

EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOLS /VICTORIA UNIVERSITY: AN ACCELERATED PATHWAY TO DEGREE COMPLETION

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The University of Texas at El Paso and Victoria University began their mutually beneficial relationship in 2009, a relationship that had at its core a recognition of similarities in their communities and an alignment of their goals to provide access, excellence and success for the students from their respective communities. An ongoing exchange of ideas and collaborative undertakings from that point provided a rich contribution to the educational capital of both universities.

In 2011, a group of Victoria University staff, including Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Dawkins, visited UTEP and were introduced to the Early College High School (ECHS) program in El Paso. The potential for Victoria University to also work with its local schools to provide enabling educational pathways for students in our region became increasingly apparent as we saw the multiple ways in which the program was successful for the students in UTEP's community. This influence has continued to be acknowledged in the work VU has done in this area in the last three years. Below is an excerpt of a paper (Richards, 2015) presented at the 2014 Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention & Success (STARS) conference, Melbourne, Australia.

...Victoria University has a partnership arrangement with the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) which, like Victoria University, is located in an area of economic disadvantage with a good proportion of students from NESB and LSES backgrounds. The success of the Early College High School (ECHS) programs in their region to both provide increased access for students as well as increased success through co-enrolment in school and college, prompted us to explore the possibilities for our region.

Ideas, however, can rarely be transported unchanged from one context to another without needing to acknowledge and accommodate some differences. Unlike Texas, the Australian Victorian secondary school system does not allow for the concurrent study of tertiary and secondary programs in such a fulsome way as allowed in the United States. Although this does not preclude change in the long term through work with the Department of Education, it did necessitate seeing and acknowledging differences in the educational contexts in the short term. However, the drivers for Australian students are also not identical to those of Texas and so a greater emphasis on transition- including building aspiration and preparedness- and less of an emphasis on financial imperatives and acceleration goals emerged in the VU Early-Uni Pathways (EUP) program.

While all agree this accelerated educational pathway is not the choice for all students, it has certainly been demonstrated that it is the right pathway for many. Offering multiple opportunities to continue higher education is what UTEP and VU are all about, as they realize that their 21st century student population represents students from many different backgrounds and walks of life who benefit from this innovative partnership that promotes access at all levels to higher education for the students of their regions.

IN THE BEGINNING IN EL PASO

In the summer of 2008, a new high school opened its doors in El Paso, Texas. With a small first entering freshmen class of only 125 students, it did not seem as if it would have much of an influence on the local educational setting, much less impact educational opportunities on the other side of the globe. But, that first class at Mission Early College High School set the stage for some amazing educational success stories to follow both in El Paso, Texas, and Melbourne, Australia.

The concept of Early College High Schools (ECHSs) began in 2002 with support from foundations such as Bill & Melinda Gates and organizations such as Jobs for the Future. The idea was to create an environment where high school students could receive their high school diploma and associate degree concurrently by taking a mixture of college and high school classes.

This preparation for college has proven to be success in the United States with no fewer than 230 early colleges educating more than 50,000 students across 28 states. The data suggests that the concept works on a national level.

- 90% Early College High School students graduate from high school vs 78% from traditional high schools nationally
- 94% earn free college credit while in high school
- 30% nationally earn an associate's degree or other post-secondary credential while in high school (Jfforg, 2016)
- Early College students have a greater opportunity than their peers to enroll in and graduate from college. They also appear to be on a different academic trajectory, with early college students earning college degrees at higher rates than comparison students. Early Colleges appear to mitigate the traditional educational attainment gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students. (Airorg, 2016)

This last point is of particular interest to us at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) where approximately 50% of the students come from families whose annual income is in the bottom quartile nationally and 53% are first generation college-going. Early College High School provides them with a no cost pathway to earning an associate's degree that is, in most cases, fully transferable to a degree plan at UTEP, thereby, covering up to half the costs in tuition and fees of earning a bachelor's degree at the university.

FIRST CONTACT AT UTEP

The first introduction to ECHS students at the University of Texas at El Paso was a phone call in January of 2010 when the assistant principal at the first ECHS in the El Paso area, Mission Early College High School, contacted UTEP to find out what she could do with the 23 Mission ECHS students who were going to graduate with their associate's degree from El Paso Community College (EPCC) at the end of their junior year of high school. In the beginning, no one really knew what to do because this situation had never occurred to any of the key educational personnel involved in establishing the ECHS concept in El Paso. Turns out, this very first group of students not only were going to meet the institutional goal of earning their associate's degree concurrent with their high school diploma, they were going to do so a full academic year prior. Students who complete their associate's degree prior to graduating from high school are now referred to as Accelerated ECHS students while those who complete their associate's degree and high school diploma concurrently are referred to as Traditional ECHS students.

A meeting of Mission ECHS and UTEP personnel was quickly arranged to determine next steps and one of the first major issues discovered was that since these students had not yet graduated from high school, they were ineligible to apply for federal need based financial aid that most students in the region used to pay for their university tuition and fees. Without this support, almost all of these students would be unable to continue their higher education for the next 12 months prior to high school graduation.

That seemed an unacceptable option to UTEP's president, Dr Diana

Natalicio, long a champion of El Paso students and known for supporting innovative solutions to hurdles that faced the region's student population. She encouraged development of a solution to allow these students to continue their education at UTEP while concurrently completing their high school diploma. Six years later, over 600 Accelerated ECHS students have been able to continue their higher education at UTEP through the Accelerated ECHS Students Scholarship that provides scholarships for tuition and fees for up to nine semester credit hours for up to two semesters at UTEP. The data shows that these Accelerated ECHS students are completing their baccalaureate degrees in greater numbers, in shorter time periods, and with higher GPAs than their Traditional counterparts. Additionally, they are going to graduate school at higher numbers with the first ECHS student to receive her master's degree from UTEP as one of those original 23 students from Mission ECHS.

EVOLUTION OF TYPES OF EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOLS

Overall in the community, there has been an evolution of the types of early college high schools established and operated by an exemplary cooperation between the region's independent school districts and the El Paso Community College. This partnership began from the first established school that accepted its first cohort of freshmen in fall of 2006 to the most recent, and eighth ECHS in the community that opened its doors in the fall of 2015. All of the ECHSs in the community are operated as a high school in the independent school district in which they geographically reside supported by collaboration with El Paso Community College that credentials the teachers in the Dual Credit classes that make it possible for students to jointly earn their high school diplomas and associate's degrees. Dual Credit, as defined by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), is "a process by which a high school [student] enrolls in a college course and receives simultaneous academic credit for the course from both the college and the high school." (2016).

The first four ECHS campuses in the El Paso region were established as stand-alone schools on El Paso Community College campus grounds in fall of 2006 (Mission), fall 2007 (Valle Verde), and fall 2008 (Northwest and

Transmountain). There was great advantage to this model as students and teachers could walk across the parking lot and, therefore, have access to classes at both the high school and college campus. The next two early college high schools were built also as stand-alone campuses but not on community college campuses in the fall of 2010 (Cotton Valley) and the fall of 2012 (Clint). Cotton Valley presented its own unique twist on the model through a collaboration of three smaller independent school districts who each were interested in providing the early college pathways for its students but did not have a student population large enough to support one individually.

The latest model of early college high schools in El Paso is with the two newest campuses established in fall of 2014 (Burgess) and fall of 2015 (Socorro). These two schools are a school-within-a-school model where the early college high school cohort is housed separately but integrated on the larger traditional high school campus.

The evolution of these types of Early College High School demonstrates but one of the characteristics that make this educational pathway so successful in this UTEP / VU Global Partnership – adaptability – while remaining true to the original intent of providing students who are traditionally under-represented in higher education with a pathway that promotes both access and excellence.

CATEGORIES OF ACCESS

Access and Excellence have long been ideals to live by at the University of Texas at El Paso encompassing in just two words the philosophy that this regional university holds as a promise for its students. The concept of access can be broken down into four categories that more fully allow the discussion of what kinds of access.

Aspirational/Expectational Access

To a largely first-generation population, the aspiration of going to higher education is not to be assumed. The collaboration of educational partners in the community from K-12 through community college along with the university to instill the vision of pursuing higher education opportunities is

important. The ultimate goal is to turn this aspirational access of “I think I can” to Expectational Access or “I will”.

Academic Access

Once the goal of continuing higher educational pursuits is established, it is imperative to provide a strong educational structure that provides students with the academic skill set to be successful in a higher education setting. Again, a partnership among K-12, community college, and university personnel is the platform on which these academic successes are built.

Financial Access

For a population residing in a county with one of the lowest per capita incomes in the United States, the ability to support the cost of higher education is a constant concern. Keeping tuition and fees low, providing student employment on campus, and offering financial literacy information are but three of the ways UTEP focuses on keeping higher education within financial reach.

Participatory Access

There are a number of other hurdles that can get in the way of a student’s success in higher education such as transportation, child care, health, and family responsibilities. Providing students with support structures and pathways to address these “life gets in the way” issues can be the difference between attending school or not.

Early College High Schools help all these categories of access. Students apply to Early College High Schools in eighth grade and the conversations about attending them begin before that. Students are encouraged in elementary and middle school to think about higher education through early college pathways building that Aspirational to Expectational Access.

The state of Texas requires students to test as college-ready in order to take Dual Credit coursework, so, for early college high school students, that means testing as college ready as early as 8th or 9th grade requiring students to build their academic strengths at an even earlier stage thereby building

Academic Access to college level coursework.

El Paso Community College is the institution that credentials all the Dual Credit teachers in the region, thereby providing students with college transcripts documenting their college level coursework. They do not charge students for tuition and fees for these courses, receiving only formula funding match from the state of Texas for these semester credit hours. Receiving an associate’s degree through Dual Credit saves a student over \$5,000 USD in community college tuition and fees or over \$16,000 USD in the equivalent of what the same number of credit hours would cost at UTEP clearly making Financial Access an important consideration.

And, finally, because Dual Credit courses are offered during high school hours, many of the potential hurdles to higher education are mitigated through school districts support such as transportation to campus and available child care.

THE JUMP ACROSS THE OCEAN

In the summer of 2011, during the visit to UTEP by the Victoria University team, Dr Donna Ekal, associate provost in the Office for Undergraduate Studies, made a presentation about several of UTEP’s student success partnerships and efforts, including Early College High Schools. The potential of the ECHS model was immediately embraced by the Victoria University team, including Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Dawkins, who saw how this reaching from the university to the high schools could also benefit their rising student population. During the next 12 months, members of the VU delegation consulted with their colleagues, explored opportunities, and determined that a VU interpretation of the Early College High School framework was indeed a possibility.

The following year, during the summer of 2012, Dr Ekal was a member of the UTEP team who travelled to Victoria University where she presented to several audiences about the Early College High School story in El Paso with special emphasis on the partnership of key educational personnel and the benefits to students. In the intervening years, VU and its educational

partners developed the concept of Vic Uni providing a pathway for area high school students to begin the journey to a baccalaureate degree while still in high school.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

In the broader Australian educational, social, economic and political context, the government, after a major review of Australian Higher Education, in 2009 required universities to accommodate the needs of a more diverse cohort of students, setting a target of 20% from a base of 15% of enrolment to be students of Low Socio Economic Status (LSES) by 2025. To achieve this universities needed to examine their current practice including the ways they attracted, supported and enabled more non-traditional students into university. Studies showed that more diverse students can enter and succeed but universities need to change and improve their practices to achieve this. The challenge is for universities to find creative ways of both widening the participation of these underrepresented groups and to better ensure that there is an enabling context that supports success for students from all backgrounds. Victoria University saw the Early Uni Pathways program as one of the approaches to achieving this.

In 2012, a year after visiting UTEP, the Vice Chancellor initiated discussions with schools in the west of Melbourne with predominately LSES student cohorts, and a commitment to a collaborative program that supported the transition of non-traditional students from school to university was made. In the Australian context, students traditionally complete their secondary education and receive a numerical Australian Tertiary Admittance Rank (ATAR) on the basis of their year 12 study which in turn determines which courses they are eligible to enter across Australian tertiary institutions. This ranking system, although offering a ready way of characterising students' readiness for university has increasingly been seen to be less of a direct indicator of success than thought, especially for non-traditional students who do not share the academic capital enjoyed by traditional students.

The potential of an early university pathways program was to offer a different way of accessing higher education, less reliant on the ATAR score and more

from proven study outcomes in a tertiary setting. In 2013, government funding in the form of a Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP) Partnership grant was made available to Victoria University to develop a schools university program to address issues of access and success for students from LSES backgrounds.

The project objectives included:

- Developing, in collaboration with partner schools, a sustainable model to encourage and support students from local secondary schools who are traditionally underrepresented (low SES) in Higher Education to both build and realise their aspirations for tertiary education
- Supporting scaffolded transition into the first year of a higher education degree to not only provide access for these students, but to better ensure success and completion
- Improving student retention and progression outcomes of low SES students from non-traditional backgrounds through the provision of opportunities to build academic readiness
- Building collaboration between school and tertiary sectors to better enable shared and coherent approaches to supporting students through educational transition. The program is the driver for partner institutions to work together and with the university to develop an integrated academic program to achieve this
- Assisting in demystifying higher education for parents of students in low SES schools
- Developing a unique and innovative program building on and customising successful past practice in academic support and transition strategies to better ensure successful outcomes for students



HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS AT
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM

In developing the EUP program, VU drew from its own long tradition in developing and running transition and foundation courses where students are placed at the centre of the learning experience. The learnings from that work with students from a range of backgrounds was successfully taken up in the development of the EUP. Student-centered learning that allows for the co-construction of knowledge was a hallmark of VU's early transition work and this was incorporated into this new program. This approach speaks to the school educators and has become a means to more authentically create a school and university shared space.

A unique program architecture was developed involving four layered and integrated streams:

- Curriculum to Curriculum alignment (senior secondary school study with University units)
- Student to Student support (involvement of university peer support program)
- Teacher to Teacher collaboration (school and university teachers, and curriculum advisors)
- Institution to Institution alignment (collaboration to build an integrated approach)

The program was informed by the following principles shared by the schools and the university:

- Focus on university access, transition and completion for students who are currently under-represented in tertiary education
- Focus on building student capacity to engage in university studies
- Focus on utilising capacity within secondary schools rather than requiring new facilities or programs such as are seen in some ECHS models (US model)

- Flexibility to ensure adaptability to a variety of schools
- Commitment of schools and the university to work collaboratively to overcome policy and funding challenges, keeping the student as the central focus
- Integration sufficient to ensure students see themselves as members of a school and university community
- Provision of financial incentives for students to complete a degree

THE PROGRAM

The EUP program is comprised of Year 11 and Year 12 (two final years of Australian secondary schooling) components:

Uni-Link

Uni-Link is a Year 11 program of 3 hours a week for 10 weeks on campus, which introduces students to tertiary study and promotes their development as independent learners and as members of the university community. The unit is structured to reflect the university systems of student engagement such as lectures, tutorials, learning management system and library databases. The academic content developed for this unit of study was documentary photography. This consisted of the history of documentary photography and the ethical debates surrounding the enactment and subsequent uses of photography to document. The unit culminated in students working in small groups to represent a story of an individual from the local community through photograph and text to be exhibited in a public setting. Students were also required to complete a short academic essay around the ethics of documentary photography. The curriculum approach underpinning this unit is what William Pinar describes as curriculum as complicated conversation, “Because each conversation is distinctive—that is if it is enmeshed in the moment and expressive of the distinctiveness of those participating—it may not congeal into a conclusion” (Pinar, 2012). Meaning the threads of what is explored in tutorial discussions, the varying degrees of participation from

one week to the next is not indicative of what is occurring for each student who attends the program.

Attentiveness to the student and their sense of place in the university is as significant in this program as the acquisition of academic capabilities. Students were attuned to the differences between secondary and university learning environments noting a distinct difference in their pedagogical relationship with the academic when compared to the secondary school teacher. The learning experience introduced students to lectures, tutorials and fieldwork and supported their learning in a university context by introducing them to university systems—on-line learning in a university learning management system, university communication systems and a university student management system. It involved ongoing interaction with university mentors and use of the library network and other support resources. The content of the learning unit was designed by university staff but informed by the school teaching staff who prioritised independent learning and university approaches to learning, including introduction to learning and applying theoretical concepts. Yearly reviews in 2014 and 2015 have resulted in improvements and enhancements of the original teaching program and approach. Students also receive a non-award university unit and preparation for continued university study in Year 12.

Uni-Study

Uni-Study is a program that enables Year 12 students to select and enrol in a unit of study from a selection of first year undergraduate degree units offered at Victoria University (with no tuition fees). This allows students to have an authentic study experience together with other enrolled university students from mainstream first year. These units of study are recognised by the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) as contributing to the student's ATAR score. Upon successful completion of their unit of study, students gain advanced standing for the units passed and guaranteed placement into their first year university course in the following year with a base line ATAR score.

Both programs are embedded in an engagement framework which includes support from university peer mentors, academic support staff and the EUP team.

WHAT HAS VICTORIA UNIVERSITY LEARNT FROM THE EARLY UNIVERSITY PROGRAM IN ITS FIRST FULL YEAR?

The Victoria University program is still very young and there is limited outcomes data to work with. In Year 11, 2014, three schools were involved. 41 of the 47 students finished the course with four withdrawing early and two who did not finish their assessment. All completers were successful in passing the unit. In Year 11, 2015, 116 students from nine schools were involved. 106 finished the course and were successful.

The Year 12 program pilot in 2014 was limited to eight students and one university unit as a proof of concept. All passed their single university unit and six went onto take up university studies in 2015. The other two were taking a year out and it is uncertain at this point if they will take up studies in 2016.

The full Year 12 design is only one year old but semester one results indicated 50% of the 24 students achieved a credit or higher result with 25% of the remaining achieving a pass. Second semester unit results are not finalized. At this point we do not yet know how many of these have gone onto university study for 2016.

In 2016, 13 schools will be involved with potentially 260 students participating in the Year 11 Uni-Link program and up to 120 students in Year 12 (the latter is difficult to estimate because of timetabling and student course design).

RESEARCH

Research to date has involved a mixed-methods approach targeting the views of students, teachers and leaders before, during and after the program. It also looks at the policies, practices and history of the institutions involved and attempts to identify the contributing factors of the design, practice and outcomes of the project in the success or otherwise of the project.

Initial interviews surfaced students' lack of experience of university study; a fear that they would be seen as 'kids' by the other university students although they were in separate classes; various levels of concern that they may not cope with the expectations; various degrees of feeling ready; hesitation and

excitement about attending a university campus; worry that it was outside their comfort zone and concern with working with strangers from other schools.

Post interviews generally displayed considerable confidence in their ability to navigate the university itself and pride in getting to know it through their projects in a way they had not envisaged (university collaborations with the community); an enjoyment in working with and getting to know students from other schools; an excitement about the learning program itself and how university was different to school but also seeing strong links with some content and skills covered at school. Students professed that the program took away their 'fear of university' and reinforced or strengthened their desire for a university education.

The program also authentically alerted students to the impending transition from secondary school to university. Students were able to see the real differences between learning in a university context as opposed to school. As one student commented "No one is telling you what to do and in a way that is scary." The program is able to alert students to the nuances of the culture of university. Teachers of the university program as well as contact staff and leadership of the three schools were also interviewed before and after the Year 11 and Year 12 programs. From these and student inputs, issues are currently being teased out and some interesting insights are emerging. Of the 41 Year 11 students from 2014, 15 took up Year 12 university subjects in 2015 and others were at pains to say that although a university unit did not fit their Year 12 schedules they would resume university studies in 2016.

FINDINGS

The study reinforced our original notions that:

- A shift in student identity can be made in this time, and can act as an indicator of success
- There are distinct benefits in building on institutional experience in curriculum design for transitioning students

- There is an awareness of the importance of bringing the higher education habitus closer to the familial/school habitus of the students (Bourdieu, as cited in Thomas, 2002 p.438)

It also gave rise to new considerations that need to be further integrated into future models:

- An identified need to integrate students' university study into their school load more successfully and overtly
- The importance for students to find commonality between their school work and their university work
- The positive role of student mentors in the learning experience for the students
- The importance of supporting students in their academic skills, especially in the various Year 12 studies
- The potential to have university and school staff work together on course advice

Most importantly, the pilot taught us that the interface between schools and the university is more important than what happens in either institution. This locale is rich with potential but it has to be truly transformational to create real opportunity for individual students. As Liz Thomas (2010) states, there are a wide variety of reasons institutions may wish to increase diversity including funding, new markets, social justice, policy, and staff commitment. However, institutions can respond to student diversity in different ways. Thomas (2011, p.10) notes:

the idealized types are: altruistic (no institutional change), academic (little or no change), utilitarian (special access and additional support mechanism) and transformative (positive view of diversity resulting in institutional development).

Continuous review and evaluation contribute to the ongoing development and success of the Early Uni Pathways program. Findings of the 2014

HEPPP EUP Evaluation (Victoria Institute, April 2015) state:

- The Early University Pathways project established an efficient and ongoing partnership with schools participating in the first phase of the implementation.
- The collaboration between Victoria University and the partnering secondary schools is enabling the development of shared and coherent approaches to supporting students' transitions to university.
- The 'Uni-Link' program is enabling students to gain important aspects of academic cultural and social capital. Students started developing university student identity and self-belief in their capacity to succeed at the university.

Victoria University has still much to learn to build on these very early attempts but an approach such as the early Uni Pathways program that includes co-enrolment and the creation of a school to university space to build an interface that supports successful transition has much to offer our broad community of schools, students and university. We will also continue to learn from UTEP's more mature program and their findings around the part Early College High Schools and the university's accelerated pathway to degree completion. It is an exciting new space for Victoria University.

SHARED CONCLUSION

We see the transformative response to student needs as the real challenge in our work going forward in both locations. Universities need to respond, adapt and co-create the transitional interface in ways that recognize and value the students' knowledge and their position in the learning experience. These are students whose learning and home experience have shaped their views and who do not necessarily see university education as their future; who have commitments to school, work and family; who may be positioned to find university learning as very different and potentially irrelevant and may rely less on their family social capital and more heavily on the support

of their schools for shaping their future.

They are also students who bring a different type of capital and learning characteristics. The same assumptions we make about first year students may not apply to students who have not traditionally expected to attend university. We have to not just work around these characteristics but embrace the reality and work with schools to create a path for these students to access, and be successful in university learning. This emerging third space in the educational experience of students is one that Victoria University and The University of Texas at El Paso will utilise in building the effectiveness of this and other programs for our student populations who, while so far apart geographically, have much in common.

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EARLY UNIVERSITY PROGRAM PHOTOSHOOT



STUDENTS ON CAMPUS AT UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
AT EL PASO