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Teaching 'new generation' students: Pedagogical signposts to show the way.

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Using the metaphor of a bushwalk through relatively unexplored terrain, this paper reports on an investigation of the best way to negotiate the challenges and opportunities of teaching an increasingly diverse student cohort. The research participants were enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts, at an Australian Group of Eight university. Of particular interest to this investigation were increased numbers of new generation students, a descriptor that includes students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students whose parents did not attend university. A theoretical framework distilled from the literature was used to interpret the data collected through an online survey and focus groups. The constant comparison method was used to generate themes that could act as signposts to the best path forward through this evolving landscape. The pedagogical signposts confirmed in this study included: effective approaches to teaching, supportive learning communities, good communication, and teacher professionalism.

Keywords: Low SES, inclusive pedagogies, effective teaching practices.

Increased enrolments of students from under-represented groups are transforming the Australian higher education landscape. Recent research and scholarship provide academics with suggestions on how to navigate through the pedagogical challenges and opportunities associated with these changes. However, like a bushwalk through relatively unexplored terrain, the best way forward is still not clearly defined. This paper provides higher education academics with some signposts to effective teaching and learning approaches that have the potential to help all students reach their destinations successfully.

One of the significant changes to the Australian higher education landscape in recent years has been the Australian government's directive to increase enrolments of students from under-represented groups. This paper will specifically focus on *new generation* students, which is a term (borrowed from Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012) that is used to describe students from low socio-economic (LSES) backgrounds and/or students who are the first-in-family to attend university. In the last five years there has been considerable research and scholarship focused on helping academics to address the pedagogical challenges and opportunities created by increased numbers of new generation students. Admittedly, regional universities have been successfully managing these issues for a long time, but it is increasingly becoming a significant issue for Group of Eight universities.

In the last decade, there has been an increase in the literature exploring the access, teaching and learning, and support needs of new generation students. This study which focused specifically on teaching and learning challenges has therefore been able to draw on encouraging empirical research with new-generation students and/or their teachers (Devlin et

al., 2012; Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Hockings, Cooke, & Bowl, 2010). The scholarship of academics and students in the field of universal design for learning (Bowe, 2000; Burgstahler & Cory, 2009; Durre, Richardson, Smith, Shulman, & Steele, 2009) also has relevance because of its focus on improving educational opportunities for a diverse range of students. The research and scholarship already completed in this transforming higher education landscape, is like the exploratory bushwalking that occurs when a new area is discovered. These early 'explorers' have produced a variety of recommendations for those hoping to also successfully journey into this new landscape. The framework, shown in Figure 1, identifies the common themes in these recommendations.

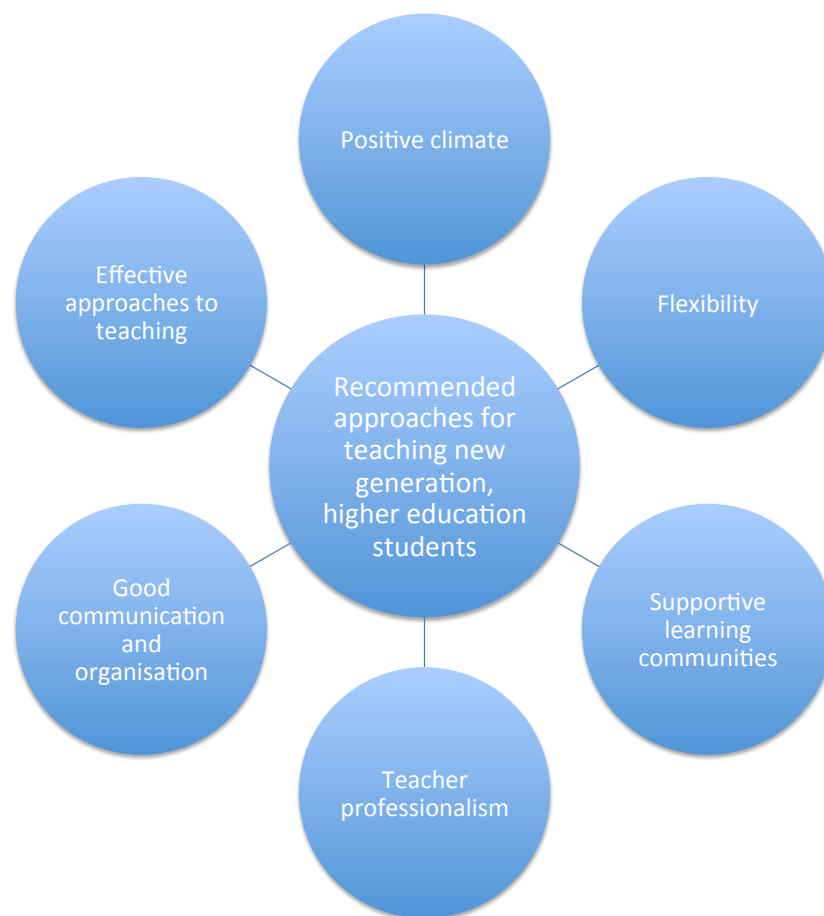


Figure 1. Six recommendations for teaching new-generation students.

The next section of this paper will summarise the recommendations made by these early explorers.

A positive climate

Teachers in higher education have a responsibility to help create a positive learning climate if they want to make welcome the students who in the past may have felt like they did not belong. Hockings et al. (2010) encouraged academics to “enable all students to bring their individuality to the learning endeavor in personally meaningful ways” (p. 108). Devlin et al. (2012) encouraged academics to get to know their students, embrace diversity, and recognize and enable student contributions. Durre et al. (2009) recommend academics be available and approachable to their students, and whilst Burgstahler and Cory (2009) concur, they also insist that high expectations be maintained for all students.

Flexibility

Without compromising the quality and standard of work, academics are encouraged to be flexible with the curriculum and assessment and to provide students with choice wherever possible. Devlin et al. (2012) promote the use of technology to provide flexibility, and they suggested academics adopt a wide range of teaching strategies and be flexible with aspects of course administration such as assessment due dates. Bowe (2000) suggested allowances be made for range of learning needs and preferences when a course is being designed. He also challenged teachers to be sensitive to the learning needs of students who come from different backgrounds from their own.

Supportive learning communities

In a supportive learning community, interaction is valued and encouraged. The failure to engage with a more diverse group of learners means some students may not exposure to new and different ideas and perspectives (Hockings et al., 2010).

Teacher professionalism

The researchers and scholars in the literature were adamant that an academic who seeks to teach in a socially inclusive manner will demonstrate high levels of professionalism by: being a reflective practitioner (Devlin et al, 2012); becoming aware of your own culture’s teachings and how they effect your educational practice (Bowe, 2000); demonstrating promptness and punctuality (Devlin & O’Shea, 2012); being careful with stereotypes because few students actually fit them (Hockings et al., 2010).

Good communication and organisation

New generation students won’t necessarily have the social capital to quickly find solutions to the challenges they experience in higher education. It is recommended that academics keep their communication grounded by using accessible language and clear expectations particularly about assessment (Devlin et al., 2012; Devlin & O’Shea, 2012). Hockings et al. (2010) reported that participation in classes improves when ground rules for inclusive and collaborative learning behavior are established at the outset.

Effective approaches to teaching

Massification, improvements in technology, and recognition of the importance of social inclusion have greatly expanded the ways in which students learn. Teachers should use pedagogical approaches that encourage student learning, including peer collaboration, meta-learning strategies, scaffolding, and the use of practical examples – especially when they reflect the students’ own backgrounds and identities positively (Burgstahler & Cory, 2009; Devlin et al., 2012; Durre et al., 2009; Hockings et al., 2010).

The research and/or issue under consideration

The research described in this paper, was to compare the recommendations in the literature for improving how new generation students can be taught (see Figure 1) with the learning preferences of a group of new generation students. Ultimately, the goal was to identify some pedagogical signposts that will show teachers how to help new generation students to be academically successful.

Methodology

This interpretivist study used the recommendations shown in Figure 1 as the theoretical interpretive framework to inform the collection and interpretation of the data. The research participants were Bachelor of Arts students in a research-intensive, Group of Eight university in Australia. The flexible nature of the Bachelor of Arts programme, and its various double degree combinations, means the participants were enrolled in courses across all Faculties of the university.

Data Collection

In 2012, data were collected through an online survey, and focus group discussions. A research assistant from the university's evaluations unit helped with survey design, distribution, response collection, and results compilation. This allowed student responses to be linked to the student information system, which was used to determine the low SES and first-in-family status of the respondents. The Australian government's Low SES measure (based on geographical location) was used because it was the best tool available at the time. All students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts (N=6494) were emailed an invitation to participate in the study, with a link to the online survey. There were 697 valid responses, a response rate of 10.8 per cent. When completing the survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group. From the 203 positive responses, 20 new generation students were randomly selected and invited to participate in a 45 minute focus group discussion. This resulted in 12 participants over four separate focus groups that were facilitated by the author.

Analysis

Two groups were established for the analysis and comparison of survey responses. The group of new generation students (N=178) included students identified as either low SES or first-in-the-family. The other group, labeled traditional students (N=415), were not from a low SES background and at least one of their parents had attended university. These two groups, which do not include all of the respondents, were selected because of the contrast in terms of social, cultural and financial capital.

The analysis of data involved the concurrent processes of data reduction, analysis, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The new generation students' qualitative responses to two survey questions, and the selective transcriptions from the recorded focus group discussions, were coded using Vivo software. The constant comparison method, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used to identify sub-themes, essences or patterns within the data. The emergent sub-themes were sorted into the six main themes of the theoretical interpretive framework. However, this was not a linear process and revisions to the main themes of the framework occurred throughout the process.

Member checks of transcripts, triangulation and auditing of the coding process by a colleague (Creswell, 1998) were used to ensure the dependability and authenticity of the findings. A research journal and memos were also used to document the research process and provide an audit trail to ensure that the conclusions developed were defensible. Normal research ethics processes were followed and necessary permissions obtained. The student survey responses were de-identified and provided to me anonymously by the research assistant. The research assistant contacted the potential focus group participants, and all recordings and transcripts were stored securely. Confidentiality was protected by removing any details from the transcripts that could identify participants.

Limitations of the study

Within the interpretivist research paradigm, decisions about generalisability are the responsibility of the reader as the primary focus of this study was to improve understanding and awareness. There are a number of limitations in this study that should be considered when interpreting the findings. This research focused on a particular group of students in one degree programme, at one elite university. The categorisation of new generation students is based on data provided by both the Federal government and the students themselves. There is potential for error in these tools used to categorise new generation students and this is a weakness in the study design. The relatively low response rate to the survey, and the small number of new generation students, impact the relevance of the findings and the application of the recommendations to other contexts.

Findings and discussion

One question in the online survey asked students, “In your studies so far which of the following activities has helped you to learn effectively (tick as many as appropriate).” The students’ responses to the different options provided are shown in Figure 2. Consistent with an interpretivist study, this data is included to improve understanding and highlight issues worthy of further exploration. At best, the data shows only small differences between the response of new generation and traditional students, suggesting little difference in the learning preferences of the two groups. However, it is not wise to assume that the learning needs of new generation students are the same as traditional students or that “a pedagogy for diversity, is in fact ‘just good teaching’ and nothing new” (Hockings et al, 2010, p. 107). More research with bigger samples and more accurate identifiers is needed to explore the significance of any differences that may exist.

It is interesting that almost all students (85-90%) indicated they value the traditional learning inputs of lectures and tutorials, followed by a cluster of activities such as online activities, private reading, internet research, and assessment tasks valued by 60-70% of all students. Interestingly, only a small percentage of all students (5-10%) indicated that learning assistance programmes or study skills workshops had helped their learning.

The survey question responses that contributed data to the qualitative analysis in this study came from the following questions: “In lectures and tutorials what activities organised by the teacher help you to learn more effectively?” and “Why do these activities help you learn more effectively?” The selectively transcribed sections of the focus group discussions were also analysed. All texts were coded, using inductive codes that emerged within each of the six themes of the theoretical interpretive framework (see Figure 1). The proportion of responses coded to each major theme is shown in Figure 3. A discussion of new generation students’

responses within each theme will now be provided, including direct quotes from the survey responses and focus group transcripts.

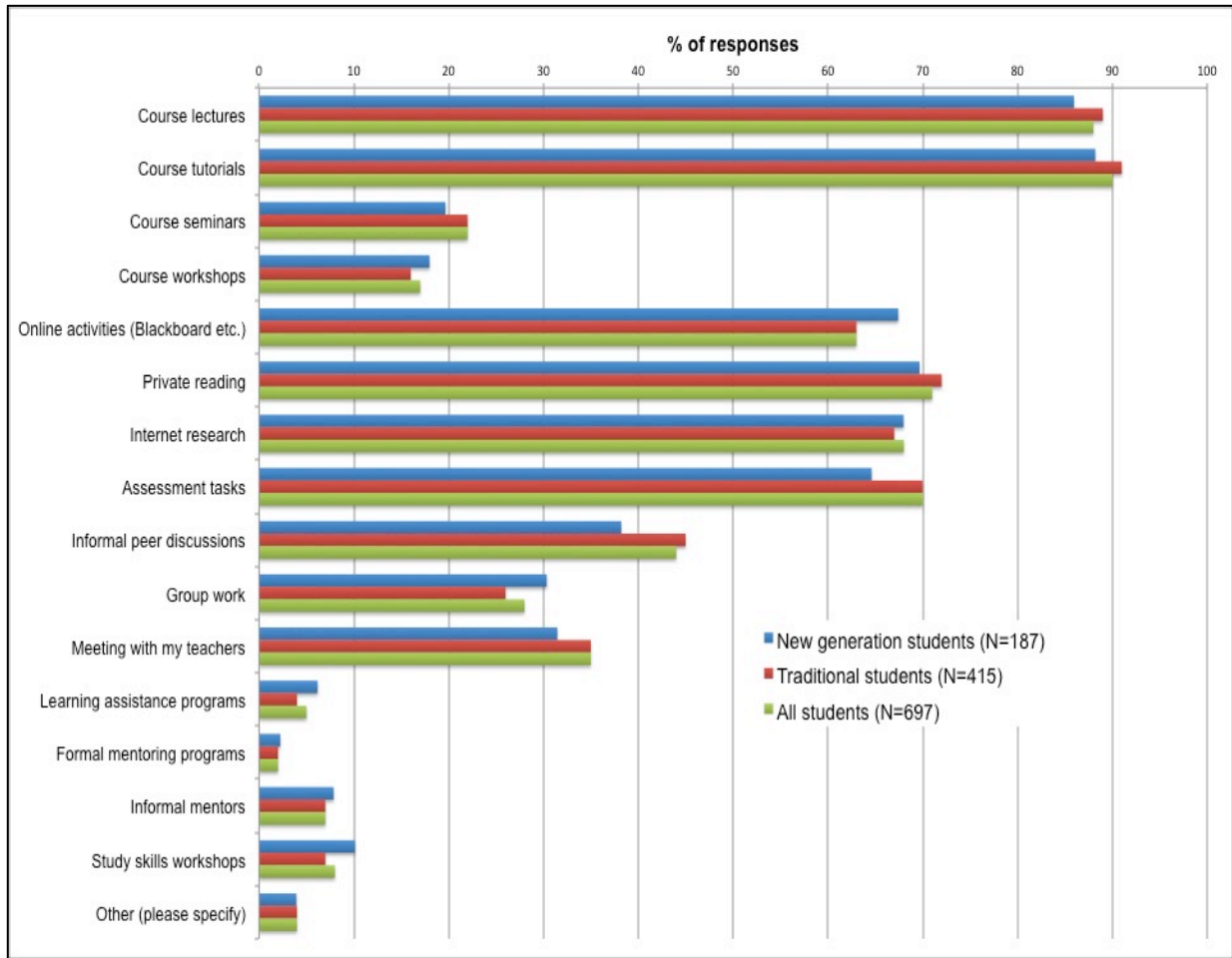


Figure 2. Activities that help students to learn effectively

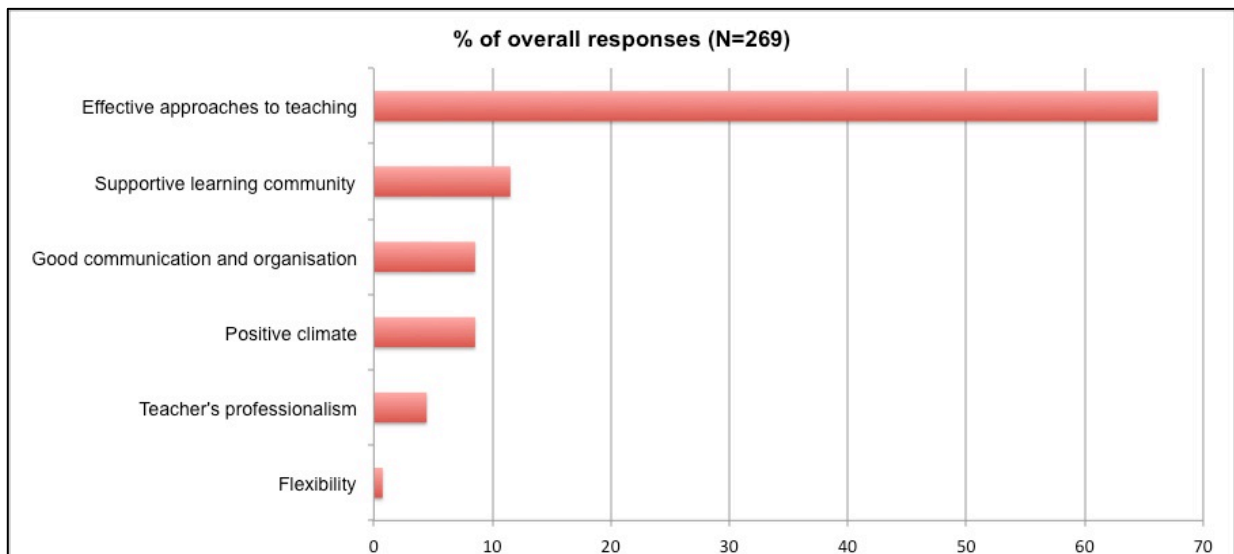


Figure 3. Qualitative responses from new generation students to each theme of the theoretical interpretive framework

Effective approaches to teaching (178 responses)

The largest numbers of student responses were coded to this theme, with the biggest emphasis on the sub-themes: *engaging learning activities* (108), *use of technology to enhance learning* (25), and *authentic learning activities* (23). This study has made it abundantly clear that new generation students want to be actively involved in the learning process. They were clear that they value:

Lecturers who build up rapport, whether that is through the Socratic [formal questioning] method, where they directly engage people each week, and have a fairly encouraging style.

Summarizing throughout the lecture, asking questions and doing visual examples on the screen or with volunteers.

Group discussions were the main activity that helped me learn more effectively.

Particularly peer discussion, I have found this helps me grasp concepts far better and gain a deeper understanding of the material.

I like to be able to ask questions or discuss things, meaning that I like a lecture to be less rigidly structured to allow for digressions.

Good tutors who facilitate discussions and listen to all points of views and moderate class discussions well (rather than taking sides or talking for too much).

Independent learning activities requiring higher cognitive activity i.e. thinking and reasoning rather than regurgitating course content.

The focus group participants in this study agreed; some academics do not give them enough credit for knowing how they learn best. While it would be unwise to assume that all new generation students have developed this skill of meta-learning (Weimer, 2002), or learning about their learning, the responses in this section indicate that many had.

In terms of the potential for technology to enhance their learning, new generation students provided many positive responses, as shown below.

She made like a Facebook group for our lecture, so that was really good now that everyone is on Facebook that made it easy to connect. So the fact that lecturers are starting to realize that, and use it, is really good as well.

Lectopia /360eco [lecture recording software] as these provide much needed support to students that have to work while studying, also they help when revising for the final exams.

Lectopia is an absolute wonder - especially for lecturers who are difficult to understand due to accents etc. or who are convoluted in their explanations.

Use of media such as short film clips to illustrate key points discussed in classes and brain storming sessions with peers.

Weekly tasks to be completed on Blackboard [the university's online learning management system] are extremely helpful.

To be fair, many students were critical of the excessive use of PowerPoint, or lecturers reading from PowerPoint slides. However, this is not a criticism of technology; it is a criticism of poor teaching.

Within this theme, new generation students also spoke positively about teaching that was authentic. A sample of their responses, which were repeated numerous times, indicated that they value:

Going through the assigned readings, analysing and debating them. Using metaphors and real life case studies.

Actual activities that get us to use the skills/knowledge we're supposed to be learning.

Engaging material, which can be related to the real world.

Information that could prepare me better for the realities of my degrees and post-degree employment.

Being able to apply to real world situations brings substance to all the material that is taught.

The emphasis that new generation students place on authentic, practical knowledge is consistent with Gale's (2011, p. 681) "funds of knowledge approach," which acknowledged students from different backgrounds value different ways of knowing, and that good teaching works with the diversity present to improve learning for all. The above findings also align with the connectionist pedagogies of Hockings et al., (2010) which espouse the need for subject matter that is relevant to "immediate lives or imagined roles and identities" (p. 104). Finally, in this theme, new generation students also made reference to the importance of learning activities that created opportunities to practice using skills and knowledge that would be needed for assessment tasks. This included reviewing students' work from previous years and doing exam and assignment preparation in workshops or lectures.

Supportive learning communities (31 responses)

New generation students were vociferous about the positive benefits of sharing their opinions and getting to hear the views of others. This theme received the second largest number of responses, and the sample responses that follow were repeated many times over by different students. The survey responses to the question, "In lectures and tutorials what activities organised by the teacher help you to learn more effectively?" included:

Group discussions I find effective and they also help you get to know the people around you and make more friends.

It is good to be able to talk to other students, and listen to others' opinions and points of view.

When asked "Why do these activities help you learn more effectively?" they indicated:

By interacting with others you are forced to think deeper about the topic and organise your views by putting them into words. Additionally, you get to hear what others have to say, which is more than often a helpful contribution.

It helps me consolidate what I know by forcing me to justify my standpoint, but also makes it easier to understand other viewpoints when others explain where they're coming from.

Increased interaction with source materials and other students' perspectives assists in the retention and comprehension of relevant information

The importance of creating a learning environment that values the opportunities to share ideas and learn from others was important for both new generation students in this study and the students in earlier studies. For example, Gale (2011) explained,

Understanding that all students bring assets to university, will require us to think about how we can structure the learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from who they are and what they know. (p. 679)

In this regard, traditional students also have much to gain by listening to the viewpoints of new generation students. This realisation emancipates new generation students from the deficit thinking of others, or deficit thinking they may have had about themselves.

A positive climate (23 responses)

New generation students valued a less formal learning environment, where they felt respected and valued. This is understandable when it is likely they struggle with the perception that university is 'not for the likes of us' (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003, p. 17). In terms of a positive climate, the new generation students valued:

Engaged lecturers who build up rapport.

The use of an informal friendly atmosphere when discussing questions, as opposed to the use of the Socratic method.

A welcoming personality that allows for questions to be asked.

Respect for us students as adults with budding opinions. I think it has to do with making own learning relevant to us and, hence, building my confidence with idea/argument making.

Lectures that are interactive or where the lecturer actively engages the students is more effective I think because it breaks down the teacher-student barrier.

I think it is all about relatability.... It's all about ... lecturers not being high school teachers.

These responses are consistent with the literature (Devlin et al., 2012; Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Hockings et al., 2010) and if new generation students are already sensitive about their place at a university, they don't need a climate that distances them from their teachers.

Good communication and organisation (23 responses)

New generation students indicated they like structure, and they explained it allows them to feel more confident and informed, particularly early in their studies when they're unfamiliar with how everything works at university. Within the sub-theme of *good organisation*, new generation students liked:

Being able to have access to as much information as possible before going to the lecture. For me personally, ... I have a lecturer who refuses to put up the PowerPoint slides until the day after, but ... even if I love the things your saying, and I want to engage with them, I can't because its too much ... I'm just missing it.

When lectures are focused on course material with well-organised power points and without group interaction.

Structured tutorials and larger discussions [because they] are more productive as they eliminate awkward silences and boredom from students when asked to "talk to their neighbour," or sit and listen to the lecture re-hashed.

Within the sub-theme *careful explanation* the responses from new generation students indicated they value:

Activities that involve critical thinking and real engagement. Activities that summarize key points that are not black and white.

My tutor is amazing; he breaks everything down so that all students are able to understand every single step.

Examples that appeal to the audience are always good at keeping attention as are questions (rhetorical or otherwise).

Finally, the last two responses in this theme from new generation students hint at the fear that they bring to the learning environment, and the way that well-paced, careful teaching can ameliorate some of their concerns.

The lecturer pausing periodically in lectures decreases my anxiety about not being able to take in all the content (particularly in courses which are challenging for me - such as statistics).

I found I learned best when the lecturer/tutor just explained the questions and gave the answers to the tutorial problems. I find it very intimidating to have to do presentations to the class or have the Socratic method used. I do not perform to my best under that sort of pressure.

Teacher professionalism (12 responses)

The professionalism recommended in the literature (Devlin et al, 2012) for teachers of students from LSES backgrounds was less apparent in new generation students' responses in this study. This was perhaps because some aspects of a teacher's professionalism are not visible to the students (e.g., reflective practice). However, many new generation students commended their lecturers for their commitment to teaching excellence. The responses indicated that they wanted teachers who could:

Make themselves available as resources to help you through your university work.

Be engaging with their subject, ... and to be able to provide for every type of learner, not just auditory learners ... being able to provide resources and use the technology properly, and being up to date with everything the university is actually offering.

New generation students also made some observations about what they didn't want in their teachers.

From my observation there is a number of lecturers who do not like lecturing at all, and in fact really resent having to do it. They have all of this amazing information but they certainly don't know how to share it with students. So there's this massive barrier.

This study has highlighted that it's likely that students near the end of their degree programmes have been exposed to a range of poor, average and excellent teaching. It is possible that they have observed and experienced more excellent teaching than many academics have. Higher tuition fees, an increased emphasis on quality control, and student evaluations of teaching have created students who are increasingly discerning and demanding about their right to good teaching and teacher professionalism. This is as it should be.

Flexibility (2 responses)

There were few direct references to the importance of flexibility to the new generation students' learning.

It's great when teachers use Lectopia. If you can't be there you don't get penalised.

RECORDED lectures!!! I do not understand why some teachers are so against it! It does not stop students attending lectures, and is SO helpful with revision.

It was surprising that so few new generation students mentioned the need for flexibility. Maybe they did not mention it because they have never experienced it. The provision of flexibility in teaching and/or assessments demands more planning and preparation from academics, which is a deterrent given existing time constraints. Whether the flexibility of recorded lectures reduces attendance is unclear in the literature, and whether the focus should be on improving learning not attendance rates is also debatable (Kelly, 2012). The provision of flexibility acknowledges that new generation students can be trusted to find ways to learn effectively if they are provided with options.

Conclusion and recommendations

The aim of this paper was to report on a study that aimed to identify some pedagogical signposts that would help higher education teachers navigate the uncertain terrain created by increased enrolments of new generation students in Australian universities. Clearly, this will be more challenging for research-intensive universities that have less experience with socially diverse cohorts than their regional counterparts. The intent of these signposts is to provide some coherent, practical directions that have been distilled from previous research and scholarship and confirmed by new generation students in this study.

For improved clarity, the six themes in the theoretical interpretive framework (Figure 1) have been reduced to just four signposts, by merging some of the themes where it made sense. In

order of importance, at least according to new generation students in this study, the following signposts (as shown in Figure 4) may help to show the way forward.

- Teachers need to adopt **effective approaches to teaching**. Active, engaging, authentic experiences that draw on technology where appropriate to enhance student learning are what new generation students want. Although, very few new generation students in this study emphasized the importance of flexibility, it is included within this signpost. As an important principle within the universal design for learning framework, flexibility in teaching and assessment will become more accepted and manageable as educational technologies continue to improve.
- The need for a positive climate has been incorporated within the signpost recommending the need for **supportive learning communities**. Clearly, as potential outsiders in higher education new generation students in this study valued being treated with respect. This was in their interactions with academic staff and also in the opportunities to share with, and learn from, their peers.



Figure 4. Signposts to effective teaching and learning with socially diverse cohorts.

- New generation students in this study highlighted that teachers must develop **good communication and organisation**. Appropriate levels of structure and clarity provided them with confidence and a sense of belonging.
- The importance of **teacher professionalism** was espoused in the literature and reinforced by new generation students in this study, although to a lesser degree than the other signposts. Today's students are more savvy than ever before. They know their rights and have high expectations of all teaching staff because they are exposed to excellent teachers.

Ongoing research with new generation students within the higher education sector will help determine if the signposts proposed through this study are relevant, effective, and useful to other faculties and universities in different contexts. The true measure of their efficacy will be confirmed when they are used in practice to provide a clearer way forward through this evolving higher education landscape. Finally, new generation students do not wear a label to class, the diversity they add may be completely invisible. Effective approaches to teaching assume diversity is present and teach accordingly.

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