University-Community-School Engagement: Awakening aspirations

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It is more important than ever for universities to engage in local and global communities to encourage young people, from an early age, to consider higher education (HE). The Commonwealth government and the university sector have acknowledged the low participation rate of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in HE. Contributing factors to this complex societal issue include availability, accessibility of HE, academic achievement and the aspirations of students. Various strategies have been developed to increase the number of students from this group participating in HE, with varied success. The post-secondary aspirations of young people strongly reflect the influence of family (cultural capital) and the local environment (social capital), particularly in the later years of primary school.

The aspirations of young people are said to be guided by their interactions with family and the wider community. Engaging the community is an important strategy in exposing students from low SES areas to HE and to encourage them to acquire a tertiary qualification. To increase low SES students’ capacity to aspire, engagement of HE institutions with their community, including school students and their parents would be mutually beneficial. Such engagement can awaken the aspirations of young people and provide knowledge that may assist families to overcome barriers and highlight enablers to HE, which in turn may lead to a change in cultural or social capital.

Awakening aspirations by introducing the notion and purpose of HE enables primary aged students to build insight into their future. These aspirations may
not be a specific profession but the development of skills in a certain area. To support this argument we discuss a program conducted in 2013 and 2014 involving primary school students attending schools identified as having low SES. The program, *My Tertiary Education Day (MyTED): Encouraging primary aged students to consider higher education*, includes the following strategies: a series of four in-class lessons delivered by university staff, an eBook with a story about the aspirations of Edwina (Ted), an Eastern Grey Kangaroo, video narratives by university graduates describing their career pathways, and a university campus visit. The strategies used are designed to encourage and foster imagination and dreaming, to explore possibilities for the future.

MyTED fosters imagination, builds the capacity to aspire and ability to believe that the “future is as limitless as the stars” (Crew, 1997). Ted herself is the product of daydreams and imagination and is used to excite children into discovering their aspirations. Students' aspirations were captured and discussed by using the research method Photovoice. Further, MyTED discusses complex ideas that students may prefer to explore through visual means rather than by taking photographs and writing about them (Knight, 2010). For this reason students are given the option of taking photographs that represent their aspirations or drawing pictures. Students' enthusiasm for drawing created a new research method that we have called MyVoice.

This paper invites critical dialogue and appraisal from conference participants in the area of engagement when dealing with complex societal needs and issues.