

# **Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds:**

Practical advice for teaching staff

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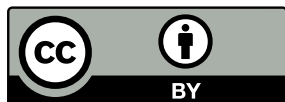
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## About this guide

This resource has been developed as part of a national research project, *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education* <[www.lowses.edu.au](http://www.lowses.edu.au)>. This guide provides practical advice about the teaching characteristics and strategies that contribute to the success of students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) and about the ways in which student agency may be enabled.

This guide is not intended as a manual for teaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, nor does it prescribe how the advice it offers might be implemented. Instead, it offers general, practical advice that has emerged from relevant literature in the field, 26 interviews with academic and professional staff in six universities experienced in the effective teaching and support of LSES students, and 89 interviews with successful LSES students in three universities about what helped them succeed. The guide draws on the voices of staff and students and, through sharing their views, offers broad advice in six areas of teaching that may assist busy teaching staff. We recommend considering the advice and suggestions in this guide within the context of your professional life, discipline and workload.

## Bridging sociocultural incongruity

The project assumes that LSES students are as varied as any other cohort of students and is wary of stereotyping. As part of that way of thinking about these students, the project has developed a distinctive conceptual framework that avoids adopting either a deficit conception of students from LSES backgrounds or a deficit conception of the institutions in which they study. Rather than being the primary responsibility of solely the student or the institution to change to ensure student success, we argue that the adjustments would be most usefully conceptualised as a 'joint venture' toward bridging sociocultural incongruity.

The notion of sociocultural incongruence is adopted as a way of conceptualising the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and the high socioeconomic institutions in which they study. The polarised deficit conceptions commonly resorted to for students and institutions, and the conception of sociocultural incongruence, which challenges these perceived deficits, are outlined below.

### ***The first deficit conception: students are the problem***

The suggestion that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students can presuppose a level playing field in relation to sociocultural and background characteristics. It can be seductive to think that if non-traditional students are clever enough, or try hard enough, or persevere enough, or believe enough in their own ability, they can engineer their success at university. Devlin (2011) suggests the tacit expectations inherent in university practices are within a sociocultural subset that is peculiar to the upper socioeconomic levels. Unless these implicit expectations are made explicit, they may operate to exclude students from low socioeconomic status who are not familiar with the norms and discourses of universities.

## ***The second deficit conception: institutions are the problem***

The other conceptual frame is to problematise the institutions that are responsible for the success and progress of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Some suggest that rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, institutional cultures should be adapted to better fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Zepke and Leach, 2005). Other authors suggest that:

- there are situational and dispositional barriers created by institutional inflexibility (Billingham, 2009)
- '... the role of the educational institution itself in creating and perpetuating inequalities' should be taken into account (Tett, 2004, p. 252)
- it is unfair to expect the burden of change to fall solely on the students and institutions should make changes (Bamber and Tett, 2001), and
- universities should make changes in terms of heralding the expectations they have of students (James, Krause and Jenkins, 2010).

Devlin (2010) argues that to genuinely contribute to the success and achievement of non-traditional students, universities need to do much more than spell out their expectations for student involvement in learning.

## ***The sociocultural conception: incongruence must be bridged***

The project proposes a conceptual framework of 'sociocultural incongruence' to describe the circumstances in which students from low socioeconomic status attempt to engage with the particular sociocultural discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education. Murphy's (2009) UK study of factors affecting the progress, achievement and outcomes of new students to a particular degree program found a number of characteristics specific to the institution and to individual students that promote progression and achievement. These factors enable the incongruence between students and institutions to be 'bridged'.

Hence – 'bridging sociocultural incongruity'.

## ***An empathic institutional context***

We argue that sociocultural incongruity can be bridged through the provision of an empathic institutional context that:

- values and respects all students
- encompasses an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and coordinated through the curriculum
- incorporates inclusive learning environments and strategies
- empowers students by making the implicit, explicit, and
- focuses on student learning outcomes and success.

These characteristics were derived through the project's literature analysis and are supported by the evidence arising from interviews with staff and students conducted as part of this project. Synthesis and analysis of the interview data revealed four key themes to which institutions need to attend to ensure the effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status. The study found that the empathic institutional context:

1. employs inclusive teaching characteristics and strategies
2. enables student agency
3. facilitates life and learning support, and
4. takes into account students' financial challenges.

This guide presents the key findings that emerged from the study that are of relevance to teachers. The focus of this guide is on the active creation of supportive and inclusive learning environments that enable student agency.

The six pieces of advice focus on practical ways that teachers can contribute to the establishment of an empathetic context within and outside the formal learning environment. These practical suggestions are summarised in the list below and further details are provided in the sections that follow.

## Key advice for teachers

The key advice to staff teaching students from LSES backgrounds in Australian universities to emerge from this national study is:

### 1. Know and respect your students

Understand LSES students are time poor; communicate with them, embrace and integrate their diversity and enable contributions of their knowledge to everyone's learning.

### 2. Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice

While upholding academic standards, offer LSES students flexibility, choice in assessment and variety in teaching and learning strategies.

### 3. Make expectations clear, using accessible language

Speak and write in plain language to ensure students understand the concepts being taught, your expectations of them and what is required to be a successful student.

### 4. Scaffold your students' learning

Take a step-by-step approach to teaching to ensure students build on what they bring to higher education and are taught the particular discourses necessary to succeed.

### 5. Be available and approachable to guide student learning

In addition to being available, be approachable so that students may make use of your expertise and guidance to improve their learning and performance.

### 6. Be a reflective practitioner

Reflect and seek to act on your own reflections, those from peers and feedback from students, to continuously improve your teaching practice and your students' learning.

# 1. Know and respect your students

The first piece of practical advice for those who teach LSES students is to know and respect your students. In order to value all of their students, effective teaching staff know their students, understand their contexts and embrace what their students bring and contribute to higher education.

Research clearly demonstrates the importance to students of feeling valued and respected (Grabau 1999; Midobuche 1999) and the impact this has on the development of a greater sense of belonging and a positive self-concept (Midobuche 1999). A significant part of valuing students and facilitating their success lies in knowing them. Erikson and Strommer (1991) argue that to know how to teach students, we must first understand them. According to Fenty (1997), knowing students and the challenges they are facing while studying improves retention rates and the overall success of students. In line with the research, the clearest finding from the 26 staff interviews conducted for the national study was that staff who effectively teach and support LSES students value and respect their students.

As one staff member interviewed for the project put it:

*I always assume that most of my students have some sort of diversity ... be that low SES, be that cultural, generational, gender, sexuality, whatever and I think that the main strategy that I use with my students is to actually get to know who they are ... [COL\_009].*

Experienced and successful staff felt that part of respecting one's students was providing supplementary support to promote and strengthen a level of resource equity. As one staff member explained:

*So they're not like my kids that can come home to academics as parents and say 'Help me with this essay'. For many of them they don't have that support network so we have to be that support network for them [COL\_025].*

Another staff member summed up the importance of knowing, valuing and respecting one's students this way:

*I think that the best advice I could say to anybody is talk to your students, find out about them, make them feel valued, make them feel important, that their knowledge and skills are as important as anybody else's, and to utilise those skills in particular areas, nothing de-values somebody more than being made to feel like their skills aren't important [COL\_011].*

## Time poverty

LSES students are extremely 'time poor' and staff who wish to effectively teach and support these students need to be aware of this factor. The literature shows clearly that as a result of balancing financial pressures, family responsibilities and/or significant hours of employment with study, many LSES students are under greater time constraints than traditional students. The findings from the current project confirmed those in the literature. Both staff and students interviewed referred to the competing pressures facing LSES students. A critical part of knowing one's students is being aware of, and empathic to the impact of, these factors.

Staff interviewed commented:

*... a common one is that in an LSES scenario ... the student has to assume carer duties for other members of their family which typically in ... a non LSES case that's not necessarily a problem for those students [COL\_004].*

*They're very time poor and so unless this is going to improve their learning outcomes, they're not interested. Unless it's going to make it easier to do that assessment task in a timely way, they're not going to engage in it because they are very time poor [COL\_021].*

Student interviewees offered insight into the time pressures they are under:

*You actually have to set aside a really significant portion of your week, in order to succeed at uni, you can't just sort of grab an hour here or there, it doesn't work. You really need to be able to organise your life, so that you have some significant slabs of time to sit down and dedicate to study, and for me, that is three days a week, my son's at school ... my daughter's at pre-school ... so I have three days where I have no children between the hours of nine and three, where I just go hammer and tongs, and that is exclusive study time, and I don't let anything else interfere, or interrupt that time ... [STU\_056].*

This staff member makes clear the impact on study of students being time poor:

*There's a fair few extensions at the end of ... semester ... when all of the assignments are due ... and they've got exams ... they're working, coming to class and then after the family is in bed ... they study. It's really quite difficult [COL\_024].*

It is clearly important for staff to be empathic to LSES students seeking extensions and flexibility (as discussed further below). Such requests are not indicative of poor time management or organisation on the part of students, as can often be assumed. Instead, such requests can be necessary for LSES students because of unexpected work, family or carer responsibilities.

## Getting to know students

Knowing your students, perhaps including their names, backgrounds, needs, learning styles and/or previous experience and/or knowledge, as well as something about their circumstances was recognised by staff as one of the most important factors in the success of LSES students in higher education. Staff explained:

*It's about individual contact and about understanding where people come from [COL\_002].*

*... you've got to go back to the learner. You've got to try to understand the learner. I'm not necessarily saying you have to fully and totally understand a person, but you need to understand them in terms of the context of that knowledge you're trying to teach them [COL\_016].*

As one staff member said:

*... you can't be inclusive unless you know your students ... that is the most important thing [COL\_001].*

Getting to know your students can be very challenging and particularly so in large classes, across multiple smaller classes and online without any face-to-face contact. Staff interviewed for the project shared some of the techniques they use successfully, despite these challenges. Communicating with students, embracing diversity and enabling contributions from LSES and other students were among the strategies recommended by experienced, effective staff to assist in developing some knowledge and understanding of and respect for students. Each is discussed in turn below.

## Communicating with students

While it may sound obvious to some, staff interviewed as part of the project identified listening to, talking to and communicating with students as key strategies in terms of getting to know one's students.

Experienced staff gave the following examples related to listening to students:

*... you need to listen to students. When they are saying things to you, or telling you things, you need to be able to listen to what their stories are, and I think the more you listen to students, and the more they speak up and join in, you can get an overview of their backgrounds, and their weakness [COL\_001].*

*[Make] time to listen to them ... because sometimes they have personal things that are impacting on their lives that are affecting their learning, so sometimes just listening and knowing them and going, 'How are you going today?' [COL\_025].*

Students agreed. When asked what had helped them to succeed, students frequently mentioned the importance of communication between teachers and students:

*Well, one of my lecturers ... she's absolutely brilliant because ... she will communicate with students [STU\_045].*

One student described the impact of a staff member with excellent communication skills:

*... you could answer a question completely wrong and she would not belittle you for it and that in itself is empowering because she won't make you feel like a fool, never. You can go to her with any problem. She will listen. She may not be able to do anything about it, but she will listen. She'll support you if you have a teary eye over something, she is there with a box of tissues. Sometimes she can fix things, sometimes you just need somebody to vent to [STU\_084].*

Communicating with students in the ways outlined above can seem to be time consuming. Staff noted for their effectiveness in teaching and supporting LSES students believe doing so is ultimately an efficient use of time as issues for students that start small do not end up larger and requiring more staff time and effort because of having been ignored. Experienced staff were also of the view that the effort spent in communicating with students, particularly early on, paid dividends in terms of both student engagement and the quality of learning they experienced.



## **Embracing and integrating student diversity**

Many of the staff interviewed recommended inclusivity and embracing and integrating student diversity in the classroom as both a mechanism for getting to know students and as a way to enhance the curriculum and teaching and the learning of all students. Staff outlined strategies such as varying pedagogical delivery practices and designing engaging learning activities as ways of embracing and integrating student diversity:

*... use as much diversity as possible in your pedagogical practices, because there's all sorts of different learners. Don't presume that groups all learn in certain ways, watch out for generalisations [COL\_026].*

*I think that is probably where the teacher should see their role, rather than as kind of causing learning as in 'I teach, you learn' ... [instead as] in trying to design learning activities that will help the students to learn and also possibly recognising that there is expertise elsewhere [COL\_004].*

Students highlighted the importance of teachers recognising the level students are at and embracing the diversity within student cohorts:

*I think that at the very beginning to have somebody there to say, '... we understand that this is new for a lot of you ... but there's no right or wrong way. There's no right or wrong question. The questions are important, because if we don't ask the questions, then we can't help' [COL\_062].*

Some highly experienced staff felt strongly that the deficit conceptions of LSES students commonly held in the sector were erroneous. They argued that all students have contributions to make to curriculum, teaching and learning and that the teacher's role is to enable those contributions as much as possible so that everyone might benefit from the different perceptions, interpretations and experiences in diverse cohorts. Moving from an 'I-teach-you-learn' understanding of teaching and learning to one that recognises 'that there is expertise elsewhere' including among the students can be a difficult and challenging shift for staff to make. It is therefore important that staff make use of professional development opportunities to support them in trying to enhance their teaching.

## Recognising and enabling student contributions

Recognising the valuable and unique contribution that students from LSES backgrounds bring to higher education was identified as central to effective teaching of this cohort of students. Making time and space for student to contribute to class is also one time-efficient way for staff to get to know their students and for students to get to know each other. Contrary to some myths that surround the capability of LSES students, LSES student performance is commensurate with or above average. As one staff member interviewed reported:

*... stats have shown in our course that, generally speaking, our low SES students tend to do better. They're slightly better motivated and probably more capable students [COL\_014]*

As another explained in relation to school leaver students:

*... students who came from public high schools tended to do better and last longer and succeed faster ... have fewer fails in things so progress faster at university, than students who came from private schools or through the religious schools ... simply because ... [the public school students] never had the resources handed to them and they always had to fight for everything and they were much more independent learners [COL\_013].*

One way that teachers might be able to facilitate contributions from LSES students is by integrating the knowledge that the students bring with them to higher education into classroom and online discussions. As mentioned above, this necessitates quite a different approach to one that assumes deficit in LSES students.

As one staff member interviewed explained:

*... being able to pull in people's different experiences because they've come from different areas can actually be really insightful. And when we're talking about developing marketing strategy, it's like we're talking to different groups and we want to know why one group might look at that marketing communication and go 'That's a lie, that's a joke', whereas another group might look at it and go 'It's perfectly believable', and it's because of that diversity in their backgrounds. So I'm very strongly in favour of people just embracing it and trying to get as many different voices coming into the mix as possible [COL\_013].*

As another staff member advised:

*... it's a kind of ... underlying premise I guess, find out what they damn well know before you start battering them. Don't start teaching and expect them to be ignorant. They'll have a rich experience. It mightn't be yours, but spend time finding out what the students know [COL\_029].*

In terms of how to go about enabling such contributions, one staff member suggested:

*... respectful communication ... it's about acknowledging students ... And trying to tap into some little something, you know, some little strength that they might have, some little narrative that they might have that we can all sort of share in in order to build that self worth, if you like, that sense of 'Well, why is it that they're here?' and their contribution is just as valuable [COL\_015].*

Overall, the advice here points to the underpinning qualities of empathy towards and respect for LSES and all students.

## Suggested strategies

- Ask for and use student cohort demographics and other available data to begin to understand who your students are at a broad level.
- As far as possible, learn and use students' names. Use some of the myriad of icebreaker techniques available on the web.
- Review your oral and written communication with students inside and outside formal classes – ask yourself how you might be more inclusive.
- Examine the extent to which you include the student voice and student opinions, views, knowledge and questions in your curricula and classes – ask yourself how you might increase the contribution and presence of students.



## 2. Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice

Both students and teachers saw the provision of flexibility, variety and choice in various aspects of their higher education experience as critical to the overall success of students from LSES backgrounds. The literature on LSES students substantiates the findings of the project that flexibility is a key factor in effectively catering to the learning needs of diverse student cohorts (Yorke and Thomas 2003). Further, students are increasingly demanding flexibility from their institutions (McDonald and Reushle 2002).

Staff interviewed were careful to stress their focus on maintaining appropriate standards and the necessity to enable such flexibility, variety and choice in a transparent, fair and equitable manner. As one staff member explained:

*So to me, to respond to the diverse situations ... it's about flexibility and responsiveness to a person's situation and thinking about what are the contextual factors around them that are impacting on their ability to meet all the demands of the course [COL\_009].*

When asked about the ways in which they teach LSES students effectively, another experienced staff member explained:

*I suppose the first thing that springs to mind is flexibility ... when I'm designing my teaching delivery approaches, I'm quite supportive of not requiring students to be in a particular place at a particular time ... I always tape all my face-to-face lectures ... the key is to be flexible, so to make that learning environment one that is valuable for students if they're there face-to-face, but also if they're listening online [COL\_027].*

Staff did not make assumptions about students attending fixed timetabled classes and instead assumed that students might have individual constraints and/or challenges to following traditional attendance patterns and planned flexibility into their teaching.

## High academic standards

A major question that flexibility, variety and choice raises is around the protection of high academic standards. Staff interviewed were united on the need to maintain academic standards and went to great pains to point out that the common assumptions made about LSES students and standards were unfounded. As several staff pointed out:

*I've found that the low SES kids that we've got here are just very determined. They're very smart and determined people and it takes them a couple of years to nut out the system but if you are halfway welcoming, they can do it very quickly [COL\_007].*

*... we take students who are low socioeconomic and first in their family to go university ... and last year and the year before that we had 25 per cent of them graduated with distinction [COL\_023].*

*I had someone who got high distinctions, who came to see me to be better [COL\_001].*

One teacher offered advice in relation to standards to those teaching and supporting LSES students:

*I think the first thing I would say is don't make assumptions about the students. Even within any kind of category that you'd want to give a student a label, there is a diversity and wealth of experiences within that and what I worry about is that if you have the assumption that students are a particular way, that's how you teach them and I think you should always teach students with the expectation that they can excel and that they are capable and have capacity [COL\_008].*

Finally, one staff member summed the matter up this way:

*... it's not about dumbing things down ... it's [about] clarifying the expectations [COL\_004].*

In terms of how flexibility, variety and choice might be achieved while maintaining appropriate standards, the use of technology, a variety of teaching strategies and choice and flexibility in assessment requirements were suggested. Each is outlined further below.

## Teaching with technology

Teaching with technology was seen as an important way in which to provide students from LSES backgrounds with the flexibility they often require. Both staff and students commented on the role of technology in enhancing the higher education experience for LSES students. The careful and thoughtful use of technology offers students the option to study at times and in places that best suit them as they balance a multitude of competing pressures, including paid employment, family commitments and study.

In response to questions about what helped their LSES students to learn, staff commented:

*... the recordings have been really popular, even with sort of mature-aged students ... [who] you would think wouldn't be as keen on technology. We do get a lot of feedback, good feedback that it just provides flexibility, and they can listen as many times as they want [COL\_030].*

*The uploading of lectures with the PowerPoint slides attached to them, I think, has been a big step. I've had lots of students say that they find that much more involving than reading stuff. Hearing the voice and then seeing the slides at the same time ... I think the impact of that is still quite strong [COL\_002].*

Students similarly commented on some of the benefits when teachers used technology:

*... the online interactive ... presentations ... They've been really good ... I felt that teachers who wanted to use that technology have been probably a little bit more effective [STU\_051].*

*... all the online technology was fantastic and the eLive sessions, I really enjoyed them because you connected with people and the lecturer about the topic [STU\_001].*

*I have to travel a bit further than most people so if I just have a really short day or something it's really inconvenient so sometimes I just go online. The online module ... the lectures ... being recorded ... [and the] online unit ... [are] very useful for me. That's what's made uni a bit easier [STU\_008].*

*I think the most important thing is having a large range of resources available ... to have*

*audio ... podcast and ... video ... and then having ... the lecturers ... tutorials ... a large range of services ... I can access because I particularly enjoy learning by listening to things. So to have those extra ... resources which are ... more catered to me and I can choose to use them. I found that that's beneficial for me [STU\_045].*

One student articulated the benefits of using technology to plan and organise their study around other commitments and to enhance their learning:

*... that whole online concept, where you can email your lecturers, and you nearly feel like you've got 24-hour access to your learning material [is helpful]. There's even learning material put on a couple of weeks in advance, so if I'm on task ... I can look ahead and see what's coming, and ... that's the same with the subject outline. You can see what's coming, rather than just being blind, and try ... to prepare yourself for the semester. I feel like I can lay everything out, I know when my exams are, I know when my assignments are due right from the very beginning, so I can plan everything around the three kids [STU\_054].*

As teaching with technology becomes more commonplace, it will be important for teaching and support staff to continually review their use of technology to ensure it is inclusive and that it supports a wide range of learning preferences and individual circumstances.

## A wide range of teaching strategies

Employing a wide range of teaching strategies was seen by staff as significant in offering diverse student cohorts variety and catering to different learning needs. Staff commented:

*I try to provide resources that meet every learning style ... I think things like that are particularly important, because you need to support in a range of ways, because not everybody learns in the one way [COL\_011].*

*... when students first hit university, and may never have had anything to do with university, they don't want to be hit with a whole lot of text, I've got to read all of this, and I don't know where to go ... I try to provide resources that meet every learning style [COL\_011].*

As one staff member explained:

*... the resources that I would use in a lecture situation would be references to any kind of popular cultural things that are happening, so you use YouTube, or I use a lot of photos or images in my teaching that represent diversity or the experiences to illustrate any of the kinds of content that I teach [COL\_008].*

One staff member conceptualised such variety as 'epistemological equity':

*I guess you could almost see it as an 'epistemological equity' in some ways because it's meeting students where they're at, it's student-centred, you know if a person's unable to figure out how to use the technology, no problem, let's find something else you know [COL\_009].*

One warned of the potential barriers when teaching strategies are not carefully considered for diverse student cohorts:

*... you're giving a lecture on a particular topic, which has great meaning perhaps to the audience, and then suddenly, you throw up a graph to illustrate a point, and there are people in the audience who are not particularly au fait with the reading of graphs. So ... all of the people who are reading the graph have had an understanding of the topic under discussion, when it comes to the presentation of information in certain ways that they're not familiar with, suddenly, their opportunity for learning diminishes. So I think these things need careful consideration any time we're looking at learning [COL\_016].*

## **Interactive teaching and learning**

In particular, interactive teaching and learning was seen by both students and staff as a key strategy to facilitate LSES student success. One staff member pointed to the usefulness of an interactive approach for determining students' current level of understanding and to guide their interaction:

*I use an interactive lecture style too, so 'What do you think about this?' and I'll give them a scenario just to see where they're at. There is no assumed knowledge [COL\_024].*

Another explained the importance of interactive teaching and the benefits of engaging students:

*I think that it's much more useful for students to have a conversation evolving around concepts so that they can explore and unpack things that they don't understand as you're going along [COL\_027].*

Students pointed to the benefits to their learning of interactive strategies in terms of engagement, involvement and concentration:

*... the interactive lectures where they ask questions ... [and] they might have quizzes throughout the lecture, that's helpful ... It gives you the time to sort of draw aside and talk with the people next to you or get out your calculator and work out the quiz question or whatever. That's really good as well to get you involved in the lecture rather than just sitting there, falling asleep [STU\_010].*

*I've found most of the tutorials have been really good where the tutors have been engaging, they've tried to bring all the students involved in the conversation, which is good for people that are quieter ... I thought that was good how they try and encourage students to become involved [STU\_026].*

*I like ones that make it a discussion, that are more interactive than just reading the notes, that makes a big difference because it's easier to stay focused when it's a discussion [STU\_095].*

While there is an argument that interactivity is time consuming and content may need to be cut to accommodate it, the flip side of the argument is that you could cover less content interactively but ensure student engagement and understanding is greater than it would have been through passively listening to a lecture. Arguably, if there is interactivity and it has the benefits to involvement, focus and learning outlined above, students may be motivated to think and learn more about the topic, including outside of class.



## Variety in assessment (mode)

An important part of providing flexibility and variety to students from LSES backgrounds is offering different assessment formats. While noting the importance of comparability of modes or formats of assessment, staff pointed to the importance of variety in promoting inclusivity:

*... clearly if you want everyone to feel they belong and are comfortable in the assessment regime, the first thing you have to have is variety of modes [COL\_026].*

*... assessment at university ... relies too much on the formal written word, and on the traditional types of assessments, like essays and reports, and yes, there definitely is a place for those kinds of assessments. But in this changing world, we need to bring in more variety in modes of assessment, so not just a formal essay, but a variety of ways, to meet the diversity of our students as well [COL\_012].*

Examples of how variety might be achieved were offered:

*... assessment should offer a range of ways ... in which the students can present their work. So [in] many of the assessments, they have been able to do it online, as a report, as an essay ... as a collection of interview information [COL\_001].*

However, not all staff agreed about such flexibility and some thought there might be other approaches. As one explained:

*I think a little flexibility with assessment that allows students to prepare in advance, even students who don't have the core skills [is acceptable]. I don't think that we should be changing our assessment types if it contributes to the academic rigour of the program, just because it might be an alien way of performing academically for some people. But I do think that working with individuals to build their capacity around those sorts of assessments is probably something that we should give a little bit more thought to [COL\_005].*

The issue of staging and scaffolding assessment is discussed in some detail below under '4. Scaffold your students' learning'.

## Flexibility around assessment due dates

As well as variety and/or staging, there is also a clear need for flexibility around assessment due dates at times for LSES students. Both successful LSES students and staff who successfully teach and support LSES students pointed to the need for some flexibility where there was good reason for this.

Many LSES students referred to the need to have flexibility in relation to assessment deadlines because of their other responsibilities:

*I need flexibility because with work arrangements and everything sometimes that all changes and I just need a few days' flexibility here or there [STU\_036].*

*The teachers are probably a big help ... for me, with three kids ... So at times, they have assisted, whether it be extensions, or special consideration ... but I definitely think those things have helped me get through. If they weren't available, I don't know what I would've done [STU\_054].*

Staff were also explicit in comments about the need for flexibility around assessment deadlines:

*I think in the university setting there's a constraint in that people have to pass the course so what I try to do with my assessments is to be as flexible as possible especially around due dates, so I tell everybody they need to let me know for whatever reason when they can't meet the due date ... So for me to respond to the diverse situations that people walk in the door it's about flexibility and responsiveness to a person's situation and thinking about what are the contextual factors around them that are impacting on their ability to meet all the demands of the course [COL\_009].*

This raises the question of fairness. In terms of fairness, there was no suggestion that extensions, special consideration and the like should be applied differentially to students but that the provisions for flexibility allowed in university policies should be used to assist all students to succeed.

## Strategies

- Examine your unconscious assumptions about LSES students and challenge yourself about the potential impacts of any biases you might hold.
- Record your lectures and make recordings and slides/notes available to your students.
- Explore better use of technology to enable greater inclusivity in your teaching online and face-to-face.
- Reflect on your preferences in and utilisation of teaching strategies – ask yourself how the range of these might be widened to encompass more interaction and a greater range of student learning needs.
- Reflect on your preferences in assessment practice – ask yourself how the range of these might be widened to allow improved learning, without compromising standards.

### 3. Make expectations clear, using accessible language

Research shows that many LSES students enter higher education with expectations about teachers, teaching assessment and university culture that are disjunctive with the reality of higher education (Roberts 2011; Brooks 2004). The importance of making expectations clear for LSES students in language they understand emerged as a major finding in the present project.

Using clear and accessible language with students is a significant part of making expectations apparent. The literature suggests that LSES students often enter higher education without a prior acquaintance with academic language and discourse (Priest 2009). Further, students' lack of familiarity and acquaintance with the language of academe can impact on feelings of belonging in higher education (Hutchings 2006). It is, therefore, critical that teachers use clear, accessible language when teaching and supporting students who may be unfamiliar with academic discourse.

The clarity necessary can be achieved through a variety of means. In particular, staff and students pointed to both the benefits of thorough explanations of assessment requirements and criteria and the use of accessible language and examples to ensure student understanding.

Successful students shared what had helped them to understand and learn and many responses related to having clarity about expectations of them:

*... just clear instructions of what they want from an assessment item. It can be daunting to kind of sit down and write your first five thousand word assignment ... so definitely a clear structure ... helps [STU\_057].*

*Because they're the ones marking my assessment ... it's good to know what they want in the assessments or exams [STU\_074].*

*... there are typically hundreds of questions that are then filtered back to the course convenors, and the way that those are then answered, such that everyone can see all of the responses, is critical in demystifying what's being asked of us a lot of the time [STU\_056].*

Staff members highly experienced in teaching LSES students stressed the need for expectations to be made clear to students in ways they can relate to and understand:

*... if you lay the guidelines out ... you say, 'This is what I would like, this is what you can do', they know very clearly what it is you want [COL\_001].*

*... they're told to write these essays and they want to see what an essay looks like ... It's like trying to teach them how to ride a bicycle without the bicycle ... But if you're teaching something, and if you can show an example of it, the students can see the expectation, they can see the level of what is expected of them [COL\_012].*

*... with assessment ... the students need to understand the criteria sheet, or the rubric, if you like ... what the lecturer, or what the tutor is looking for. I think it's very difficult for them to do a piece of assessment if they're not clear on the guidelines of what they're supposed to be doing [COL\_001].*

Experienced higher education teachers are aware of the importance of making expectations clear. However, what is clear to a student who has familiarity with higher education through their family and friends' experiences and what is clear for an LSES student who may have little or no familiarity with university study can be quite different. It is critical that accessible language and examples are used with LSES students so that they are not excluded from understanding by the vagueness of academic language.

#### Accessible language and examples

Both staff and students identified the use of accessible language and examples as central to LSES student success. The use of these enabled clear understanding of expectations, concepts, ideas and assessment requirements and facilitated higher-level understanding and performance by LSES students.

In relation to the importance of the use of accessible, everyday language, students commented:

*... I mean a couple of times I might have listened to lecturers that probably used too many big words so sometimes I didn't understand where they were coming from. So maybe if they can speak in layperson's terms a little bit, that makes it a lot easier [STU\_026].*



*I feel like they're using big words and big sentences when they can say the exact same thing in simple language and half the amount of words ... In other words, 'What does it actually mean?' So I've had a few teachers that I really couldn't understand and they were just so sort of theoretical that I found myself tuning out which was really difficult and it also can get maximally hard to relate to if they're speaking in really high academic language [STU\_035].*

Staff concurred with students about the use of complex and obscure language by staff in their comments:

*... students say to me, 'Our lecturer has given us lectures, and we don't understand their language, what they're saying. They're speaking something like a foreign language, with terms, and different phrases' [COL\_001].*

*So these students that I interviewed ... one of the things that came out is that there would be questions like, 'Do it with depth. Respond with depth and meaning' ... and they go, 'What's depth? What do they mean by depth?' Or critical analysis and, 'What's critical?' 'What's analysis?' So I think that some of the things that have been challenging for these students is really understanding what the language [means] [COL\_021].*

*From the students' perspective ... just trying to de code the assessment criteria is an issue. What does that actually mean, because it's not written in plain English. It's not written in English that first year students, or even second and third year students, can understand [COL\_012].*

The importance of demystifying the content of curriculum and, particularly, the assessment requirements for LSES students cannot be overstated. Current practice in use of 'high academic language' excludes students who are not familiar with that language and puts them at a distinct disadvantage compared to their higher SES peers who are familiar with such language. The challenge is that some academic staff are not aware of their exclusive language use or may believe that it is a sign of intelligence if students understand such language. Of course, it is not – it is a sign of familiarity with the language, nothing more. Students from LSES backgrounds should be given the opportunity to become familiar with the language and plain English should be used in the meantime. If nomenclature is needed, it is best to teach it to the students as it is introduced.

## Real-life examples

Students also commented on the benefits of teachers who used 'real-life' examples in their teaching:

*I do like the ones who are more practical, have a more practical approach ... they're actually giving, their life examples or speaking about their experiences and ... I find that more beneficial [STU\_037].*

*And I think with the tutors, they're quite personal, so they'll relate their own experiences, which is really good because you have something to go from rather than it being really abstract ... They have so many stories, which ... really helps me put it into the real world kind of context [STU\_088].*

Students from LSES backgrounds are not alone in appreciating the use of anecdotes, stories and real-life examples in teaching. Like much of the advice offered in this guide, the use of such examples benefits all students and their learning.

## Suggested strategies

- Record a typical class and review your use of language for jargon, acronyms, complex vocabulary, long sentences, the absence of clear explanations and the like.
- Ask a small group of volunteer students to listen to this recording and give you feedback about your use of language and your clarity.
- Ask a colleague from another discipline to critically review your subject guide or other material you give to students for the use of confusing jargon, acronyms, complex vocabulary and the like.
- Actively practise simplifying your oral and written language and using explanations of greater depth.
- Try to include a small number of short anecdotes or stories in each class to engage students and help them understand and remember concepts.

## 4. Scaffold your students' learning

The term 'scaffolded learning' takes its name from the idea of a support structure that is gradually removed as the central entity becomes strong enough to stand on its own. Scaffolded learning refers to learning that is tailored to meet student needs, helps students reach their learning goals and provides the necessary degree of support to assist students in their learning. The literature shows that there are good reasons to scaffold the learning of LSES students, related to their confidence and relevant skill level.

As Devlin and McKay (2011) report, LSES students can be reluctant to seek support from academic staff with subject-related queries because they are often unsure of the validity of their questions and how staff might respond to their queries (Benson et al. 2009; Lawrence 2005). LSES students can lack confidence and self-esteem, which can in turn affect their choices about seeking support (David et al. 2010; Murphy 2009; Christie et al. 2008; Charlesworth 2004).

Further, as Devlin and McKay (2011) point out, LSES students may not be equipped with the skill set that traditional students hold in terms of academic, research, computer, writing and language skills (Kirk 2008; Fitzgibbon and Prior 2006). The academic preparedness for university study of LSES students can sometimes be different to that of traditional students (Murphy 2009; Northedge 2003; Berger 2000). In particular, there can often be a mismatch between their cultural capital and the middle class culture they encounter in higher education (Greenbank 2006, Devlin 2011).

Many students interviewed as part of this project reported feeling under-prepared in terms of their academic, research, computer, writing and/or language skills. Enabling scaffolded learning, that is, explicitly teaching to different levels and using a step-by-step approach toward mastery, was identified by staff as critical in successfully teaching diverse cohorts, particularly those with students from LSES backgrounds who vary in their levels of academic preparedness.

As staff explained:

*... I think we have to recognise that all students are at different levels. They're not all at the same level of learning and understanding [COL\_001].*

*Well how I'd like to design it ... is to make sure that it does actually come from where the students are from, so it's flexible enough that they can actually bring in their world but then it actually challenges them to go beyond that so it's always starting from where they are [COL\_008].*

One staff member explained their approach to scaffolding and the benefit to all students:

*Well what I try to do is find ways in which I can scaffold the information ... I ... try and structure it so that every student has the capacity to look at the task and if they understand it to begin with, then they can move onto the next task ... some students who are finding it perhaps a little bit more difficult ... so ... structuring the task ... allows them to say 'Okay, well, I'm at this point and I'm going to need some help to move into the next one', whereas the other students who are doing better can just go, 'Yeah well I finished that one, let's move onto the next one'. So everybody is sort of still moving [COL\_013].*

Approaching teaching this way can be challenging for those who are new to teaching and for those who are experienced but have taught using the more traditional approach of preparing one set of content for all students. As university populations in Australia continue to diversify, it will be necessary to teach the students in ways that accommodate all of them, rather than just those who prefer and benefit from a traditional approach.

### Teaching and learning the discourses

Particular academic cultures exist within institutions. They are often understood as dominant and specialist discourses of knowledge, communication and practices. In layperson's terms, 'the way we do things around here'. Students must be given the understanding and tools necessary to understand the university culture and participate in its discourses.

As one staff member explained:

*A good example of that is when you might set an essay task, for example, which requires some degree of reflection on literature. Now, a culturally rich student audience will say, 'Essay. Yes, I know essays. I know what they are. I've been doing essays since such-and-such, we learnt how to write an*



*essay this way, and that way. Oh yes, I know how to get hold of literature and review it, and critique it, and so forth'. The students, however, who come from a less well-endowed background may look at you and say, 'You know, I've really not written very many essays, or I haven't written any at all', and they may also be puzzling a little bit about what an essay actually is, and 'What do you mean by critiquing the literature? Do you mean that I can't write a sentence without acknowledging that it was an idea that somebody else wrote? How does this actually work?' So they're not stupid, but the point is that they don't have this cultural knowledge about how you write an essay [COL\_016].*

Another staff member pointed to some of the reasons that LSES students face challenges with discourses:

*... once we do write the assignment ... we need to look at the ones who perform poorly and why they perform poorly. It is usually because they just haven't been trained in that type of academic area ... Usually, they are the first one in the family to go to university and their parents have never been to university and the parents quite often can't assist them with academic writing and all of that, and it comes out very, very quickly [COL\_006].*

Another staff member interviewed highlighted the challenges for some LSES students who may not have the academic literacy of their fellow students:

*... what a student does ... in a lecture ... [is] they try to copy everything down religiously, because they're not looking for the key points, and they have no idea ... what they're expected to do, and seriously, there are so many who have no concept of how to read academically, that it holds them back, so they stop doing it [COL\_001].*

This staff member added:

*I think what we kind of ought to be doing at the beginning ... is teaching students 'chunking', how to do their academic reading, how to do a glossary of words they're not sure of, how to do relevant notes [COL\_001].*

The importance of teaching and learning academic discourse and, in particular, writing skills, was highlighted as part of a scaffolded approach to learning in interview responses.

Students interviewed stressed the need to be taught academic discourse and writing:

*... how to write an essay for instance, the correct format and whatnot – that sort of stuff, that basic stuff which would seem very basic to some or [to] the seasoned university students, but to someone like me, it was invaluable in my learning process [STU\_046].*

*Well I think when I first started I had a really good lecturer who showed you how to format an essay. She told you what type of font to use, what size font, spacing and went through all of that because I wouldn't have known, I'd have just done it with one line spacing and handed it in, so that kind of thing made ... it was just information that you don't know that you need to know [STU\_095].*

The matter of whose responsibility it is to ensure these discourses and skills are taught and learnt by LSES and other students, and how best to ensure they are taught in meaningful ways, is often raised. In terms of responsibility, academic staff sometimes argue that they are too busy teaching the content of the subject to also teach students about how to interact with the discipline and the academic requirements. Academic language and learning (ALL) skills staff sometimes argue that it is not possible to effectively teach the discourses without including content and embedding such teaching in the discipline context. There is also an argument that once they are aware of the need to understand and use them, students themselves have a responsibility to ensure they learn the discourses. The appropriate approach depends on the discipline, the teacher(s), the ways in which the teacher(s) and ALL skills experts might work together and the particular student needs. An initial discussion between the teacher(s) and an ALL expert is advisable to plan and implement an appropriate approach.

### ***A developmental approach to assessment***

A developmental, staged approach to assessment, which enables the continual and ongoing maturation of students' learning and development of assessment performance, was seen as important to facilitating the success of students from LSES backgrounds. This allows them to develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in university study.

Students commented on the benefits of a developmental approach to assessment tasks in helping them to succeed:

*We got taken through ... step by step. A lot of time you're sort of just given assignment tasks and then just sort of having to work it out for ourselves ... [this] was really good in kind of easing us into it and telling us not to expect ourselves to know straight away [STU\_007].*

*... probably because we've got smaller numbers, they get to know the students so well and they know where our weaknesses are. They literally can present us in lessons the best way and like their gradual assessments, they often will put so much information on those assessments so that we know where our weak areas are and where we need to build them and they take so much time and effort [STU\_094].*

As this staff member explained:

*... the assessment tasks that I do are incremental ... it's about 'Okay, so what skills do I want the students to have at the end of a particular subject?' and whether they've been able to consolidate and build on those skills [COL\_015].*

ALL expert staff can also assist teaching staff to develop and implement a staged approach to assessment to assist students to gradually build the capabilities they need for success. Once again, a useful approach might start with an initial conversation between a teacher and an ALL expert.

## Peer learning

A significant aspect of scaffolding students' learning is providing adequate support to ensure students achieve the desired learning outcomes. The project identified peer learning as a key support strategy for successful LSES students. This applied to formal peer learning within the classroom and online and informal peer learning organised outside class by students. Several staff noted the quality of such learning. As one put it:

*... you know that they learn from each other, half the time better than from you [COL\_029].*

This staff member explained how peer learning is important to student success in terms of its contribution to supporting transition into university:

*My tutorials are basically all about group work and interaction and everybody in the group gets a say ... and it is very, very important we do that, because that binds them together with the other students and it also gets them to settle into the university in the first five or six weeks, and that is critical [COL\_006].*

Students explained why peer learning opportunities were helpful from their point of view in terms of social and academic outcomes:

*Well, I found that if you get out and mingle with other people – you make friends and then you can learn from them as well, so you don't have to be sort of alone and solitary in your learning. I find it easy, personally, if I can learn off other people as well [STU\_044].*

*The thing that really does help me learn is having study groups with other people in my course because I can get their perspective on the topic. And it motivates me to study as well because they're studying too. And if I don't understand something, they can help explain it or I can help them as well, which helps me remember it, to explain it to them [STU\_074].*

*... I think learning from each other also helps. With group work, it's really interesting to know what other people know as well 'cause we're all learning, and I think we can all help each other learn more [STU\_044].*

Designing and implementing peer learning in class or online as activities and/or as part of the assessment strategy for a subject can be extremely beneficial for students. Not only can the inclusion of such activities increase student engagement and enjoyment through greater social interaction, this interaction can impact positively on learning. In addition, students sometimes make better teachers than the teachers themselves – if there are concerns about displaying a lack of understanding to teachers, for example, students may not feel comfortable asking teachers the necessary questions to clarify their understanding and may instead prefer to approach a peer for clarification. Peer learning opportunities can be a formal part of the curriculum or they can be an informal option, encouraged by staff who understand the potential benefits of peer learning.

## Suggested strategies

- Consider the ways in which you might be able to better scaffold LSES and other student learning through the subjects you teach. Ask yourself what extra or different resources you might use to supplement your teaching and how you might include activities at different levels in class or within assessment tasks.
- Talk to an ALL expert within your university about the best ways to approach teaching your LSES and other students the discourses they need to learn to be successful.
- Design and implement peer learning activities inside and outside class and ask students to provide feedback to you on their usefulness to their understanding and learning.
- Provide feedback through formative assessment opportunities.

## 5. Be available and approachable to guide student learning

A fifth key piece of practical advice for teaching staff to emerge from this project was to be both available and approachable to students. These are interlinked, yet distinguishable, characteristics of a teacher that emerged as clear factors contributing to LSES student success.

While 'office hours' and an online presence are common among university teachers, students in particular noted the value of teacher availability to assist them in understanding what was required of them and in supporting their attempts to perform appropriately in assessment. Research supports the importance of teacher availability and its impact on improved outcomes for students (Kearney et al. 1991; Mottet et al. 2005; Shin 2003).

Over and above availability, a teacher's 'approachability' was noted by numerous students as one of the keys to student success. When a student knew their query would be welcomed and appropriately addressed, when they knew a teacher would be friendly and when they knew the interaction they were seeking would be pleasant and helpful to their learning, they were much more likely to take the risk of exposing their lack of understanding and seek help. These findings are supported in the literature on effective teaching, which maintains that 'approachability' is a key teacher attribute from the students' point of view (Sander et al. 2000; Reid and Johnston 1999).

It is important to note that students did not expect help '24/7' or in an unlimited way. That said, however, the issue of staff workload did arise. This is discussed below, following an outline of characteristics of teachers that were found to help LSES students succeed.

### Teachers who are available

The importance of teachers simply being available is a factor in facilitating success of students from LSES backgrounds. As staff experienced in facilitating LSES student success explained:

*It doesn't matter how many fancy electronic resources you've got. If you haven't got time for them, you've got problems [COL\_011].*

*I think it's just time. I think I would spend the most time with them. Isn't that one of the most valuable resources that you can really give, is time? [COL\_025].*

In relation to the availability of staff members and how helpful they found this, students commented:

*It was always clear to us that if we needed support we could just go talk to the coordinator or our lecturers or anyone really ... that's a big benefit of coming here that they're very accessible [STU\_092].*

*I think having a lecturer available for help and to ask questions – like you can easily email them ... or organise a time to meet up with them for help. I think that's really helpful [STU\_074].*

*Support from the lecturers ... or the tutors [helped me succeed]. When they make themselves available, where they make appointments with you to discuss things that you're not clear about, that's the best help that I've had actually [STU\_009].*

### Teachers who are approachable

Teachers being perceived as approachable was seen by both staff and students as critical to student success.

Staff commented:

*You know I just like to make myself approachable to students so that if they've got a difficulty they can come and tell me and I will understand [COL\_009].*

*I guess it's just having the door open and trying to have as accessible an approach as possible. So where you are encouraging students to talk to you if something's not right [COL\_027].*

Students commented about teacher approachability as opposed to simple availability through office or contact hours. As one summed it up:

*I find some lecturers are really approachable if you've got a question and some aren't at all. So you've just got to pick which ones are and ... you can sort of tell by their mannerism and how they answer a question in the classroom whether they're approachable in their contact time [STU\_095].*



## Teachers who are helpful

Teachers' helpfulness was identified by the majority of student interviewees as having contributed to their success. So as well as being available and approachable, the quality of interaction between students and staff was seen as critically important, as was the outcome of the interaction. When asked what had helped them succeed in their study to date, 60 out of 89 LSES students interviewed for this project (67 per cent) specifically commented on the helpfulness of teachers having facilitated and supported their success in their studies.

Typical examples of comments included:

*... there are some people who are more helpful than others ... there's one fellow ... who was just terrific in the last practicum subject, because you could actually go to him with various other questions or concerns, and he'd help you get those sorted out, even outside of his own subject, so there are some people like that who are just really, really keen to help ... [STU\_056].*

*... there was a lot of assignments where I really had no idea what I was supposed to do. So I'd go to him ... he would give up a lot of his spare time to help me get on track and stuff and get me really thinking about it. And ... he made himself available whenever I needed him. There was multiple times where I would send him an email, and he'd just say, 'Look, come into my office, and I'll discuss it with you.' And every time I walked in his office – he just seemed like he was the busiest man in the world – but he'd sit there with me for an hour and a half to two hours sometimes, just telling me other things and telling me what I need to do and stuff like that. He ... led me in the right direction [STU\_004]*

Staff indicated some of the ways in which they tried to be helpful:

*I will offer them the opportunity to post online the example question where they will write on a forum ... So that's using the online tools [COL\_015].*

*Recently a student who has a mental health disability ... she hadn't handed anything in all year and I'd sent her a couple of emails saying that 'I've noticed that we haven't got anything. Is there anything, do you need extra help?' and she came up to me and she burst*

*into tears and just described what had been happening and then together we planned how she was going to manage her work and she's done it [COL\_009].*

## Staff workload

The characteristics of availability, approachability and helpfulness together raise the issue of time and workload for teachers of LSES students. Experienced staff frequently commented on the extra time they spent with LSES students assisting them to come to terms with university requirements and develop the skills and confidence they needed to perform appropriately in assessment tasks.

Some universities have arrangements where academic and language skills support and development are embedded in curriculum. Alternatively or in addition, support staff may work closely with academic staff to provide necessary support and advice on discourses, skills, assessment requirements and the like to students. Where they exist, these arrangements work well to ensure students are supported toward success without the sole responsibility for this support falling to academic teaching staff.

No university, to our knowledge, has yet formally acknowledged the extra time required to teach LSES students in workload models. This may be an area that requires further investigation in the future.

The project has developed advice on resourcing and supporting those who teach and support LSES students and this is contained in a companion guide for institutional and policy leaders.

## Feedback/feed forward

Another factor in facilitating LSES student success is the provision of feedback and 'feed forward'. As one staff member explained:

*Basically, I think the philosophy is allow them to make mistakes and then improve on it ... Education ... should be about taking risks, trying things out and having a journey whereby you're not trying to guess what someone else wants or what the right thing is before you really know [COL\_003].*

Another agreed:

*I think constant information going back and forth between the students and the lecturer about how they're performing ... make ... it [as] straightforward [an] experience as possible transitioning from where they've been before into university [COL\_014].*

A third outlined the approach taken to providing feedback:

*We give lots of formative feedback, so all of my tutors and lecturers, we take drafts so they can hand in a draft assignment and we all give one lot of feedback ... Obviously we deconstruct the assignments for them but it's also about the learning. It shouldn't be just about the assessment, it really has to be about the learning [COL\_025].*

In relation to feedback, students were clear about its positive impact on their success:

*... feedback ... helped [me] to see where you were and improve the next semester. Although it wasn't the same subject but you could still apply it to different areas and different assignments [STU\_003].*

*I think that the feedback's there when you want it ... and ... the systems are in place to provide feedback ... it's formative feedback, it's learning, assessment for learning sort of thing. Your learning grows [STU\_101].*

## Suggested strategies

- Ensure your 'office hours' and other availability online are clear to students, along with details of how to contact you and expected response times.
- Review the style and content of your oral and written communication to ensure you appear approachable to assist students with their learning.
- Use time efficient methods of providing feedback/feed forward, including:
  - using generalised written summaries of general strengths and weaknesses to groups of students
  - using pre-prepared feedback/feed forward templates that match the assessment criteria
  - using the learning management system or appropriate software to communicate with all students
  - via carefully trained, briefed and supported tutors or other casual staff.

## 6. Be a reflective practitioner

Finally, the findings from the project point clearly to the importance of teachers reflecting on their practice and making adjustments to ensure they are teaching all of the students in their charge as well as possible. 'Reflective practice' on the part of teachers of students from LSES backgrounds is critical. Drawing on the work of Loughran (2002), reflective practice is understood as the need for teachers to 'develop their understanding about the way they conduct their work, and to be skilled practitioners through their work ... By doing so, the knowledge base of the profession is developed and refined in ways that help the practitioner to be an effective and informed professional' (p. 34). The need for reflective practice in teaching is widely upheld and promoted in the literature (Brookfield 1995; Valli 1993; Osterman and Kottkamp 1993; Russell and Munby 1992; Richert 1990; Schön 1987; Smyth 1992).

Staff who are committed to offering effective teaching and support of students from not only LSES but all backgrounds will necessarily be reflective in their practice. One of the major findings to emerge from the project was that staff members known for their expertise in teaching and supporting LSES students shared reflective practice as a common trait.

As staff explained:

*... it's about I suppose helping adults to learn, I mean that's my philosophy ... the philosophy comes from an andragogical background which is the science of helping adults to learn. So that means always looking at my practice ... and saying, 'Well, how can I do this better?' [COL\_015].*

*... I found ... that I was teaching them all these things and they weren't even sort of remembering from the exam and I thought 'Well, this is just a waste of everyone's time' ... I stepped back and said, 'Well, what do they need to know from this unit? What are the core skills? What are the really valuable things that I can give them in the short time I've got with them that are going to be lasting?' ... [T]hen [I'd] focus on that [COL\_003].*

*... in terms of the need of making inherent expectations explicit and even some of the hidden cultural assumptions that are in the way I'm marking, judging and assessing, I've really had to soul-search about why I prioritise the fact that having a linear argument that's written in a direct and rational way is superior to somebody who might write in metaphor in a circular way [COL\_009].*

Reflection does not necessarily lead to immediate solutions, as this last comment above in particular shows. However, it can lead to important questions, which in time may find responses that enhance teaching and learning for all students. Involving colleagues in reflection may be one way to support critical examination of your practice.

One staff member suggested reciprocal peer review as one way to reflect and learn from others simultaneously:

*You get somebody to review what you're doing and that's always beneficial. But also you get to see what others are doing and you know you adapt what's appropriate to your own student group from that [COL\_005].*

The challenges of reflective practice were acknowledged:

*... the immediate effort in trying to sort of step back and look at what you're doing is quite difficult, particularly when you're engaging yourself in other people's minds all the time, to then step back and look at your own is another jump [COL\_003].*

Some staff suggested other creative ways to inform reflective practice, for example:

*... we ... check for understanding of their learning and then we always have an honesty box that I take with me and they can, if they're not understanding something but they're too nervous to come and explain or if I'm not teaching well or they're not getting something, they put that in the honesty box and then at the end of the week I check out the honesty box and I think 'Oh, so next week, I need to do these things', so it's feedback to me, how I could be better in supporting their needs ... [COL\_025].*

## Suggested strategies

- Reflect on each class to determine what worked well and what might be missing and what might be improved in terms of teaching.
- Consider how you know to what extent students understand what you are teaching. Determine how you might better understand this.
- Ask your students for informal feedback on your teaching and their learning.
- Review your online interaction in terms of the learning objectives you have for your students and determine your strengths and weaknesses and identify opportunities for enhancing future interactions.
- Reflect and act on formal feedback on your teaching.
- Ask a peer to review your teaching and provide constructive comment.

## Project methodology

Data for the national project from which the advice in this guide was derived was collected from four major sources:

1. **A review of peer reviewed and other significant literature in the broad area of the experience of students from LSES backgrounds in higher education.**
2. **Interviews with 89 students who were from LSES backgrounds and in the first generation of their family to attend university.**
3. **Interviews with 26 staff known for their expertise in teaching and/or supporting students from LSES backgrounds at university.**
4. **An environmental scan of effective practice, programs, policy and initiatives in teaching and/or supporting students from LSES backgrounds across Australia.**

The individual and collective expertise of the project team members was also used to inform data gathering and to interpret the findings, based on a unique conceptual framework developed through the project. In addition, the reference group was consulted throughout the project and provided valuable guidance and feedback, as did an independent expert evaluator.

The methodology received ethics approval from the Deakin University Human Ethics Committee (DUHREC) [2011 – 081] and subsequently from the other universities.

Full details of the methodology can be found in the final report for the project at [\*\*<www.lowses.edu.au>\*\*](http://www.lowses.edu.au)



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