

Facebook and the fast-track to better futures for disadvantaged youth

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The Tertiary Preparation Program Intensive School for Year 12 school leavers offers young people from low socio-economic backgrounds an alternative pathway to university, a second chance at tertiary entrance and ultimately for some, a fast track to a better future. By adding Facebook and other social media to the teaching toolkit, opportunities expand for the students from non-traditional backgrounds to transition to university culture and to expand their social networks.

The University of Southern Queensland's Open Access College has long offered an exemplary Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) which gives individuals the skills they need for tertiary study and guaranteed entry to a USQ undergraduate degree. Extending this work, the USQ Toowoomba campus trialled an Intensive mode TPP with the intention of widening participation and raising aspirations of recently finished Year 12 school leavers from low socio-economic status (LSES) identified schools¹.

Participating students in the first USQ TPP Intensive School were a unique group of twenty 17–18 year olds from identified LSES secondary schools across Toowoomba, Brisbane and Ipswich, and smaller rural towns such as Millmerran and Pittsworth.

With a focus on assisting this group of school leavers with their lifelong career development, an innovative use of social media was employed; with Facebook producing a number of surprising and positive outcomes across academic development and social integration.

These students faced challenges exceeding the usual obstacles faced by young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Coming straight to us from Year 12, they did not have the same opportunity to mature over a long summer holiday which other university students enjoy. Many had never been away from home before and did not

know anyone else enrolled in the program. As well as adapting to a fast paced academic schedule within a culture of independent learning, the students also needed to acclimate to sharing accommodation and meal times with their peers, within the culture of residential colleges. Pastoral care was an important aspect of the program. This was enhanced by having a Residential Adviser who coordinated social activities and assisted after hours with study sessions.

Lecturers faced challenges too. Not only did they need to teach mathematical, academic communication, study management and career development skills essential to completing an undergraduate degree, but to also provide a social and cultural experience which would help the students settle into and experience university life.

Our solution was to create a TPP Intensive Group within the social networking site *Facebook*. It proved to be a great success as it facilitated and fast tracked both learning management and social integration.

There was an immediate uptake by the majority of the students who already had Facebook accounts and profiles. We placed notifications on the site in relation to arrival at campus, orientation and planned social events—and by the first day of teaching, students had uploaded and shared photos of each other and their new environment. Informal peer learning had also begun in

The Intensive School provides not only fee-free tuition, but free transport to and from campus, accommodation in the University Residential College for those who require it, and meals and social activities.

response to the uploaded teaching resources. Most were already familiar with the informal language and 'friending' conventions of this technology from their everyday social lives, so they were comfortable using it in their transition to higher education.

In post-program evaluation surveys, 67% of respondents rated the *Facebook* site as 'Excellent' while 33% rated it 'Good'. Even after accessing the official online Learning Management System our students tended to check their *Facebook* profiles more regularly than the USQ Study Desk and email accounts through their ever-present 'smart' phones and other mobile, personal, 'always on' communication technologies.

Students commented: "Facebook site ... Love it" and that the Facebook site was "Simple. [and a] Reliable way to communicate with friends and teachers.

Facebook allowed us to chart the growth of the students. And even after graduation, they continue to visit the site to support each other and compare experiences of undergraduate study. It has facilitated social links based on mutual benefit and collaboration which provide strong social support networks; an important factor determining career and study success, especially for young people.

Career development practitioners understand that students need more than

educational credentials or educational 'capital' to successfully manage their career lifelong; they also need social networks or social capital. For the digital generation, Facebook is a tool for becoming networking savvy alongside the development of academic skill sets. Not only is a sense of social cohesion and connectedness useful in the short term of a preparatory course, the capacity to network and maintain mutually beneficial social relationships is increasingly essential for long term career success.

It is "imperative that people develop networking skills"² because they enhance the individual's social capital and without it, students are more likely to feel isolated and disconnected. It may ultimately see a student drop out. Put simply, in a competitive job market, a credential is almost worthless without professional 'others' to mentor and support and vouch for you. In post-industrial workplaces where employees are increasingly expected to be flexible, mobile, entrepreneurial and adaptable, online or 'virtual' social capital can help smooth transitions and maximise career opportunities.

The internet is a powerful tool offering access to a career resource library, a marketplace of opportunities, and a space for exchange of social capital³. Career practitioners are already involved with the use of ICT in their services such when teaching clients to use social networking to assist with job search strategies, but it is also necessary to provide instruction in their benefits to career development.

Preparatory programs such as this, aiming to improve the life chances for disadvantaged groups, need to take social networking seriously and explicitly as a skill which can be learned and practiced. Bridging this gap is often about making connections through social networking sites—and for young people, just as important as formal and more traditional forums and networks.

Career development is an important aspect of the TPP program. The curriculum is written to cover competencies mapped to the Australian Blueprint of Career Development (ABCD) and is aimed at both adults and students in senior/post compulsory school or its equivalent. Creatively, student online *Facebook* profiles, where students explored and exchanged potential new 'selves' and potential new futures online,

complemented the work within the 'Developing and Maintaining Positive Self-concept' competency of the ABCD .

The curriculum introduced the students to career education and decision making—requiring them to complete two assignments: a self-assessment and career exploration exercise using the *myfuture* website (www.myfuture.edu.au); with the second about career decision making using a rational and logical approach. Students also received a presentation from a career development practitioner from the USQ Careers and Employment Service to affirm the services available to them. In addition, career counselling sessions were offered within the first week of the Intensive School and also the last. This helped each student to establish dialogue on what they hoped to achieve out of the Intensive program, why they had chosen to participate, and to offer information on career pathways.

The high level of career assistance proved extremely useful for students and evidence suggested it also assisted with the raising of aspirations. Disadvantaged or marginalised youth who may or may not have had career aspirations were able to spend time learning about themselves, learning about the world of work, exploring career opportunities and also building on their self-concept through the use of social media. This all occurred whilst in a safe environment amongst peers while concurrently, gaining academic skills to prepare them for further study.

In post program evaluation surveys, 80% of respondents indicated that the TPP Intensive School had assisted them in realising their potential. The raising of aspirations had taken place and more than 85% of the students went on to enrol in undergraduate programs for 2013.

The TPP intensive School will run in the summer of 2013 the at the Toowoomba campus of USQ. We welcome enquiries from career development practitioners—and do 'friend' us on *Facebook*!

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- 1 Funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) 2011 Partnerships Competitive Grant Process
- 2 Sommerlund & Boutaiba, 2007, p. 536 as cited in Strehlke, C. (2010). Social network sites: a starting point for career development practitioners. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 47, 38–48.
- 3 Hooley, T. (2012). How the internet changed career: framing the relationship between career development and online technologies. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 29, 3–12.