



# Old hands show the way

Improving social equity is now a major concern for academic institutions, writes **Emma Haigren**.

CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN Bulldogs player Corey Payne has a mission off the football field: to improve participation rates in tertiary education among young people from Sydney's south-west. And he's assisted by postgraduates at the University of Sydney.

Payne, who completed a bachelor of commerce at the university in 2007, is spearheading a project called the Future Direction Network which provides financial support, mentoring and careers advice to encourage school students in the area to consider university.

"I've been trying to inform students about the benefits of going to university and challenge their thinking a bit," Payne says.

"A lot of the kids in this area see university as being beyond their reach or they finish school and then have no choice but to get employment as soon as possible so that they can contribute to the family income."

In semester one, students in the master of management program were enlisted to act as consultants on the project, researching its target, looking for funding and developing sustainability principles. An associate professor at the university's faculty of economics and business, Nick Wailes, says the project has equipped students for challenges they will face professionally.

"They need to be able to solve real problems, not just theory; they need to be able to work in teams; and they

need to be able to communicate with clients," he says. "This project honed skills that are going to be crucial in the workplace."

Universities are placing increasing emphasis on improving social equity. At the University of NSW, postgraduates volunteer on the ASPIRE program, which has partnerships with 17 schools, mostly in Sydney's south-west. All are identified as having a high number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The ASPIRE program starts as early as primary school, where the focus is on goals and aspirations and awareness of university. At high-school level, trained ASPIRE ambassadors help students with some of the practical issues involved in applying to university.

"The interaction with current university students is so valuable for school students," says the ASPIRE project manager, Fiona Nicholson. "They're exposed to role models who they can identify with and say 'that could be me in the future.'"

The University of Western Sydney engages postgraduates to support its indigenous students, including undergraduates who choose to complete their degrees through a combination of intensive two-week on-campus sessions and distance education from their home towns.

"It's actually quite a difficult way to get a degree: holding down a job and looking after a family," says a senior lecturer at the university's Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education, Terry Mason.

"That's why we'll link them up with a postgrad, so that they can discuss education issues and keeping the balance with family and community involvement or just learn some coping mechanisms if things are getting stressful."

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## Test in the west

FOR Simon Brown, a practical consultancy project with the Future Direction Network was much more than just another unit towards his master of management.

The 22-year-old University of Sydney student, who hopes to work in politics, says the project tapped into his personal convictions.

"I've had a privileged upbringing," he says. "I want to lend a hand and help people who are disadvantaged. A project like this, with the potential to be really beneficial in south-western Sydney, really appealed."

As part of their work on the project, Brown and his fellow management students visited three schools to find out why the university participation rate for that part of the city was below average.

He says it became clear that encouraging students from lower socio-economic backgrounds into higher education was a challenge that needed to be tackled early.

"At first, we were looking at year 12 students but what we realised was that you really need to try and change the culture much sooner than that, working with students from year 7 onwards, getting them to do their homework, encouraging them to stay at school.

"And we learnt that it's not just about providing money to students through scholarships but also providing mentoring and education. It's one thing to help a student get to university but we discovered that first year is the hardest, so it's important to try and build relationships at that stage and encourage them to stay."

**Emma Haigren**