work collaboratively with school students to raise their aspirations and awareness of studying tertiary level music and art. The program ran successfully in 2012 and 2013 and an expanded program is running in 2014. The service learning unit of study allows an expansion of existing partnership activities with three of the six schools in Sydney and promoted a development of new partner schools through an intended goal of community engagement of students and staff from the University with schools.

This paper presents findings derived from surveys and interviews with first year university students (n=35) and staff (n=9) on the influences of a two-year internally funded widening participation project in an Australian university in 2012 - 2013. Rather than concentrate on the effects of community engagement on school students, the paper focuses on

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university students' responses to running collaborative music and art workshops in the schools. Results indicate various ways in which tertiary teaching in music and visual arts can be influenced by incorporating a service learning unit of study into university degree programs. Specifically, these relate to rethinking by university teaching staff of demonstrating the longitudinal nature of study in music and art; the strength of collaborating with school students to provide holistic views of future tertiary study; and the significance to students of service learning as representation of the possibilities that good school/university partnerships development can mean to schools of disadvantage (Rowley, 2009; 2013).

This aim of the project is to investigate the other side of the university/school partnership, focusing on university students' perceptions of widening participation in relation to collaborative learning with school students to promote a deeper understanding of tertiary music and visual arts. The contention is that school students' engaging in these partnerships will widen participation in tertiary study for those who traditionally have not thought about higher education as a post school option. An intentional aim of the project was a collaborative composition of the art and music pieces by both university and school students. The relationship and enjoyment of the two groups of students working together with little intervention from school and university teaching staff was an unintentional aim of the project.

The paper is structured in following sections. First, background information and relevant literature on widening participation in the Australian tertiary sector is given. This is followed by methodology and the projects' results. The final section of the paper notes how this program is affecting university students' understanding of service learning, community engagement and the learning and teaching of music and art at tertiary level.

Background

A recommendation from the Bradley Review of Higher Education was that targets for participation in higher education in Australia be set to increase from 32 to 40% of 25-34 year olds to attain a bachelor level education and an increase from 15 to 20% of undergraduate enrolments to come from LSES backgrounds by 2025 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). With a new proposed model comes a need for tertiary institutions to be able to support new targets and to plan accordingly for a more diverse population. However, there have not been significant modifications in the tertiary sector in catering for the expansion of diverse student cohorts who are 'non traditional, in terms of preparedness, SES and geography' (Dawson, Charman & Kilpatrick, 2013, p.706). It is proposed that the targets are ambitious (Australian Government, 2009) and Gale and Tranter (2011) note that the targets will see 'attrition rates likely to rise because universities aren't set up to teach less-prepared students' (p.31). The higher education sector is in the process of transforming into 'an egalitarian tertiary system enabling access and participation from a diverse range of students, many who would not previously had this opportunity' but has not achieved that goal yet (Simson et al., 2012, p.48).

There is a focus on widening participation in higher education in Australian University's institutional agendas with support through HEPPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program) funding. The program described in this paper is supported by HEPPP funding and seeks to address in its own way, the inequity in current university populations by widening participation of current students to work with the non traditional future tertiary students. The established program is aimed at preparing LSE

students for pathways that would lead to a university education beyond secondary school by raising aspirations and awareness for school students to study tertiary level music and art.

Bradley et al. (2008) reported that the majority of higher education participation programs are focused on students who are already achieving high grades in secondary school and, therefore, the students targeted by greater access and participation programs arrive at university insufficiently prepared. The Centre for Study of Higher Education (2008) reported that LSES groups (including indigenous Australians) are likely to have lower perceptions of the attainability of a university place, have less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education and be more likely to feel socially excluded from the university culture. No matter how many access programs are organised it is the university that has to change and become prepared through its curriculum and teaching to cater for a new future student population.

Providing a musical and artistic learning experience through the service learning unit of study reported on in this paper, was an attempt at increasing the social capital for both the university and the school students (Munns, 2004). The school students' desire to learn music and art was encouraged by their enjoyment of the music and art making experience with their school teachers. It is often thought that success is driven by opportunity and individual's own intrinsic motivation. The students from LSES require an alternate focus of opportunity so that they can derive self worth and, indeed, a motivation for learning (Saubern, 2009).

The school students who participated in the workshops are not the focus of this paper and were selected by their school using a variety of selection criteria and they were all currently engaging in some music or art education at their school. The learning outcomes of the school workshops for the school students are limited to 'participation in the workshops and the final concert/exhibition'. The learning outcomes for the university students, however, explicitly stated:

- to critically examine widely held perceptions about people from LSES and disadvantaged backgrounds;
- to develop an understanding of the artistic needs of learners with limited musical and visual arts knowledge;
- to demonstrate and communicate basic skills and apply musical and visual arts knowledge to LSES and disadvantaged school aged and community learners;
- to understand and be sensitive to issues of cultural and social diversity;
- to contribute to service provision in collaboration with schools and the broader community. (Rowley, 2013).

A key component of the service learning unit of study was for the university students to widen their creative arts career experiences and to explore 'how best to shape and implement teacher learning opportunities for the maximum benefit of both teachers and students' (Desimone, 2009, p. 189). It is expected that the project will increase the capacity of existing curriculum by providing tertiary students an opportunity to generate and implement genuinely collaborative projects with school students at LSES schools. An argument is therefore made for the role curriculum and teaching strategies have in providing for future generations of non-traditional tertiary students.

Literature review

It is reported that those from LSES backgrounds are less likely to complete Year 12 as they perform poorly at school and are, therefore, unprepared for university which means they

face challenges in gaining a place in higher education (Muir, 2009 as cited in Dawson et al., 2013). Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen (2008) investigated the individual and school factors affecting students' participation and success in higher education in New Zealand. Their primary research was 9894 students, from 69 secondary schools in the Auckland region, who sat final exams in 2004, average age 17.8 years. The study looked at the effects of a) individual student demographic characteristics and b) school characteristics on a) pathways from school to university and b) student's performance at university (GPA). Shulruf, et al. (2008) found that students' characteristics, such as socio-demographic, aptitudes and previous achievements, affected individuals' pathways to and through tertiary education, and the way schools prepare students might also have a significant effect on pathways to higher education.

In Australia, for example, Ryan and Watson (2009) found that students attending independent schools gained higher Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) scores than students attending Catholic schools; and Catholic students, in turn, gained higher ENTER scores than students attending government schools. In their study, Shulruf et al. (2008) found that higher SES students were more likely to achieve the required score for university entrance. In a report on Widening Participation In Australian Higher Education, it was stated that academic achievement is highly correlated with SES background and therefore those from LSES score lower marks on the mechanism used to determine university entry (Gale & Parker, 2013). The challenge for higher education is to maintain standards whilst providing access to the new generation of tertiary learner (Marks & McMillan, 2013). The findings from the literature would encourage, therefore, strong partnerships between LSES school and university's to be mutually beneficial for the future non traditional tertiary student population (who have greater diversity in preparedness and social capital) through an institutional strategic re-alignment, strong leadership in teaching and learning and appropriate resourcing (Devlin, 2013).

Soto, Lum & Campbell (2009) looked at university-school music partnerships and found that school students did not have a particular focus on pathways to studying tertiary music. They did, however note that, 'students will be informed by on-the-ground experiences in schools as well as enabled to 'give back' as they learn something of the rhythm and realities' (p. 9). This was fueled in part by 'motivation to bridge the gap between privileged university students and underserved school populations, in that disadvantaged youth may be encouraged and motivated to learn from positive role models' (Soto, et al., 2009, p.11). In music and art learning there is an expanded view of the repertoire for performance and listening, and also an increased sensitivity toward students of differentiated cultures. As many of the school students in this project were from different cultural backgrounds to the university students, it was important in the university staff's preparation of the students that there was a focus on cultural sensitivity. A partnership that engages prospective music educators in teaching and making music for multicultural student populations helps to develop this sensitivity through firsthand interactions. There are clearly demonstrated benefits of a partnership between universities and schools to engage school students in the potential of higher education.

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper treats each university and school partnership involved as a case study (Cohen & Manion, 1996), and uses qualitative comments from survey and focus group interviews with university students and staff responsible for program in both the schools and the universities of this project. Interviews with university students, while

designed to elicit specific information on learning, were semi-structured to allow interviewees to represent differences between their experiences in the schools, and for 'flexibility . . . (and) subtleties of personal interpretations' to be heard (Burns, 2000, p. 424). This type of interview also allowed interviewees to represent the multiple differences between their school and collaborative programs, and to pursue lines of thought and opinions as they emerged during interviews. A narrative inquiry method was applied, which uses field texts, such as stories, journals, field notes, conversations, and interviews as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning. This method is common in educational research as a tool for analysis and belongs to the wider field of qualitative research. As a mixed-method, exploratory study using narrative inquiry it employs an integrated method, procedure and technique used in the organisation of data or other artefacts into themes (Altheide 1987). Primary data for this investigation were collected through voluntary university student surveys and focus group interviews with university students and ethics approval was given for this study. In addition, school and university teaching staff were interviewed by phone with a semi-structured interview method. Conversational, semi structured interviews with the university students and school/university teachers allowed them to chat informally, discussing their own observations and experiences. Surveys and interviews from students and staff aided data triangulation. Questions used in the survey, focus group and semi-structured interviews are available from the author. Using directed content analysis, initial coding categories were derived from literature on widening participation and each response was coded for frequency. Scores and measures were obtained through this process and collated to indicate the strength of the theme amongst university student responses. The research questions were:

1. What impact does the school workshops have on raising aspirations of school students for a tertiary education?
2. How does the experience of the school university partnership impact the university students' perception of LSES and widening participation?

Backgrounds of school workshops and data collection method

The workshops ran by university students in the schools employed a collaborative, peer learning approach using informal learning strategies and are designed to generate music and drawing skills and creativity. For example, the music workshops initially introduce the schools students to key musical concepts (e.g. rhythm, beat, voice) through games in a fun way. The drawing workshops look at drawing in the contemporary art sense where school students create a series of background/surface patterns on paper (e.g. Water colour washes; Folding and cutting out coloured paper and gluing it onto a surface; Collage stuck onto a sticky contact surface; Collaborative drawings gluing cotton wool and tissue paper). In the workshops the school students are asked to reflect and consider previous work produced to create a large collaborative composition (music) and patchwork wall hanging (art) from what they have generated. At the end of the three (art) and five (music) workshops, the school students present their work to the 'wider' schools group in a collaborative manner. This is achieved through a performance and exhibition 'concert' held at the University at the conclusion of the program where school students, their families and school community are invited to share the compositions (transport and dinner provided).

In total, this project involved five university staff working with 40 university students and 90 school students across six different schools in 2012 and 2013. In 2012 the service-

learning program was a music program only and university students were working with one high school (year 7) and two primary schools (years 4-6). In 2013 the program expanded to include music and art and university students from two faculties worked with school students in one primary school (years 4-6) and three high schools (years 7-11).

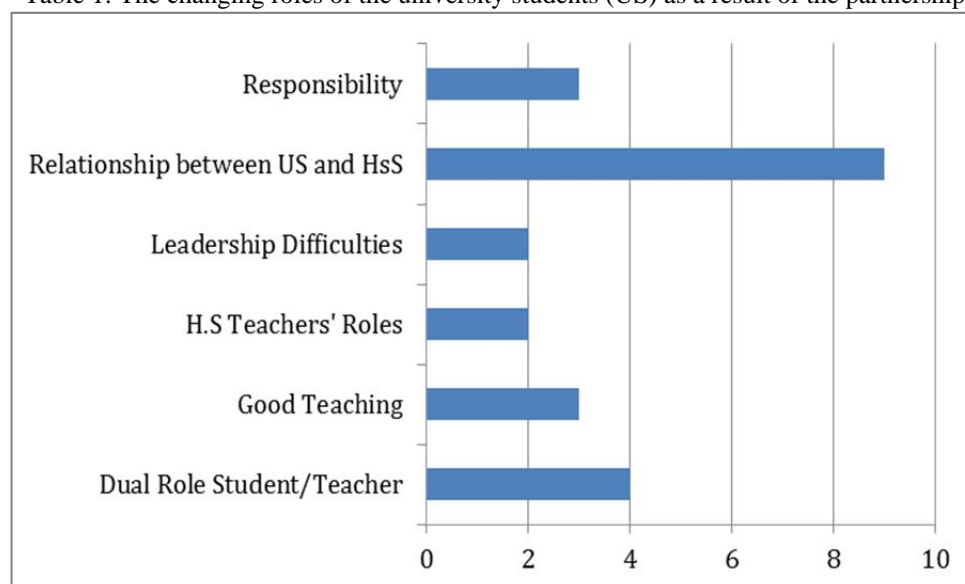
Results

This paper draws on university students' data from four sources, the questionnaire from the visual art faculty, the questionnaire and focus group from the music faculty, the end of unit of study survey from the music faculty (n=35). It also draws on semi-structured interviews with school and university staff (n=9). The data is both quantitative and qualitative and were coded inductively, and then subjected to a process of constant comparison between sources. Following this initial process, themes were discerned throughout the codes using methods drawn from grounded theory. Finally, data were transformed in line with data analysis methods recommended for mixed methods studies, in order to produce frequency charts to represent the most common themes. Throughout, quotes are drawn from the different sources and coded accordingly: SCM = music faculty; SCA = visual arts faculty F/M = female/male; Number = the order in which they appear in each individual document (note 'F3 SCM Focus Group' is not the same person as 'F3 SCM Questionnaire' etc.)

Part 1: The School Dimension

This section presents a variety of themes that pertain to the 'School Dimension' of the service learning unit of study. This has been divided into two overriding sections – 'University Student Experiences' and 'School Student Experiences'.

Table 1: The changing roles of the university students (US) as a result of the partnership



Relationship between University Students (US) and School Students (SS)

This section reports comments from university students made about their relationship with school students. These were overwhelmingly positive, suggesting that forming these relationships was one of the high points, for both SCA and SCM students and an unintentional outcome:

'For me it [the best memory of the program] was working with one of the students in particular who played a piano duet with me... and he was really excited after the concert... and seeing them [the boy and his mother] so happy that they could come to the con, something special for them, and something special that I was a part of' (F2 SCM Focus Group).

Clearly this is seen by the university students to be one of the most beneficial aspects of this program, and the anecdotal evidence that the university students provided in the form of narrative stories about their time in schools would suggest that the high school students equally benefitted from these new relationships.

'I would have to say what was enjoyable was creating a friendship with the students that they may not have gained if we were not from university or students ourselves' (F1 SCA Questionnaire).

The university students commented on their unique position as both student, and teacher/facilitator. This liminal space was perceived to afford them a special insight into the learning experiences of the school students:

'I felt I have been through it before but I just had in the back of my mind that I knew what the student was experiencing and how they understand and take on work especially from an artistic view because I am also a student' (F1 SCA Questionnaire).

This special empathy may explain why the university students felt they were able to craft such strong and meaningful relationships with the school students. Several students were aware of their heightened responsibility as teachers/facilitators.

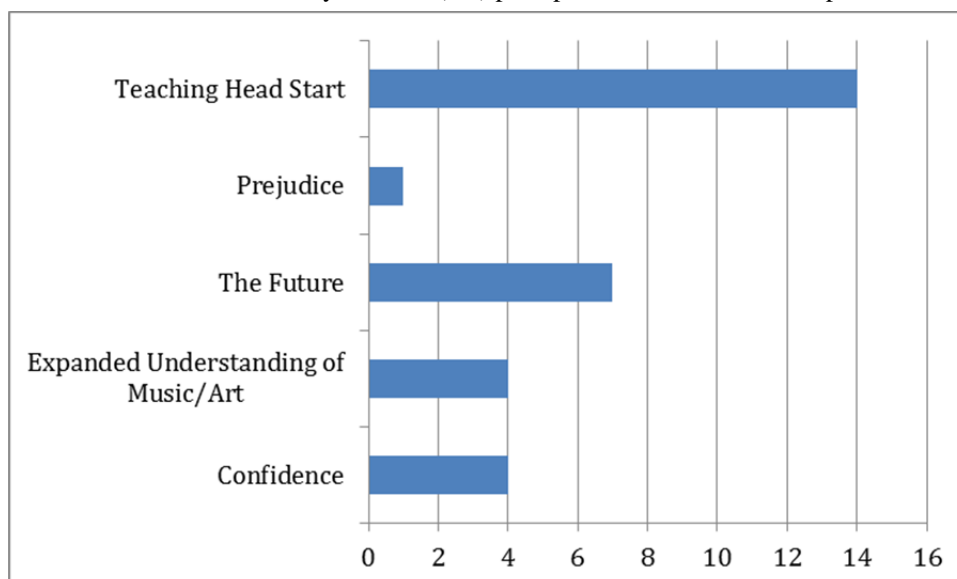
'It was very surprising how the students trusted me and asked questions about finishing high school and getting into university' (F3 SCA Questionnaire).

The university students did not take this new dimension lightly:

'I realised that their learning and understanding of music making depended on my teaching method and how I interacted with the students. It was initially difficult, but I got used to in and enjoyed the experience of teaching' (M2 SCM Questionnaire).

It was clearly seen as a valuable insight into the 'real world' of career, and one that could only be gained through practical application.

Table 2: University students (US) perceptions of their self development



The unit of study is seen as providing a strong insight into a future career.

'I hope to somehow get a career like this, in the future, that not only will allow me to be an artist but also allow me to help support and encourage younger artists to grow' (F6 SCA Questionnaire).

Several students reported that the program had improved their confidence levels. For most, this was a developed confidence in working with younger students and some students also reported improved confidence as an artist/musician:

'It was a very sharing, collaborative process and I loved it. I also found that it improved my confidence not only in learning but also in being a practicing artist' (F6 SCA Questionnaire).

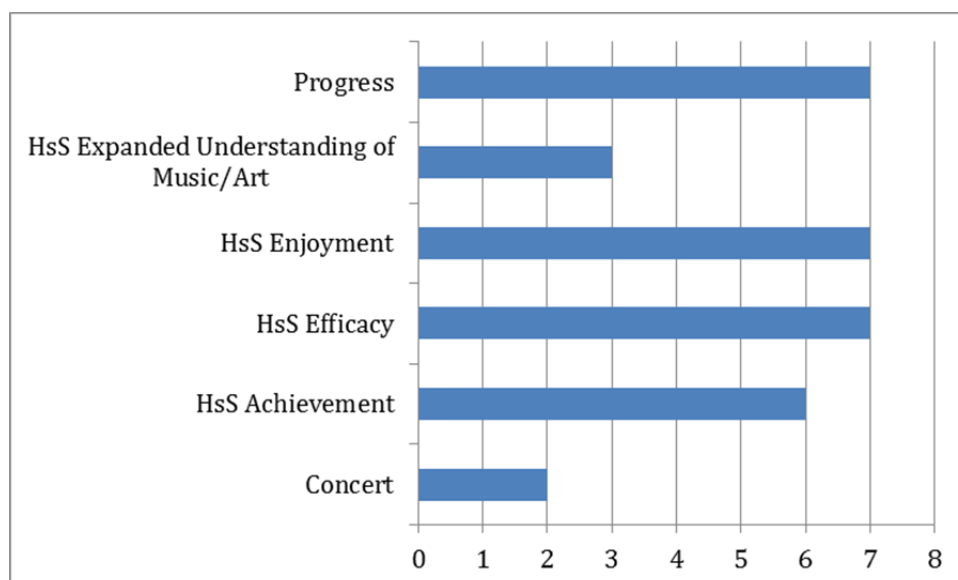
Along with improved confidence as an artist, some students suggested that they had also expanded their understanding of music/art as a result of teaching others.

'It has shown me that music making isn't just about notation and instrumentation for classically trained musicians but how to learn informally with collaborative learning from what students bring from their own context' (F2 SCM Questionnaire).

School Student Experiences

This information is second hand; really it is the university students' perceptions of the experiences of the school students. More positive than negative experiences were reported. The university students noted many examples of school students making progress, achieving high results, and enjoying themselves.

Table 3: University students (US) perceptions of the school students (SS) experience in the partnership



The university students provided many examples of the school students simply enjoying being a part of the experience:

'It was good to see someone who was so unsure of his own ability [a boy with autism], just coming through [in the concert/exhibition]. He was smiling from then onwards, he just didn't stop' (M2 SCM Focus Group).

For some of the university students, the enjoyment of the school students was the high point:

'Seeing the students enjoy themselves and having fun, whilst learning and realizing their own musical abilities and potentials was the most enjoyable aspect by far of the whole schools music workshop experience' (F1 SCM Questionnaire).

From the amount of description that the university students provided, it is possible to conclude that (some) of the school students enjoyed their time in the workshops. The university students were also pleased to see school students motivate themselves to contribute to the project. This had a profound effect on the university workshop leaders:

'What really encouraged me was the students taking musical knowledge from the workshops and investing their own time in their own learning' (F2 SCM Questionnaire).

The motivation of the school students also appeared to benefit them, giving them a greater sense of ownership over their final performance. The university students were able to observe a great deal of progress in the school students. In many cases, this was artistic growth:

'Seeing their growth as musicians from week one and remembering what they did, and then slowly as the week went by seeing their progression from what they did and what we taught them' (M2 SCM Focus Group).

However, there were also several examples of the school students developing other skills, including confidence:

'Before with that kid he could barely...he was very nervous around all the other kids who were older than him. And by the end he did a solo in front of all of them and in front of the school' (F3 SCM Focus Group).

The progress of the school students was something that the university students took pride in and were able to observe progress. Whether or not the school students were aware of progress they made, it was certainly clear that they had made some important musical and artistic achievements - including overcoming performance anxiety, alongside the achievement of completing the workshops and composing music or art.

'Having a student engage and observe and actually create something beautiful (and there were some really nice works), in the end come together as a whole and produce this wonderful collaborative artwork was something I probably wouldn't have encountered if I was not in this role' (F1 SCA Questionnaire).

The workshop leaders also commented on the students' expanded understanding of music/art, as well as their own. This was seen as a positive progression:

'The students were progressing into a different and more limitless way of thinking about drawing and art in general' (F7 SCA Questionnaire).

The fact that there are examples of both school students *and* the university students expanding their aesthetic ideals gives a strong indication that they were learning together, and having an authentic collaborative experience. The university students described ways in which the university course integrated well with the workshops in schools. Some students mentioned very positive benefits, such as the way in which the course had given them a desire to work more with their communities:

'I think all musicians should, like when you get out there, you will find yourself doing things for the community, and I think all musicians should be concerned with that... I think it should be introduced across Australia more widely, where there is such a lack of value and education about arts in the community' (F3 SCM Focus Group).

Finally, several music students mentioned the final concert/exhibition as being a high point for school students:

'You could see in their eyes they were really happy to be there in a real musical place, performing to so many people. They loved it' (F3 SCM Focus Group).

The positive associations that the workshop leaders had with the memories of the concert suggest that the opportunity to be in such a place (the university), with access to some great facilities had a positive impact upon the school students. One of the art students commented on the difficulty that she had in expanding the school students' ideas:

'I also found it difficult to encourage them to steer away from things they found comfortable doing: representations of butterflies or cut outs of their name, and instead explore different concepts and ideas away from representation' (F2 SCA Questionnaire).

The university student here acknowledges the link between the problem and her own learning and teaching, suggesting she has learnt from this.

Staff opinions on the music and art workshops

The university and school staff members discussed a range of ways in which their teaching had been influenced through the introduction of the service learning. In some cases these were related to specific teaching practices, such as assessment procedures, and in others to holistic personal and institutional teaching ideologies. The ability of a service learning program for students to present assessable work that had been undertaken away from a university campus, was something one university staff member commented on. The music and art students had to create a reflective journal and an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) of their workshop experience with the school students. The reflective journal and portfolio was based on the unit of study learning outcomes presented earlier in this paper. The university staff member commented that the experience 'had broadened the types of musical experiences students were receiving at uni' (F1 SCM) and 'the pieces were simple, but playing as a group and creating the art drawing composition as a group was so valuable to their learning' (M1 SCA).

'The most useful aspect was that it was a reminder about how every student can benefit and enjoy music, participate and produce something worthwhile and good quality given the resources and opportunity' (F1 SCM).

One of the school staff commented that benefits to the school students were that they 'loved the group work, and hearing the university students play their instruments' (F1 School 3). The school students got a good 'sense of rehearsal ethic and the importance of practice' (F2 School 3). As far as thinking about studying music at university: one school staff member reported that the school students 'were more comfortable with the idea and realised that it is not impossible... made aware that music university students are humans too' (F3 School 2). She further commented that it enhanced learning for the school's students as they 'realised the level of playing ability of the university students, especially when playing together, and how much the school students enjoyed performing' (F3 School 2). The five (music) and three (art) workshops gave one teacher 'other ideas about composing as a group, and the capability of the school students to compose art works and music - i.e. how much the school students enjoyed putting it together' (F4 School 4).

'The school students had such a good time and they would have loved it to go on for longer, but that's not always possible. They loved the warm ups and the games, and performing and the collaboration was wonderful as the school students really opened up and connected with the university student' (M1 School 1).

The workshops showed many of the school staff involved how valuable collaborative group work is and many commented that they would 'encourage more group work and composition' because they can see that students are 'capable and benefit from it' (Schools 1, 3 and 4).

There was agreement, on an institutional level, that use of service learning in the teaching of music and visual arts aligned with university policies that favoured increased use of blended learning, that skills (such as problem solving, decision making, and reflective learning) were representative of university expectations of graduate attributes.

The results above demonstrate that the project adds to what is already known about widening participation and provides evidence of the benefit of service learning programs to university students who participated in the program. The project provides a unique institutional undertaking to enable tertiary students to apply their skills in community and service education.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an insight for tertiary education institutions that want to address the issue of widening participation for non-traditional students. It has provided evidence for the need to implement curriculum, teaching and learning strategies for better managing the future tertiary students. This aim of the project was to investigate the other side of the university/school partnership, focusing on university students' perceptions of widening participation in relation to collaborative learning with school students to promote a deeper understanding of tertiary music and visual arts. The intention of the service learning program was to create a stronger school-university partnership, to widen participation and to encourage the school students to consider the many new pathways to tertiary music and art study. For the tertiary students it was categorized as a service learning and community engagement activity to encourage a broader understanding of the music opportunity in LSES schools. However, the outcome was so much more than this.

Specifically in the university teaching of music and visual arts, introduction of university and school student to this service learning and partnership experience, according to the work of this project, is having a range of effects. These include engagement with diverse students in different ways than previously experienced, access to new teaching and learning situations, ability to provide school creative and performing arts teaching staff with some professional learning, developing ways of reflecting on music and art as a university student, linking of university teaching to institutional policies, and increased emphasis on widening participation as response to service learning and partnership experience. The ongoing intervention demonstrated in this innovative curriculum redesign will link broader access to musical and artistic expertise for school students who were engaged in the modeling and mentoring of musical and artistic excellence in their schools.

Implications for the program are that tertiary institutions and their students have raised awareness about the next generation of tertiary students and that building partnerships with schools and engaging in collaboration are positive strategies for ensuring the success of the next generation of tertiary students in the aim of widening participation.

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