

## **Building social capital among students in preparation programs—lessons from the UTAS University Preparation Program**

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### **Abstract**

The Cradle Coast Campus of the University of Tasmania was opened in Burnie in 1995. One of the reasons for establishing a presence on the north-west coast was to improve higher education participation rates within the region. However, given the low educational qualification status of the population in the region, the University needed to provide more than just a physical presence in the region. Thus the University Preparation Program (UPP) was established in 1996 at the Cradle Coast Campus as an enabling program to provide a bridge for students not able to meet traditional general entry standards and to support the University's community engagement agenda.

The need for UPP is as great now as it was in 1996. While the number of students enrolled at the campus has grown over recent years, the proportion of the population that completes year 12 is still about two-thirds the state average and just over half the national average. Other education statistics show similarly that the region is struggling to engage with education generally, and perhaps more specifically with higher education. This reflects a national trend of growing disparity in higher education participation between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia—an issue highlighted by the Bradley Review and addressed in the Australian Government's response.

There is much work yet to be done in building a culture within the Burnie community that readily accepts the higher education pathway as a norm for year 12 students or higher education as an option for mature aged learners. Not only does the region face this aspect of cultural change but it also faces a further social capital deficit in that many of the region's students, and particularly UPP students, are and will continue to be first in their family to consider going to university and thus lack the family and social support structures that are recognised as critical success factors for university study. That said, UPP has had considerable success in engaging students on a pathway that leads to undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

One of the critical factors that contributes to this success is the creation of social capital within the student body. Students coming into UPP build a new set of social relationships that generates new knowledge resources and new identity resources, which in turn builds their social capital. UPP attempts to establish new norms and values in a safe and trusting environment. It offers personalised support that results in the creation of new 'bridging ties' that enable them to get on, not just get by. However, countering the potential impact of these new social relationships is a pre-existing set of relationships that may inhibit students' capacity to engage in this new—and somewhat challenging—learning environment. This is reflected in relatively high attrition rates (up to 70 per cent).

Drawing on the literature on social capital and learning, this paper attempts to articulate some of the lessons learned and from the experiences of UPP at the University's Cradle Coast Campus. The paper also draws on observations made by students. It provides examples of teaching and learning strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective in building social capital within the UPP student body—as a precursor to sustained engagement in learning at UTAS. While the paper reports on success, it also raises questions about the costs of an approach that intentionally builds social capital. Given the Australian Government's intent to address inadequacies in the regional learning

model, questions still remain about regional universities' capacity to respond to the social capital needs of students and communities.

**Keywords: Social capital, preparation, engagement, pathways, regional**

### **Introduction**

The Cradle Coast Campus of the University of Tasmania was opened in Burnie in 1995. One of the reasons for establishing a presence on the north-west coast was to improve higher education participation rates within the region. However, given the low educational qualification status of the population in the region, the University needed to provide more than just a physical presence in the region. Thus the University Preparation Program (UPP) was established in 1996 at the Cradle Coast Campus as an enabling program to provide a bridge for students not able to meet traditional general entry standards and to support the University's community engagement agenda.

UPP is now in its fourteenth year and has extended state-wide as a preparatory program for distance students and attending mode students at all campuses. It has grown from 12 students in 1996 to over 300 students in 2009. In addition, the Program has received accolades through a number of awards, most notably a University of Tasmania Teaching Excellence Award for "New Pathways" in 1999 and a Carrick Award (Programs that Enhance Learning) in 2006.

The development and growth of UPP has been influenced by changing needs, developing technology, student feedback and data collected from four major reports undertaken in 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2009 and a formal review in 2005.

The UPP foundations in Burnie provide particularly important lessons for the University as it seeks to engage the local community in higher education. One of the factors for its ongoing success has been the extent to which the program has been able to build social capital among a cohort of future undergraduate and postgraduate students, many of who describe themselves as the first in their family to attend university. The lessons learned have particular implications for UTAS, but may also be significant for other universities with a presence in rural or remote Australian communities.

### **Background and context**

The importance of social capital in supporting students from low socio economic backgrounds and from families that have no higher education family tradition is becoming increasingly apparent. Social capital requires co-operation, trust, reciprocity, civic engagement and collective well-being. Putnam (1993) drew this conclusion from a longitudinal study conducted in Italy over 20 years from 1970. These elements of social capital are often used to explore the strength of a given community. Development of the concept incubated for a number of years prior to Putnam's (1993) discussion of social capital (Bourdieu 1983; Coleman 1988; 1990; Bourdieu 1991), but his definition in terms of trust, norms and networks for mutual benefit remains well supported throughout literature (Woolcock 1998; OECD 2001).

Australian policy discussion has led to the broad understanding about the concept of social capital as the outcome of 'the social norms, networks and trust that facilitate co-operation within or between groups' (Productivity Commission 2003: viii; ABS 2004). The key hypothesis is that this co-operation can provide benefits and resources that help individuals, groups and communities to 'get by' and/or to 'get ahead'. Where this is the case, social and economic benefits can follow, 'reducing transactions costs, promoting co-operative behaviour, diffusing knowledge and innovations'. The strongest demonstrated benefit lies in a combination of 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital. Bonds within and between groups can help group members to 'get by'. Where group members also have links with members of other groups, the benefits of these social contacts demonstrate the 'strength of weak ties' in building social cohesion and providing opportunities. Where groups are densely linked but homogenous, with few links to members of other groups, social capital can be detrimental (Portes and Landolt 1996) which according to Woolcock (2001:12) is an intuitive recognition that 'social ties can be a liability as well as an asset'.

Research by Garlick, Taylor and Plummer (2007) and Taylor et al (2008) argue that access to human capital is the most significant driver of regional economic development in Australia and it is the growing unequal access to this human capital that mostly contributes to the growing economic disparity between high growth major metropolitan regions and the remainder of the nation. Commenting on the connections between social capital and human capital, Côté (2001) notes that 'human capital, networks and social relations can potentially be seen as helpful tools for individuals, groups, communities, regions and firms in their effort to adapt to change...' (p. 32).

The notion of a socially inclusive society is defined by the Australian Government as, '.... one in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society. Achieving this vision means that all Australians will have the resources, opportunities and capability to learn, work, engage in the community and have a voice.' (Australian Government 2009a). However to achieve the aim of a truly inclusive community social capital needs to be built—underpinning access to these resources and the desire to take advantage of these opportunities.

Tasmania ranks as the second highest state in Australia in terms of relative social disadvantage as measured by the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage. Low socio-economic status correlates with educational status and nationally there is a trend of growing disparity in higher education participation between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia (Stevenson et al. 1999; Cumpston et al. 2001) an issue highlighted by Bradley (2008) and acknowledged by the Australian Government's response (Australian Government 2009b), which indicates that regional loading as a mechanism to address the needs of universities in regional areas, is 'not sufficiently well targeted to meet the needs of regional Australia for high quality higher education' (p. 40). The Australian Government's Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program (HEPPP) goes some way towards addressing the issue of access but questions still remain about what kind of funding model would best meet the needs of aspiring students in rural communities (Department Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). The Bradley findings have been reinforced by a number of reports and studies nationally. For example, the Outer Urban Higher Education Working Party established by the Victorian Government in 2003 found that this disparity was also found in outer urban areas. In 2001 the ratio of equivalent full time student university places to population in inner Melbourne areas was between two and seven times greater than the ratio in outer metropolitan areas (Langworthy 2004) and the On Track Project longitudinal research into the destinations of schools leavers consistently demonstrates lower levels of post-secondary educational engagement in outer urban and regional areas (Centre for Post Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning 2006). It can be argued that outer urban and regional areas in Australia are least likely to have the social capital to support student engagement in higher education because of factors such as the pull of close knit families and communities (Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009).

In Tasmania, the north-west coast is typical of other areas in regional Australia where the social capital that supports student engagement in higher education is lacking. Burnie, the fourth largest city in Tasmania and the home of the Cradle Coast Campus typifies the challenges faced in engaging the community.

### *Burnie*

Burnie is a city that, on a number of measures, can be described as disadvantaged. The ABS Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) Index for Education and Occupation shows Burnie with a median range of 875-900 compared to 975-1000 for Australia (ABS 2008). National Economics (2008) in its *State of the Regions Report 2008-2009* ranks the north-west region of Tasmania ninth out of 58 regions in terms of the proportion of the population receiving cash benefits from Centrelink. The Report indicates that dependence on disability support and parenting payments are more than twice the national average.

Table 1 compares key characteristics of the Burnie Local Government Area (LGA) with Tasmania and Australia. The data (sourced mostly from the 2006 Census) represents some of the distinguishing features associated with the Burnie population. It is characterised by relatively high proportions of Indigenous persons in the population, high teenage fertility rates and high proportions of dwellings rented from state housing. It is also characterised by low levels of year 12 attainment (almost half the national average), low levels of pre-school attendance (less than half the national average for 3-4 year olds) and relatively low levels of post school qualifications and low levels of income (\$100 per week less than the national median for individuals).

**Table 1. Key characteristics of Burnie (LGA geographic areas), 2006**

	Persons aged 15+ (a)	Persons (a)	Persons aged 15+ (a)	Occupied dwellings (a)	3-4 year olds attending preschool (a)	Teenage fertility (b)
Region	Per cent of 15+ population completing Year 12	Per cent Indigenous persons	Per cent of 15+ population post-school qualifications	Per cent rented from state housing	Per cent 3-4 year old population attending preschool	Fertility rate per 1000 (15-19 year olds giving birth)
Burnie	22.5%	4.7%	31.1%	8.5%	26.8%	45.4
Tasmania	31.3%	3.5%	35.6%	5.7%	35.2%	36.8
Australia	42.2%	2.3%	39.4%	4.3%	61.6%	

Source:(a) ABS 2007a (b) Jenkins et al. 2009

Not surprisingly, the low participation trends are reinforced in Table 2 which shows the numbers and proportions of the population with bachelor qualifications. The Burnie LGA lags well behind the State of Tasmania and Australia as whole, though the increase from 1996 to 2006 exceeds the growth rate for Tasmania and Australia. The community is also experiencing significant economic dislocation as the economy shifts with the closure of major manufacturing industries including the paper mill and vegetable processing plants.

**Table 2. Bachelor qualification trends, 1996-2006**

	BACHELOR QUALIFICATIONS (Persons aged 15 and over)						
	Persons			Per cent of persons with bachelor qualifications			
	1996	2001	2006	1996	2001	2006	1996/ 2006 change
Burnie LGA	552	699	893	10.7%	13.2%	13.8%	29.0%
Tasmania	21,065	27,132	34,418	15.9%	18.3%	19.2%	20.8%
Australia	1076934	1,445,943	1,840,667	18.5%	21.1%	22.0%	19.3%

Source: ABS 2007b

Many north-west coast residents have not had formal education beyond Year 10 and thus their bonding networks are largely characterised by others who have similar educational backgrounds. Unskilled and semiskilled work has been predominant and educational expectations low. When families do not expect their members to complete their secondary education why would university even be on their horizon? Who in their local community would be encouraging them or even entering into discussions about education or career paths beyond the local experience? What can replace the dinner table conversations that support children of families who do have a higher education tradition? How can the fear of the impact of higher education ('will my son or daughter look down on me?') be overcome?

Almost without exception, UPP students are the first in their family to attend university and lack the supportive networks and resources of those who do have family members who have attended university. A regional and periurban study undertaken in Victoria highlights the issue of 'intent' (Golding et al. 2007). This study demonstrates that for many families that do not have a tradition of higher education, their young people will make a deliberate choice, aspire to work, see the benefits of university education as distant, delayed and marginal, have little understanding of university educational experience and limited knowledge of options and support available. They may have also experienced lack of success at school or even found school a boring and debilitating chore (Golding et al. 2007; Sellar and Gale 2009).

Success at University does require social capital and a recent focus on transition and first year support emphasises the need to provide support and build capacity in first year students (Kift 2009; Wilson and Lizzio 2009). The importance of developing a sense of capability, connectedness, resourcefulness and purpose identified by Wilson and Lizzio (2009: 5) could be seen as building the social capital. In many ways, the approach of the UPP team does this and more. The development of UPP is a community engagement process—and one, it is hoped, that is moving towards the higher end of a continuum from consultation to inclusive community participation through to local community ownership (Brown and Keast 2003).

### **Case studies**

The following case studies are vignettes, based on a synthesis of real life stories of students. While they may be composite narratives, they are very real in that they represent feedback that comes regularly from students. These case studies are used to reflect on critical success factors and lessons learned.

#### *Michelle: single parent and aspiring teacher*

Michelle is a 35-year-old single parent who for the last five years has focused on parenting her two children, aged nine and 13. She left school at the end of year 10, initially working in the retail sector before taking an administrative position at a farm machinery parts manufacturing business where she worked until the birth of her first child in 1997. In the years to 2005, as time and support permitted, Michelle engaged for short periods in the labour market, on a casual and part-time basis in a variety of small business contexts. Following separation from her partner in 2005 she felt it was time to focus on bringing up her two children.

In August 2009 she attended an open day at the Cradle Coast Campus of the University of Tasmania. She was attracted to the idea of teaching as a career, partly because she recognised the importance of education for her own children but also because teaching offered a degree of flexibility, particularly as her children were still growing up. She was disappointed to learn that even as a mature aged learner she did not have entrance requirements that were needed to commence at university. However, the UPP coordinator talked with her about enrolling in the program.

At the start of 2010 Michelle enrolled in three UPP units. She immediately found a small group of like-minded students, who like her, were mature aged and looking for a career change—though unlike her, many were not sure what they wanted to do after UPP. She describes the learning environment as a 'safe and secure place'. While initially feeling daunted by the prospect of being in a university, she soon found that lecturers were supportive, understanding and there to help her. Similarly, she found that the other students in her cohort formed something of an exciting and helpful social network. On the other hand, she found that many of her family and pre-existing friends didn't understand what she was talking about when she described the UPP program. One family member commented: 'You think you're better than us' and sadly she found that she had less in common with some of her old friends than she had thought. However, by the end of semester one 2010, Michelle found that she was capable of things that she had previously never thought possible.

### *David: redundant builder, turned nurse*

David is a 40-year-old qualified builder. Late in 2007, he was made redundant from a company he was working for because of the closure of a manufacturing plant in Burnie. While he could have found alternative employment, David took the opportunity that arose from the redundancy to consider his career options. Reflecting back on this time, David says 'I was sick of working outside in the freezing cold in winter and realised that my body couldn't hack it for much longer'. He heard about UPP at a careers expo that was organised in response to the plant's closure.

Hearing of the need for nurses, he decided to explore the possibilities presented by a UPP course as a pathway into an undergraduate nursing program. David was not particularly confident of his abilities—it had been 25 years since he left school—but he was encouraged by a UPP staff member (who he later described as 'someone who knew exactly what I was thinking and feeling—a warm and friendly person'), to give it a go. He enrolled in UPP in 2009 and successfully completed six units. He applied for entrance to nursing and was accepted for the 2010 intake. He attributes UPP to giving him the confidence he needed to achieve his learning goals. Towards the end of his year at UPP that the key factor that contributed to his success was the friendly and supportive environment of the Cradle Coast Campus: 'the lecturers were real people that seemed to care about me'.

### **Critical factors for success**

The discussion now turns to critical factors that lead to the success of UPP. The focus here is on the intersection between social capital and the learning environment. It is of course acknowledged that there are many other factors that contribute to successful outcomes for UPP students.

### *Personalised support and relationships*

There is a degree of hand-holding as students begin in the UPP program. While students need to become independent and self-directed learners for these students the transition into university can be daunting to the point of overwhelming. David's early discussion with the UPP staff member was pivotal in his decision to enrol in the program. Similarly, Michelle's experience of supportive, helpful and understanding lecturers helped her to overcome her early fears and concerns. It is not only that there is someone on hand for students to talk to, but it is the fact that they can relate to a staff member on a personal level. Over the years several UPP students have been employed as tutors and lecturers and these people in particular have been able to build a special rapport with students, having been in the same situation themselves. They act as models for new students. In terms of social capital, this relationship is a significant 'bridging tie' that opens up a range of networks to a whole new world for UPP students.

### *A trusting and safe environment*

The Cradle Coast Campus is a small and somewhat intimate campus. Students who come into this environment do not have the same initial feelings of being alone in a sea of unknown faces as they might in a larger campus. Michelle's description of the campus as a 'safe and secure place' is an acknowledgement of this intimacy. As a component of social capital, trust (expressed here in terms of 'feeling safe') is an important precursor, which leads to an extension of networks beyond those which could be typically described as 'bonding ties'. These bridges, as discussed in the literature, make it possible for people like Michelle to 'get ahead' rather than just 'get by'.

### *New networks and new identity resources*

Consistent with Falk and Kilpatrick's (2000) model of the social capital development discussed in the literature, David's case shows that UPP gave him the confidence to achieve his goals. Identity resources are about self-confidence, vision, trust, norms and values. Michelle's case also highlights the importance of new social networks as a vehicle for mutual support. To some extent these new networks and identity resources replace the old. They create new bonds and new bridges to a range

of knowledge and identity resources that in turn build social capital among the UPP cohort. The students have a sense of belonging that did not previously exist.

### *The 'new normal'*

Michelle's comment about not being understood by members of her family and her existing networks of friends is frequently echoed by UPP students as they make the transition into university study. One reason given for this is a failure to place a value on university education—especially UPP. It is sometimes seen to be a road to nowhere. Working—in whatever capacity—on the other hand, has an immediate value. UPP students quickly recognise the intrinsic value of learning. This new norm, which places a high value on learning, is then responsible for comments like those offered to Michelle: 'you think you're better than us'. Within one semester in UPP they begin to put into practice their new found critical thinking skills—and they love it. However, this creates some tensions with their old friends and families who do not understand what has happened to the identity of the person they thought they knew. This is where the new networks become useful as a support mechanism. Their fellow UPP students *do* understand and share a similar set of values and norms of behaviour which they have all begun to acquire. As time goes by, the students are then able to build social capital within their old networks and thus University education becomes an achievable goal for other family and friends.

## **Lessons learned and implications**

### *Flexibility of staff*

Personal support in the context of UPP requires a somewhat different approach to teaching and learning practice than might typically be expected of a lecturer teaching an undergraduate course. Lecturers in UPP cannot expect the kind of results that have been discussed above if all they do is turn up to deliver lectures and mark assignments. UPP students at Cradle Coast Campus, making the transition to higher education, need flexible, understanding, available and responsive tutors and lecturers. In order to overcome the kinds of barriers described in Background and context (see page 2), lecturers must be prepared to offer an empathetic and listening ear and acknowledge the often high degree of self-sacrifice that student make in order to enter the university learning environment. At the same time, UPP lecturers need to be mindful of the need to build independence, resilience and resourcefulness among students in order to better prepare them for their learning at undergraduate level. One of the key issues for UTAS as it continues to draw from UPP completers in its undergraduate programs, is the importance of unequivocal support for staffing, particularly at Cradle Coast Campus, where student numbers are relatively (some might be tempted to argue unjustifiably) small.

### *Small groups*

The cost of maintaining a program at Cradle Coast Campus where class sizes are typically less than 10 (the unit cohort including distance and flexible mode students is typically in the order of 50 to 70) is relatively high. However in the context of a small rural university campus, size does matter. It is perhaps only because of the intimacy created in the small group that a sense of belonging (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000), which leads to the kind of mutually supportive learning networks required for sustained engagement in higher education, can be created. The cost of not pursuing this approach at Cradle Coast Campus will do little to support the growth in higher education participation and completions that have been experienced in Burnie since the campus came into being in 1996 (see Table 2).

### *Engagement*

Learning engagement in the context of UPP at Cradle Coast Campus is much more than completing assessment tasks or attending classes. Engagement in learning also depends on the quality and quantity of supportive interactions with other students, lecturers, non-academic staff,

work colleagues, family members and friends. Lecturers are to some extent responsible for facilitating the kind of engagement that contributes to the development of social capital with its attendant identity and knowledge resources—they therefore act as catalytic engagers. UPP Students respond well to teaching and learning strategies that facilitate the development of social capital.

Engagement in learning and engagement between students is one important element of a university community engagement strategy. However, more needs to be done to engage the north-west coast community to create a sense of ownership of the University by the community. Part of an integrated strategy to engage the community may require a more intentional cooption of a broad cross-section of the Burnie community.

#### *Building social capital*

An intentional approach to building social capital is important. It requires building the identity resources of individuals so they can better engage with their learning and with their peers. In the Study Skills unit for example, identity formation is included as an aim of the course and builds assessment of identity formation into the assignments. Further, UPP specifically encourages mutual support and shared learning approaches. For example, in the Communication Skills unit, students are intentionally brought together in group assignments such as debates and joint presentations. This process intentionally increases the propensity of students to enter into something of a community of practice where ideas, knowledge and resources are shared. Trust is reinforced in this process, new bonds are created and new bridges are built.

#### *Need for evaluation*

While the case for the creation of social capital among UPP students may be argued, there is a need for more research and evaluation to be carried out to determine to what extent the observations made about students translates into successful outcomes in terms of the university and in terms of the community. On the one hand it is true that attrition rates are relatively high (up to 70 per cent). On the other hand it is also true that a number of students have gone on to complete not only their undergraduate studies but also post graduate studies, including at least four who have gone on to complete their PhDs. What needs to be understood more definitively is: a) what do students think in qualitative terms about the program; b) to what extent UPP success translates into lower levels of attrition in undergraduate programs; and c) to what extent UPP contributes to community well-being and social capital. These questions would require an intentional evaluation strategy that must be funded.

#### **Conclusions**

In the context of rural north-west Tasmania, the University Preparation Program (UPP) has contributed to increased higher education participation. The context of this contribution is particularly important, as historically the proportion of people with bachelor qualifications in the Burnie area has been a little over half the national average. The gap is slowly closing. This is at least in part due to the way that UPP builds social capital within its cohort of students. It does so by creating a safe and trusting environment; by offering personalised support; by nurturing new supportive networks (bonds and bridges) and new identities; and by building new norms and values that value learning through the new networks.

While acknowledging that there is more to success than building social capital, it is an important factor that to date has not been fully articulated. Understanding social capital creation as a factor for success in UPP has some important implications for UTAS as it seeks to build its presence on the north-west coast of Tasmania. It may also have implications for other higher education institutions that work in rural communities.

The lesson learnt over 14 years experience of UPP at Cradle Coast Campus in Burnie, is that successful creation of social capital is dependent on a number of factors. These include the use of

small class sizes; having flexible staff who are attentive to the needs of students; supporting engagement between students and between staff and students; and actively promoting learning and assessment processes that build identity and knowledge resources.

The Cradle Coast example can be applied to other regional universities attempting to engage students from rural communities in order to redress the disparity between metropolitan and regional/rural areas. The processes used in regional contexts to engage potential students will necessarily be directed at progressively shifting the prevailing culture to one that accepts university as part of a normal career pathway, particularly for young people. There are cost implications that result from the lessons described above. While the Australian Government's reform agenda, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Australian Government 2009b) does respond to the Bradley Review and allocates additional funding to support low socio-economic status (SES) participation, the finer details of additional funding is still under development. For example, the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations is currently examining the cost of providing higher education in regional Australia, in particular the appropriateness of regional loading. It is to be hoped that these examinations take into account the true costs of regional engagement as typified by programs like UPP and provide for the longitudinal programs required. Ultimately the question remains as to whether the new model provides the support required for rural and regional universities to adequately build social capital.

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