

**Addressing policy imperatives to improve access of under-represented groups to university education: a collaborative project between a university and secondary schools.**

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## **Addressing policy imperatives to improve access of under-represented groups to university education: a collaborative project between a university and secondary schools.**

This paper reports on a ten-year collaborative project in New Zealand between a university and low decile schools, to improve access to university participation of under represented groups. In the first phase, high school students from these groups who showed 'potential' for university study, but with little family history of such participation, were encouraged to remain at school through a system of awards and other strategies that also raised their awareness and expectations of future higher education. In the second phase, students were first introduced to university life and later, building especially on lessons learnt from those early years, were supported in their study. As the innovation developed, mistakes were made and lessons learnt which, because of the 'piecemeal' nature of the change process undertaken, could be addressed as the project unfolded.

Keywords: higher education, tertiary education policy; retention; student diversity; scholarships; cultural capital, New Zealand, innovation, first year experience.

Issues of access and retention for under-represented groups in university education have been perennial concerns for higher education systems around the world over recent decades (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson & Anae, 2006; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006). Governments, too, try to address such issues within tertiary education policy. The Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2009) (and of the previous government, 2007) in New Zealand, for example, includes the tertiary education<sup>1</sup> priorities of increasing educational success for young New Zealanders through more achieving qualifications at level four and above by age twenty-five, with a special emphasis on Maori and Pasifika achievement. Indeed, a major theme of this policy document overall is one of improving access, retention and completion rates of currently under-represented groups in tertiary education, especially at the higher levels; a priority that many Tertiary Education Organisations (TEOs) themselves are likely to endorse.

The current Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2007) builds on the previous one (Ministry of Education, 2009) by identifying and attempting to address 'underachievement'. Using statistical data, the 2007 Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2007) acknowledged that while New Zealand's participation rates compare 'reasonably well' with other countries, 'our high participation in tertiary education' is among older age groups. Similarly, the completion rates are not high, with only 40% of qualifications completed after five years, again reflecting greater part-time 'life long learning' rather than young people completing, for example, degrees that 'they need to get established in their careers' (*ibid* p31). Moreover, Maori and Pasifika students are 'less likely to study at bachelors and postgraduate levels than students from other ethnic groups, and more likely to study towards level one to three [sub-degree] certificates.' (*ibid*, p31). TEOs, which include universities and polytechnics, through the mechanism of funding, were to be 'steered' towards 'a focus on quality learning and supporting students to make appropriate education and training choices' (*ibid* p32). Achievement would be measured by:

- An increase in tertiary education participation by 18-24 year olds
- Improved retention in tertiary education through lower attrition in the first year of study

- Increased progression from level one to three on to higher levels of tertiary education.

Such goals are, however, notoriously difficult to achieve. It is all very well to have policies of this kind but the question remains as to how TEOs can possibly fulfil their intentions when working class youth, including those of many minority ethnic groups, have been historically under-represented in the participation rates of universities in New Zealand. As in other countries, there are many reasons, not the least of which is the parents' own experiences of schooling in general, and their expectations of tertiary education in particular. Social, and family processes work under these circumstances to discourage entry into university, regardless of academic potential or achievement (Fergusson & Woodward, 2000). An explanation for this is that the experience of inequality works to undermine a family's store of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977, Harker, 1990), or knowledge of how the system works (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Thus, class inheritance, or the social reproduction processes of class-located families, negates the claim to meritocracy that is a dominant value of western societies. (Codd, Harker & Nash, 1990; Nash, Harker, & Charters, 1990; Nash, 1993). These are structural barriers at the societal level that seem largely immune to the interventions of governments.

Surveys into home environments and social constructs determined by class, seem to suggest that patterns of low achievement and career aspirations are set very early in the life of a child (Sennett & Cobb, 1993; Pinto, 1999). While such dispositions are acquired through socialisation, they may nevertheless be changed by altering socialisation experiences (Nash *et al*, 1990; O'Neill, 1990; Nash and Harker, 1992, 1994; Bohman, 1999; Dyke 1999) with schools, in particular, able to provide 'scaffolding' that gives learners wider experiences, although TEOs also have a role to play (Woodward-Kron, 2007). Mehan, Willanueva, Hubbard and Lintz (1996) suggest, for example, that extensive guidance may have to be provided to begin with, but that the 'supports' can then be removed slowly as learners internalise the help provided by that support.

This paper reports on a long-term project by a University in New Zealand, recently concluded, to provide such a 'support', aimed at interrupting socialisation patterns that act as barriers to university access and retention. While such patterns may be seen as a form of resistance to dominant values, or a refusal to legitimate them, the impact is 'in the end [to] do the work of bringing about the future that others have mapped out for them.' (Willis, 1977). As Sultana (1989) points out, while an anti-education culture may be a way to 'affirm class and ethnic identity in front of a monolithic, monocultural establishment,' it also 'contains not only elements of strength and power, but also, at a deeper level, an element of self-damnation.' This then was the assumption that underpinned the intervention strategy outlined here - that by building 'supports' to improve access to, and retention in, university education of currently under-represented groups, the participation and 'voices' of those groups will be strengthened in wider New Zealand society. At the same time, the intervention offers a possible strategy that other TEOs might adopt as a way of increasing the access and retention priorities embodied in current government policies.

## Part One: the school/university partnership

Although the relationship between class position and university participation is complex with many interrelated influences around issues of power and domination processes, one significant aspect is likely to be the amount of knowledge that parents gain about the nature and value of university study and how realistic they see such study for their children. Such expectations and values are passed to children in a myriad of ways, both subtle and overt. For most working class families the idea of children going onto university is not considered as relevant, possible or even desirable - that is, if it is considered at all. University education is simply outside the realm of their experience and, as such, can be almost an alien concept. In order to increase university participation of under-represented groups, therefore, it seems logical to address this issue of expectations and knowledge directly; or to put it another way, to try to increase the cultural capital of working class families with respect to university education. With this in mind Massey University introduced a new initiative, the Vice-Chancellor's Bursary Award Scheme (VC Award) in 1998, aimed at increasing access to university study for children from under-resourced families; with this under-resourcing to be defined in terms of both economic and **cultural** capital (Leibowitz, 2009). This Award, therefore, represented a rather different kind of scholarship than that usually available for university study.

Traditionally, scholarships to assist with university study are given as a reward for high academic achievement. Well-resourced students from middle-class backgrounds, who attend high schools populated with students from similar backgrounds to themselves, therefore, gain most such awards. It is a rare event for children from working-class backgrounds to achieve such scholarships (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994, Nash, 2001). The VC Award, therefore, aimed to redress this imbalance with the intention of altering the social constructs that discourage working class students and their parents, from perceiving higher education as a realistic or personal goal (Lauder & Hughes, 1990, 1991, Fergusson & Woodward, 2000). The process involved setting up a series of stages that would be continuously monitored and developed in order to provide both incentive and support for students from low decile schools.

In New Zealand, schools are classified into a socio-economic scale based on the residential location of a sample of their students. These decile ratings, as they are called, range from 1 (a very impoverished community background) to 10 (with almost all students from 'professional' families). Students from schools in the top two deciles are five times more likely to attend university than students from the bottom two (Nash & Harker, 1994) and there is, therefore, a high correlation in high decile schools between the numbers of third formers beginning high school and those remaining to the seventh form or final year. In low decile schools, on the other hand, which are characterised by a high proportion of working class (and especially, indigenous Maori)<sup>ii</sup> students, the dropout rate increases each year after year-10 (*ibid*).

Although small numbers of students from such schools do go on to successful university study, and may even win traditional scholarships, there is nevertheless considerable 'wastage' of potential talent that might be averted given appropriate support and incentive (Lauder & Hughes, 1990; Oreopoulos, 2007). This is also demonstrated by the realisation that the dropout rate in the low decile schools is not a reflection of the ability of students in these schools as a number successfully attend university in later years for 'second chance' education as Massey's own distance programme can attest. Most working class children with the ability to enter university, but who do not do so, almost invariably drop out under the influence of class-cultural exclusion processes in the fifth and sixth form. It is not want of money so much that moves them in this direction, but pregnancy, drugs and deep-seated alienation, as well as a more general desire to get a 'real' job (Nash & Harker, 1998).

It can be argued, therefore, that successful schools are those that maintain a high retention rate of senior students and prevent the wastage of talent that loss of these students represents. (Lauder & Hughes, 1990, 1991, Fergusson, Lloyd, & Horwood, 1991, Mehan *et al*, 1996, Nash, 1997, 1998, 1999a & b; Nash & Harker 1998). Thus, a first step in tertiary education success is ensuring schools retain students through to the seventh form. The next is to encourage individual students to undertake studies at university by bridging both the cultural/class and the economic barriers.

In the VC Award scheme, the first of these challenges was addressed by identifying and rewarding pupils, with potential for university study, with an award certificate at the end of year 11 (Form 5), or as they reached the 'senior school' years where drop-out is most prevalent. This fulfilled the intention of raising the awareness and expectations of the students and their parents and also of encouraging retention into the higher levels of school. A further such award was also given at the end of the next year to reinforce this process. The second challenge, to bridge class/cultural barriers, was addressed by arranging for pupils and their parents to visit Massey University soon after receiving their first award. The third challenge, to bridge financial barriers, was the issuing of the final Bursary Award at the end of 2001, which had a monetary value (unlike the earlier awards which were just certificates).

The pilot for the award established a relationship with three selected secondary schools in the central district of New Zealand (the University's traditional catchment area). The schools selected were from deciles 1 or 2 and were typified by a rapid decline in student numbers in years-12 and -13 (Forms 6 and 7) after a relatively good set of performances in the year-11 national examinations.

At the end of 1999 the first phase of the process was implemented with the selection of six year-11 students from each school. The criteria for selection were that students should show potential for university work, a reasonably positive attitude towards study and yet come from families with a history of little or no participation in higher education. The selection process was the responsibility of the individual schools and the certificates were awarded at the schools' annual prize-giving ceremonies. To reinforce the importance of the certificates, the University Vice Chancellor himself attended each ceremony.

At the end of 2000 two groups were selected at each school. The first group was selected from the new year-11 class using the same criteria as in the previous year while a second group was selected from the year-12 class. The students in this second group were predominately those who had received the awards in the previous year. However, some missed out because of 'lack of progress' while there were also some new recipients. It was projected, that by year three of the programme, as the first cohort reached the end of their schooling, a total of about sixty students from the three schools, would be participating.

The presenting of the award was followed by activities that were intended to develop and nurture a culture of expectation of university study. In particular, students selected were invited to visit Massey University for a special open day at the beginning of their year-12 to help familiarise them with a university. Because previous research (Lauder & Hughes, 1990; Nash & Harker, 1992; Nash, 1993) had shown that family perceptions of further education influence the child's expectations, pupils were also encouraged to bring an adult caregiver with them. This was intended as both a familiarisation exercise for the parents and a chance to encourage positive attitudes to the University in the wider family or *whanau*.

The students were formally welcomed and hosted overnight by the University's Marae, or Maori meeting ground (Lang, 2008) This was recognised as an important part of the experience for the students and their caregivers, especially as many were Maori. It was hoped that a range of positive 'hidden curriculum' messages from this first contact with the University would be transmitted. As with the Vice Chancellor's attendance at the school ceremony, this welcome emphasised the value the University placed on the Awards and on the students who had gained them. For Maori students, in particular, the Marae stay would help to affirm their cultural heritage and provide a more friendly first impression of an otherwise unfamiliar place.

At the end of year-13 each school were to select up to three students to receive a Vice-Chancellor **Bursary** Award (as distinct from the earlier 'progress' awards). These students, contingent upon achieving university entry requirements, would be awarded a waiver of their first year tuition fees and a small cash grant to cover initial living expenses. In addition, a system of mentoring support would be provided by the University to ensure a good start to their studies (Stampen & Hansen, 1999; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) since it is recognised that high levels of dropout are common among first year students from working class backgrounds (Ishitani, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Besides focussing on the objective of encouraging some individual students from low decile schools to undertake university study, another overall objective of the Award scheme was to develop a culture of expectation of university education among all the pupils of the pilot schools. The schools at the outset however, considered the perceived competitive nature of the Awards, to be potentially destructive of this aim. Maori and Pasifika students, in particular, tend to relate better culturally to a cooperative, rather than

an individually competitive, environment. The schools suggested therefore, that relationships with community groups and industry be established in order to increase the number of scholarships available. The intention was to ensure that all potential candidates could gain a scholarship without feeling they were competing with one another. Massey University successfully sought this support and a further three Bursaries became available for each of the three pilot schools and further low decile schools were added to the scheme over the following years.

Over the first two years that the pilot scheme was in operation, its progress was monitored through an evaluation study. These initial data collections resulted in a number of insights and trends being identified which were mostly consistent across the three schools. As a result of this monitoring, it was possible to accomplish ongoing adaptations or 'piecemeal change' (Popper, 1945), such as the increased number of scholarships above, while building on any gains made. In general, the majority of participants were supportive of the programme throughout and felt that it made a positive contribution to helping students from low decile schools identify university study as a viable option. However, the Pilot Study also noted a number of areas in which the programme could be strengthened to enhance this process.

Data was collected by means of follow-up activities - with the students in focus-group discussions, with caregivers in telephone interviews and with key school staff members in informal and other meetings. In particular, the effects on the perceptions of the recipients, of the interim awards and visits to Massey University, were examined. The results are reported below as typical examples of dialogue gathered about the effects of the interim awards and visit and final Bursary Award, on the perceptions of recipients and caregivers as well as on the wider school culture.

### ***Effects on students of the interim awards***

The first interviews with students were carried out following their visit to Massey University (and a few months after receiving their first certificate). They were asked about how they felt about receiving the Award:

*"Overwhelmed! I couldn't believe I'd get an award for such an important thing."*

Cohort 1

*"...oh my god I can do this! It's encouraged me to do better in the proper School Cert. exams (from a student who had done badly in the practice exams) and not just think I'm going to be a failure."* Cohort 1

*"I was surprised. I thought - I don't get things like that."* Cohort 2

*"I got a shock. It was very good and made me very happy."* Cohort 1

*"I couldn't figure out why I got it, but I was really pleased."* Cohort 1

*"I was puzzled - what was the award about?"* Cohort 1

*"I was surprised. I thought - I don't get things like that."* Cohort 2

*"I didn't even know the award existed so I was very surprised."* Cohort 2

*"I felt shocked but happy and proud."* Cohort 2

*"It was a nice feeling, but I felt puzzled. Why me?"* Cohort 2

Cohort 1 were interviewed again after receiving the award for a second year to get a sense of whether this second award might be having the intended effect of consolidating expectations in favour of university study.

*"It made me think: if I get this award I go to university. I didn't think that before"*

*"In the 5th form - it still seemed a long way off, but in year 12 it really sunk in"*

*"It made me careful in choosing subjects - to make sure they were suitable for university"*

*"After I got it once I was determined to get it again"*

*"I did more homework to make sure I succeeded"*

*"I went to hospital and talked to people there about qualifications"*

*"I couldn't believe they would consider me - it helped my self confidence"*

### ***Effects on students of the university visit***

Over the two years of the pilot study, the response to the visit from students and support people remained consistent. They appreciated the effort made and overall found it a positive experience. They liked the University setting although in many cases they were surprised by its size and found it a little overwhelming. Such things as the formal Maori *powhiri* or welcome, however, acted as signals that the students themselves were valued.

*"I enjoyed the Marae visit and the food. I was surprised at how big the university is"*

*"People are so laid back!"*

*"There are so many different people there!"*

*"The concert at lunchtime was cool."*

*"There are different races there."*

*"Student president was so friendly, interesting and 'with-it'. She wasn't boring."*

*"We needed to know about the sleeping arrangements."*

*"So many buildings on different sites. So easy to get lost."*

*"People seem to sit around and eat all day"*

*"It looked like everyone was having fun."*

The visit, therefore, did make the University seem a more accessible place and comments were made that they were now less worried about going. Other positive comments included that the visit *"makes you think it's worth working towards"* and *"it was a very positive experience"* and that *"I am more happy to go now"*.

Although future university study may have been in the back of their minds, the VC Award and visit both served to make such thoughts more definite, focussed and realistic. In the words of the parents/caregivers:

*"Its encouraging for students to keep the standard up through the rest of their high school years."*

*"We had considered university before, but not seriously. The visit has encouraged her."*

*"This honour gives our daughter the chance to go to university. She may not have got the opportunity to consider this option if we were not able to receive some financial assistance."*

After the visit, some students expressed greater understanding of the importance of working hard in year 12 and that concentrating on good bursary marks in year 13 would be *'leaving their run too late'*. As one student commented, *"It [the visit] was an eye-*

opener about the qualifications you need to be accepted to university” and that as a result they were “more inclined to study”.

### ***Effects of the scheme on parents/caregivers***

The parent/caregivers’ appreciation of the value of the Award to their children was evident in their responses:

*" I was very proud when [name] told us of the award. I had hopes that he would go [to university] but I know it would be very hard for him without help"*

*"We come from a very remote area, so the awards and trip have made all the hard work and effort worthwhile"*

*"It gives her a chance to have what I never had"*

*"We are proud and pleased that his achievements are acknowledged"*

*"Study will be very expensive. The award will help"*

While the value to their children of the award and the trip was evident to the parent/caregivers, they appeared less conscious of the effect on their own perceptions. That significant changes in their perceptions might have occurred were most clearly revealed through a student’s description of her parents’ reactions:

*"Dad came on the trip. He convinced Mum it [university study] was a really good idea. Now they won't shut up about it!"*

This was an important insight in the light of the objectives of the intervention in increasing the cultural capital of families normally excluded from the advantages of university participation. By the end of 2001 the first cohort of students to receive the Bursary Award were selected and started its first year of university study, while a second and third group were progressing through the school system.

### **Part Two: the university experience**

As the emphasis of the first part of the project had been on the retention of students at higher levels of school and on increasing their cultural capital for higher education, less attention had been paid to what would happen once they actually encountered university study for the first time, even though initially this had been discussed.

At the beginning of the process it is clear that the university group developing the scheme held a number of largely unconscious assumptions. These were revealed previously in the nature of the school visits organised for the award recipients and their caregivers. Among such assumptions were, for example, what should constitute the content of these visits. It was assumed that *inter alia* providing information about a range of courses and having university staff deliver such information in short and, it was hoped, interesting, sessions would be appropriate. This drew on the tradition of year 13 visits where groups of students from ‘contributing’ schools in the district are invited to ‘open days’ to explore course options in their last year at school. By implication this latter group are already oriented to university study and are therefore likely to have some knowledge of the system. They are in fact mostly middle class students, who we know have cultural capital which advantages them in terms of access to university education. As such, they

represent a different group, both in age and background, to most of the groups studied here. It was probably this difference that produced the surprises and insights from the initial study.

When asked after the Award visit, for example, what could be improved, one comment came through consistently from the students: that they wanted to know about university life in general rather than, for example, just learning about possible courses. They did not want to talk to a lot of ‘old people’ (that is, academic staff!) particularly if they simply talked **at** them – which they invariably did. While they **did** want information about the programmes, this tended to be after the visits when they had a better basis for questions. It was clear during the visits that the students were often bemused by the choices of presentations they had been offered and they had been unsure how to make their selections before the visit. What they wanted, most importantly, was to get a ‘feel’ for university life and were interested, therefore, in visiting hostels, sitting in on classes and in meeting and talking to young university students about their experiences (see also Benseman, *et al*, 2006). General information about the range of course options was valued rather than specific subject presentations that they could not put into context at that stage.

We should not perhaps have been surprised that these students would be particularly interested in university life as this is, by definition, normally quite outside their knowledge and experience. One of the things that is likely to discourage some minority groups from university aspirations is the perception that universities are products of a different social class or culture; moreover, one that is dominant or more powerful than their own (Benseman *et al*, 2006). A response or defence mechanism, to situations like this might be a tendency to close down contact with the dominant group, in an attempt to avoid as much exposure to negative judgements, from more powerful group members, as possible. For the minority group member, there is always an awareness of the clash of attitudes and ways of life as they interact daily within the dominant system. While this may not be wholly conscious - more a feeling of discomfort or unease - it is likely to be intensified in settings such as universities that represent extreme symbols of elite legitimation. We might conclude, therefore, that the desire to decrease interaction, by avoiding those settings where there is strong potential for damage to self-esteem, identifies a strong barrier to higher education access.

First year students of any social group are of course likely to suffer some anxiety at first but middle class students are nevertheless immersed in a system where the basic structures and values mesh with those of their own meaning system and sense of self and can usually work through the feeling of newness knowing the basic rules and processes<sup>iii</sup> (Clegg, Bradley & Smith, 2006). This is not so true for individuals from other groups who have to try to adapt to a system they may not fundamentally understand and may, therefore, have difficulty making sense of (Yorke & Longden, 2008). An example of this was actually told to one of the evaluators while in the field, about a high achieving past student from the school who had been a ‘star’ pupil, confident in the school context and the first of her family ever to go to university. She had left her rural community to attend university in the city but within months had returned, homesick and with her confidence

severely undermined. Despite considerable community support (Leibowitz, 2009), encouragement and academic ability, she had found the culture of the university difficult to penetrate. The students in this study had similar backgrounds although usually not with such high academic achievement.

In selecting high school students from low decile schools and bringing them to the university we were, in fact, introducing them to an unknown world that in other circumstances they would probably avoid (Barsky & Wood, 2005). In exposing them to this new world in a relatively 'safe' way we were clearly activating the curiosity-characteristic, sometimes called 'risk-taking' (Igra & Irwin, 1996; France, 2000), of young adults of all social groups, for new and exciting experiences - not so much for course information at this stage as we had assumed, but for an understanding of the lifestyle, or perhaps **meaning**, of this 'alien' place.

It is unlikely that such an understanding could be met in a one-off visit, which served to throw up more questions for the participants than answers. It did seem, though, to have aroused interest and established a sense of curiosity that could be built on, especially to make later final year 13 visits more meaningful. It also attempted to take away that deep sense of dislocation that others, as in the example above, experience. Having intervened in the natural tendency to withdraw from such exposure, it was hoped to interrupt one of those mechanisms that contribute to the unequal participation in university education of children from low decile schools. By taking part in the scheme, the participating students, who had had no previous background or expectations of studying at university, expressed greater ambition in this direction. This included a heightened knowledge and understanding of the mechanisms of the university system and, as a consequence, the insecurities that might have been expected were largely absent from their discussions. It still remained to be seen, however, how well this trust would be fulfilled through the reality of university study as the first cohort in the scheme reached the end of their schooling and prepared to undertake such study.

The first problem arose as the students' 'university entrance' results were revealed as mostly below par. Again we had all held assumptions looking back that getting the students through school would be enough but this was not the case and some 'flexibility' had to be exercised by senior members of the university to approve students into courses they might otherwise not have gained access to. Moreover, little cognisance was paid to what would happen to the students during that first year. All effort had gone into the 'school' stage of the 'experiment' and the students were essentially left to 'sink or swim'. Most inevitably sank. By the end of the first year almost all the students had 'dropped out' and the innovation looked to be in danger of failure. However, ongoing evaluation, including reporting requirements to businesses that had contributed additional funding, meant that consideration began to be re-focussed on the programme. After some years, it is fair to acknowledge that some of the momentum had gone out of the innovation, as inevitably happens (Garside, 2004; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006.) but the abject failure of the first year experience of this initial cohort served as a 'wake up call' to refocus and revive the initiative. As Trotter and Roberts (2006) point out, where there are efforts put into recruitment and widening participation rates, 'without a corresponding change in

how a university operates, there is a danger that wider participation might result in more students failing'. It was clear that this is indeed what happened. As a result, several new strategies were introduced to shore up the university stage of the programme.

The first of these was the introduction of a Certificate of University Preparation consisting of four papers including study skills, literacy and numeracy and one that focused on a particular subject area. Although this certificate was available to all school leavers who had just missed out on gaining entrance to the university, the impetus for its development arose from the failure of the first cohort of the VC Award programme who mostly fell into this category and who, it was felt, represented a significant group of potential students who could be 'rescued' with such a programme. While everyone in New Zealand can gain access to university study on reaching the age of twenty, the chances of retaining the interest of low achievers from school until then, are unlikely notwithstanding the relatively large number of learners who do still avail themselves of higher education at later years (Ministry of Education, 2007). Retaining young people at university at this early stage was, therefore, assumed to be desirable in a similar way that it was at the latter part of schooling. Having geared them up to university study, retaining students with a bridging initiative became the response to the unanticipated result of the first phase of the programme.

The second initiative was the appointment of a coordinator who spearheaded the whole process and took away reliance on a couple of original champions whose senior positions meant they were unable to sustain concentrated effort in this one area. Fernandez and Rainey (2006) identify as one of the eight important components of an effective change process, the need for top management support and commitment to 'ensure success'. In this respect the champions had been vital in establishing the VC Award, including overcoming challenges from other powerful individuals who would have had it seen as just another scholarship for high achievers. Because of their positions they were able to argue successfully for the role it eventually came to play and to hold that standpoint in later years. However, such detailed 'hands-on' commitment was never going to be able to be sustained by senior academics, with the result that the day -to-day detail that such an innovation requires often failed to get done. In this programme this manifested itself by at times poor liaison between schools and the university, role confusion and, of course, the debacle that became the 'first year experience' for the first cohort. The appointment of an overall coordinator, then, became an essential development for the successful continuation of the programme. As, Fernandez and Rainey (2006) point out 'having a single change agent or "idea champion" [can] lead the transformation' (p 171) to maintain momentum and commitment to change. Moreover, they say 'a skillful and strategically placed leader or "fixer" can successfully coordinate the behavior of disparate actors and overcome obstacles by leveraging close personal ties and pursuing informal avenues of influence' (p171).

Besides overseeing the day-to-day tasks of the programme, such as organising the visits, liaising with schools etc, in just this way, the coordinator was more importantly the visible first point of contact or focus for all participants. She was able to establish some of the supports to assist the students in making their way through the system. Many of

these supports, (such as Maori and Pasifika initiatives, student learning and social support networks) were already in place in the University but harnessing them became an important function of the Coordinator's role. The nature of the university visits changed as well, focussing far more on gaining an understanding of university life and breaking down barriers. Through the performance of this role, despite several changes in personnel, the operation of the programme settled down into what might be called the 'performing' (Thomas *et al*, 2008) mode. Though the VC Award scheme became less 'high profile' in the University it continued on successfully for a number of years.

Although subsequent follow-up of individual recipients of the Award has not been possible for privacy reasons, anecdotal reports suggest that later students have had similar success – and failure – rates as the rest of the student population. At least one student went on to become a Massey Scholar, by achieving in the top 5% of graduates, and thus receiving another scholarship, of the kind discussed earlier for high achievers, for support into postgraduate study.

## **Conclusion**

This paper, then, has reported on a project established by Massey University in New Zealand to address in a concrete way the under representation of certain groups in university study. While tertiary education policies tend to articulate the need to improve such participation rates, ways to achieve this are notoriously difficult. Although the problem represents a national (indeed, **global**) issue, holistic responses on a large scale are, as Popper (1945; Slater, 2009) suggested, both dangerous and impossible to achieve. Instead, he said, piecemeal strategies, in this case at an organisational/community level, offer the most effective way forward. Such strategies cannot overturn deep-seated inequalities entirely but they can make a difference bit by bit for some individuals and groups.

What this paper outlines, fundamentally, is the advantage of the piecemeal change process in innovations of this kind. The founding group started with an initial idea to address a real issue; it assumed certain things, decided certain activities and procedures and generally set the ball rolling. Along the way, we found that there were unanticipated events and results – as is always likely to be the case. Because the project was relatively small scale, however, such 'surprises' as well as new ideas and developments could be assessed and the project adjusted to evolve, take advantage of possibilities and improve over time - without the widespread disruption that a holistically conceived 'vision', with less flexible parameters, would have faced. Inevitably, though, the project ran out of steam with the attrition of most of the original major sponsors and supporters. Newer senior personnel had other priorities and projects.

Perhaps a final question to consider, therefore, is how such an important development such as this can be 'bedded' into the culture of the organisation better so the 'running out of steam' outcome is anticipated and avoided. Nevertheless, over the life of this innovation hundreds of students benefited from participation in the project. The long term ripple effect that increased cultural capital is likely to have brought to the families

involved, probably means that many more people will continue to be positively transformed by the students' experiences. Hopefully this project will also inspire other higher education institutions to build on the insights gained, with fresh, piecemeal initiatives of their own.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> In New Zealand, 'Tertiary Education' incorporates all post school education; rather than just 'higher' education

<sup>1</sup> ) However, research tends to indicate that socio-economic status, rather than ethnicity, has the stronger influence on the level of school leavers' attainment (Fergusson et al, 1991)

<sup>iii</sup> Although, even for this group the first year is still a difficult time when drop out is often at its highest.

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