The Generous Boys and the Nice to Meet You Band: students from migrant and refugee backgrounds as leaders in reshaping university values through creative arts-based programmes

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Abstract

As Australian institutions shift towards widening participation in higher education, recent research has strengthened the notion that institutions must challenge their own values to find ways of recognising and sharing the values of more diverse cohorts. This pilot study acknowledges the call for universities to move 'away from the notion that it is the students who need to "adapt" to university' and implements these recommendations through the design and testing of a creative programme intended to assist a specific cohort of students who had recently arrived in Australia as migrants or refugees with post-school transition. Using a combination of qualitative research methods including arts-based consultation workshops, semi-structured interviews, and participatory creative practice to collect data, the research aims to position the voices and aspirations of the students at the centre of the data collected. The 'Room 17 Goes Large' project not only aimed to improve the students' confidence in post-school transition, it also sought to ascertain what kinds of support the cohort valued most, thus providing insights that may assist institutions in better adapting to such cohorts in the future. This research and subsequent article propose a model of practice and initial proof of concept.

Introduction

As Australian institutions shift towards widening participation in higher education, recent research has strengthened the notion that institutions must challenge their own values to find ways of recognising and sharing the values of more diverse cohorts. For example, Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012, 926) argue that

> if universities are to address issues of inclusion, then they must work with their diverse communities not only in ways that encourage access to university, but also in ways that challenge the assumptions and practices that underpin and express the values of the university itself.

Tranter (2012, 913) recommends a similar approach, stating that universities 'must challenge the traditional concepts of merit' if they are to enrol more low SES students.

Meuleman et al. ([2015](), 515) also call for universities to rethink their values suggesting that they move 'away from the notion that it is the students who need to "adapt" to university' and instead find ways to adapt as an institution and provide for increasingly diverse student cohorts.

This research is informed by calls for universities to adapt to diverse communities and work with them to encourage access. This paper discusses the design and testing of a creative programme intended to assist a specific cohort of students who had recently arrived in Australia as migrants or refugees with post-school transition. The cohort was selected in partnership with Milpera State High School (MSHS), a school dedicated entirely to the settlement and English language development of recently arrived migrants from backgrounds where a language other than English is spoken. The students who participated in the project had recently moved to Australia from African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Most of these students were from refugee backgrounds, however, a small proportion of students were from a migrant background. The refugee or migrant background of students was communicated to the researchers verbally, however, the exact visa status of each student was not disclosed.

The following study tests a strength-based programme that was designed to facilitate an environment where marginalised high school students could express their values, needs, capacity, and contribution as potential university students, and where these strengths can be recognised and supported by university staff. The paper then proposes a best-practice model for the inclusion of young people from diverse migrant and refugee backgrounds in tertiary studies.

Armstrong and Cairnduff ([2012](), 926) contend that universities must create 'sustainable partnerships with schools in disadvantaged communities' and engage within 'a framework of mutual benefit and capacity building'. To create a sustainable partnership which allowed for mutual capacity building, the research team worked closely with MSHS staff and students to tailor the project to reflect and amplify the strengths of the students. Subsequently, a week-long programme of creative activities and career counselling with 16 grade 10 students was devised and carried out. The programme not only aimed to improve the students' confidence in post-school transition, it also sought to ascertain what kinds of support the cohort valued most, thus providing insights that may assist institutions in better adapting to such cohorts in the future. This research and subsequent article propose a model of practice and initial proof of concept.

Students involved in the programme were mentored by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) staff to create music, dance, and film works, which were presented as either recorded outputs or live performances. Students could focus on any discipline/ s of their choice and were treated by staff as the directors of the content they created. Each creative discipline (music, dance, and film) was led by two early career mentors who were completing or had recently completed their Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at QUT. At the end of the week's programme the students presented a performance at the QUT CreateX festival, showcasing the creative outcomes of the project to friends and family as well as QUT and MSHS staff. The research then set about determining the impact of the programme in supporting post-school transition for the 16 students.

Importantly, the approach used by the research team recognised the participants as experts in their own lived experience, and positioned them as 'active agents in the process of creating knowledge, reaching a collective objective and solving problems' (De

Vos et al. 2011, 493). By focussing on the strengths and capacities of the participants the research team were also able to adapt the activities and explore shared solutions articulated through the dialogue. This strengths-based foundation has the potential to increase participants' awareness of their own personal strengths (see Norton & Sliep 2019; Bandura 2001; Morrice 2013). This is crucial for marginalised young people, and particularly young people displaced by war and forced migration, to be able to imagine and create a positive future in a new country (Figure 1).

Review of migrant and refugee post-school transition literature

For refugee background cohorts, information about university and enrolment can be opaque and exclusionary (Joyce et al. 2010, 95; Sheikh, Koc, and Anderson 2019, 362–363). Culturally and linguistically diverse adolescents from refugee or other migratory backgrounds, experience significant challenges in engaging with social and educational aspects of Australian life (Kong et al. 2016; Nwosu and Barnes 2014). Successful acculturation involves a process of integrating the culture of their country of origin with the cultural norms of the country of resettlement, with positive acculturation experiences allowing these young people to develop a stable sense of identity and better plan for the future (Mosselson 2006). Despite aspirations to receive a university education, many students from refugee backgrounds 'fail to attain the necessary levels of education required for access to, and participation in, tertiary education' (Naidoo 2015, 21). 'A lack of information about educational expectations, systemic ignorance regarding individuals' cultures and various implications that stem from settlement practices' often results in those students being pushed 'to the margins of the Australian education system' (Naidoo 2015, 210). Consequently, Naidoo et al. (2015, 22–24) comment that tertiary institutions need to 'improve support and transition pathways for this particular group' and conduct more research to devise these pathways. Although building transition pathways is outside the scope of the project, it is within the interest area of the research team.

While Naidoo et al. (2015, 15) argue that students from refugee backgrounds are a diverse and unique cohort who are not the same as 'migrants' or 'new arrivals', the

Figure 1. Room 17 performs at the QUT CreateX festival.

nature of the research team's partnership with MSHS meant the pilot project cohort was made up of students from both migrant and refugee backgrounds. Further iterations of the project design could focus specifically on students from refugee backgrounds, however, issues around awareness of, and access to, tertiary study are common across both groups. Given the challenges migrant and refugee background students face when transitioning to higher education, as well as recent recommendations for higher education institutions to challenge their values and engage with communities, the research team designed a programme for the University to engage with this cohort of students and their community as well as challenge University staff to embrace the values of this cohort.

There is currently limited research on the design of programs required to support refugee and migrant students in a successful transition to tertiary study, or how the needs of these students may differ to the rest of the student cohort (Earnest et al. 2010; Harris and Marlowe 2011; Lenette 2016; Silburn et al. 2008). Lennette argues that while the tertiary sector has been eager to promote equity in students from diverse backgrounds able to access secondary study, 'they have been slow to address the lack of tailored support for refugee students, preventing them from reaching their full potential' (2016, 1311).

Existing academic support programs based on principles of equity often fail to account for the multitude of cultural domains that make up the migrant and refugee cohort (Gale 2009; Lenette and Ingamells 2013). Programs that have had success in community and secondary school settings have focused on strength-based perspectives, incorporating creative aspects such as music (Marsh 2012) and narrative methodology (Hughes 2014) to balance acculturation with cultural maintenance. Such research indicates that successful engagement with students from migrant and refugee backgrounds in the tertiary sector may also benefit from strength-based perspectives and approaches.

Transition programs that do exist at the tertiary level exhibit a tension between the competing demands of small cohorts with specific needs, and increasingly centralised university bureaucracies that struggle to enact the sort of 'agility' that is oft claimed as a prized student quality (see Lenette and Ingamells 2013). Whilst the design of efficacious transition programs poses clear challenges, without appropriate frameworks university staff are forced to respond to student needs in an ad hoc manner, and with many of these staff casual or contracted, this support often takes place outside their contracted hours (Harris and Marlowe 2011). Existing academic support programs may also reinforce normative cultural values and expectations and are frequently framed from a deficit-perspective. While the difficulties associated with learning a new language to the level expected for tertiary study is a common theme across existing literature and research on refugee and migrant experiences (Birman, Trickett, and Vinokurov 2002; Harris and Marlowe 2011; Naidoo and Adoniou 2019), Naidoo & Adonieu identify a conflation of 'language skills' and 'English-language skills' in the tertiary sector, arguing instead that educators would develop better practice by engaging more with the 'linguistic and cultural resources of their refugee-background students' (2019, 112). A deficit-based, or 'needs' based, approach may thus fail to adequately consider the multicultural and multilingual benefits of a student cohort well represented by students from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

In post-school transition programs, deficit models can reframe barriers to be viewed instead as tasks 'the student cannot do' rather than acknowledging the 'institutional and systemic ways by which some students are disadvantaged and discriminated against' (Armstrong and Cairnduff 2012, 925). Gibson and Rojas (2006, 69) also point

out that 'the construction of the "immigrant" as a subject requiring intervention wields substantial symbolic power in "advanced" societies dealing with the "problems" of immigration today'.

Instead of this deficit model, many researchers highlight the need for strength-based collaboration with students (Marsh 2012; Naidoo 2015; Armstrong and Cairnduff 2012). Involvement in strength-based programs can not only change the perceived accessibility of higher education among students (Felton, Vichie, and Moore 2016), but also has the potential to assist higher education staff in recognising and adapting to the values of non-traditional students. For example, Naidoo et al. (2015, 13) find that:

> The distinct and varied prior life experiences of refugee background students can add significantly to the academic and social cultures of universities. Staff should acknowledge refugee background students as an essential part in celebrating diversity and be encouraged to see the prior life experiences of refugee background students as an essential part of the educational experience.

In addition to strength-based collaborative models, Rogers' (in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989) notion of the facilitation of learning provided a useful framework that would foster a space where students could express their values and University staff could be led by these values. Rogers (quoted in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, 304) suggests that the facilitation of learning involves transforming a group into a 'community of learners', including the facilitator. The inclusion of the facilitator as a learner is particularly useful for this project as it was vital that the university staff learn from the students to enact recommendations that higher education institutions need to adapt to diverse cohorts. Rogers goes on to define three qualities that assist in facilitating learning: realness, prizing, and empathetic understanding (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, 306–311). Realness refers to a facilitator being genuine and communicating their feelings rather than presenting themselves as a 'faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement' (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, 306) or in this case, a hollow embodiment of a higher education institution. Prizing refers to valuing and trusting the learner and empathetic understanding is defined as an attempt to view the world through the learners' eyes (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, 310). These three humanistic qualities compliment a strength-based approach and are used to examine the intervention further.

Methodology

This study used a combination of qualitative research methods including arts-based consultation workshops, semi-structured interviews, and participatory creative practice to collect data. The research design reflects these aims and strives to position the voices and aspirations of the students and the experience of MSHS at the centre of the data collected. The approach of the research team aimed to foster a process of social inclusion which Whiteford (2017, 59) describes as 'ensuring people are able to participate fully in the societies in which they live, and in so doing that their unique identities are represented and respected'.

As a group of researchers experienced in community arts and engagement, the research team was familiar with arts-based processes and practices that engage participants in

exploring abstract concepts such as values, and which enable the unique strengths of participants to be embraced. MSHS is the site of a significant amount of research, particularly from health and education research projects, and this project consciously chose non-traditional research methods as the

> conventional research methods, standardised psychometric instruments and textual expressions alone, and data collected in dominant languages alone may be failing to capture the everyday nuances and complexities of migration and health of refugees. Moreover, these studies and research methods may serve to reinforce stereotypical perceptions of refugees as helpless victims that need to be studied, uplifted, and cured. (Guruge et al. 2015, 2)

Huss et al. (2015, 684) find that arts-based methods enable communication 'between different sectors and power levels' and can destabilise 'dominant global "expert" knowledge'. Thus, arts-based methods were adopted as a means of critiquing 'expert' university knowledge and values by privileging the perspectives of students from refugee backgrounds.

Huss et al. (2015, 685) also find that arts-based methods create 'a safe, indirect symbolic space for those without power to define their needs'. Previous projects with MSHS students and staff revealed that creative and arts-based methods elicited more meaningful and representative responses than traditional research methods. A previous research collaboration between QUT and MSHS drew on digital storytelling methodologies as a means of identifying the aspects of the MSHS school environment that are most important for supporting students' wellbeing, from the perspective of the MSHS school community. Dr Hancox, who is also part of this project, facilitated a series of creative and narrative workshops with school staff, students, and their families in order to illuminate a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences of school belonging. These workshops were guided by the principles of digital storytelling: the creative processes sought to elicit the personal, lived experiences of participants, and used digital technologies to record and share these experiences with audiences. The use of storytelling as a means through which to amplify the voices and perspectives of the students and their families reflects the role of the creative methods used in the 'Room 17 Goes Large' project.

Emerging research has highlighted that art and music allow children to represent their experiences in contexts of reduced stress (Harris 2007). This environment of reduced stress was created quite quickly as the students began working with peer mentors and staff from QUT on creative works. The choice of creative discipline (music, song writing, dance, film making) was directed by participants on a session by session basis, leaving them to experience and occupy each of the creative domains at their own pace. A standard session breakdown might see six participants involved in dance activities, five participants involved in music making and singing in either two of the music studios, three students roaming with film cameras or editing, while the remaining two participants might be working on creative writing tasks. These numbers would shift subtly throughout the day as energies and interests evolved, or as group projects changed emphasis. As content matured throughout the workshop programme, the dynamic evolved from a process-oriented creation to presentation-oriented rehearsal and preparation.

The use of creative and experiential methods can reveal and illuminate deeper meanings and more intimate insights into issues (Brady & O'Regan 2009). In particular these

methods support the participants to provide personal responses in ways that are not confrontational and do not make them excessively vulnerable (Galheigo 2014). The mix of verbal (narrative responses) and non-verbal (musical and embodied) create unique opportunities to contextualise the lives and hopes of the participants and to reduce the effects of uneven power relationships within the research project (see Oliveira and Vearey 2017; Fox 2015), and as Guruge states they also are better situated 'to capture the complexity of migration and the experience of refugees' (2015, 75). These approaches and the strength based philosophy create a conceptual framework that centres the voices of the participants and values their experiences and agency.

A series of pre- and post-creative intervention consultation workshops were conducted to gauge participants' perceptions of the barriers and opportunities of post-school transition as well as to uncover the ways in which the previous experiences of the students contributed to the types of skills and strengths they possessed. During the post-intervention workshop, students answered the same questions as in the pre-intervention workshops in order to gauge any changes in their perceptions of higher education. These workshops were conducted at MSHS in the Room 17 classroom. In designing these workshops, which mirrored a focus group method, MSHS staff advised the research team that when asked questions, students would often aim to please and would give answers they thought would be favourable. The research team therefore devised a pre-project and post-project workshop which would be more collaborative and less formal than a standard focus group in order to help mitigate this, and in order to maintain engagement given the participants' age range. It was impossible to audio record every participant's contribution during the workshop, as they worked simultaneously on questions. Therefore, the research team collected the participants' notes, as well as made audio recordings, to build a more holistic account of the workshop.

Despite our attempts to create a fun and safe atmosphere, the responses and the behaviour of the students during these workshops was in stark contrast to their behaviour on the university campus working on the creative outcomes. Their willingness to share personal experiences was also heightened when collaborating and creating. For example, the Generous Boys wrote and performed a song – Mwenye Wivu (Swahili for jealous envy) – about their shared experiences of being in refugee camps and how this impacted them and their families. This is a topic that would not have been discussed in the workshops, in fact we struggled at times to get the students to talk in the most general way about their career aspirations. In the workshops, students would more readily share responses to abstract questions such as 'what would an ideal university look like', than to more personal questions about their hopes. However, through collaborative music-making the participants were able to articulate an important and influential part of their lives. These experiences also provided context for some of the responses about post-secondary study that privileged teamwork, collaboration, and respect. The arts-based methods were also chosen to best enable refugee and migrant background students and their wider community to communicate and define their post-school transition needs to the university community, and to also make the findings more accessible for a wider audience (Figure 2).

Interviews were conducted with MSHS and QUT staff during and after the creative programme. It was vital to capture the perspective of MSHS teachers who attended the week-long programme as not only did they observe their students throughout the week but they also observed what impact the programme had on the students in the weeks that followed

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Figure 2. The Generous Boys recording Mwenye Wivu.

back in the school environment. Interviews with QUT staff (including the group of young mentors) ensured the research would additionally capture how university staff values were challenged and transformed throughout the creative programme.

The design of the week-long creative programme itself was dependent on initial engagement with staff at MSHS. A preliminary presentation to the teaching staff and leadership team at MSHS outlined the workshop programme and its history, model of engagement, key staff, and anticipated outcomes. The selection of the student cohort to participate in the creative project was made by the school leadership team. The school's policy is to combine students into class home rooms based upon a combination of factors including English language skills and time spent in Australia. The student cohort from Classroom 17 was chosen by the leadership team to participate in the project and comprised sixteen students from a variety of cultural backgrounds as described in the introduction. The Classroom 17 student cohort had approximately equivalent basic English language proficiency and, at the commencement of the project, had been resident in Australia for as long as seven months and as recently as six weeks.

Following project approval from the school leadership team, the teaching and leadership team from MSHS were provided with a full orientation of the QUT Creative Industries venues and a detailed briefing on the project model. Post-orientation, teachers were asked for advice and suggestions regarding the need for private/chill out spaces, individual student support needs or other cohort-specific resources.

The creative programme design was also informed by initial engagement with students at MSHS. Academic staff and student mentors from the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT then visited the school to meet MSHS students in their familiar classroom environment. Following introductions and our presentation of the project aims, we invited the MSHS students to discuss and show us their favourite artists and YouTube music videos. This initial sharing of interests and passions was included to facilitate the relationship building process between creative peer mentors and students.

Teachers, students, and those family members who were able to participate, toured the facilities and rooms in which the groups would be working at QUT's Creative Industries.

This orientation to the University built environment included creative spaces, chill out spaces, public areas, and amenities.

This orientation was followed by a creative presentation, where the QUT peer mentors from music, dance, and film showed and performed examples of their work and invited students to participate, though only if they felt sufficiently confident and comfortable. This sharing of creative work is the second stage of the relationship building process and the first stage of social and creative risk taking that characterises the process. The 'real-ness' factor of peer mentor engagement (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, 306) with the participants through the sharing of creative ideas and play provided a foun-dation of trust and reciprocity that was built on throughout the workshop programme. At the conclusion of the session, students were asked to nominate a preferred discipline and/ or creative peer mentor with whom to commence the workshop programme the option to change groups at a later date was available throughout the programme.

QUT academic staff spent two three-hour sessions in the week prior to programme commencement working with student mentors preparing a range of seeding resources for the workshops. This resource preparation was informed by the ideas presented by MSHS students in their two previous sharing encounters and included preparation of several programmed music beds using digital audio workstation applications such as Ableton and Pro Tools, choreographic sequences drawn from favourite videos demon-strated by the students, and a range of vision sequences detailing camera, lighting and staging techniques to use as inspiration for filming approaches.

Pre-intervention findings

The workshop conducted before the creative programme revealed the perceived accessi-bility of higher education among the participant group. The majority of participants ident-ified jobs, careers, or activities (such as I want to be a doctor, soccer player, fashion designer) rather than plans to attend types of post-secondary institutions as part of their post-school plans. Students also displayed positive attitudes towards tertiary study, associating words such as 'freedom', 'dream', 'new skills', 'amazing' and 'new friends' with higher education. Despite students aspiring to, and having positive perceptions, of higher education, students also perceived higher education as an opaque and distant des-tination. When asked 'what are the ways that you know of to get into university?' students responded with words such as 'no idea', 'have lots of money', 'do your homework' and 'study hard'. Students also related higher education with the words 'hard', 'panic', and 'far away'. These responses indicate that while the students interviewed considered higher education as aspirational, there were also perceptions that tertiary study was inac-cessible, establishing the need for higher education institutions to engage with these cohorts to ensure a clearer pathway to post-secondary study.

The pre-intervention workshop also revealed common values among the cohort. When asked 'what skills do you possess that you think would be useful for you at university?' student responses often revolved around inclusive social behaviours such as 'smiling', 'making friends', 'good behaviour', and 'team-work'. Apart from collaborative and inclus-ive social behaviours, students also perceived resilient behaviours such as 'never giving up', 'being responsible for yourself' and 'taking care of yourself' as important skills for higher education. Reflective observations from the researchers suggest that this would be in

somewhat stark contrast to the expectations or perceptions of Australian born students, and anecdotally presents an alternative perspective from the majority of undergraduate students taught by the research team. When describing what facilities, activities, classes, or groups they would include when creating their ideal university, students suggested that 'team work', 'nice people' and 'helping each other' were all part of their ideal university experience. These responses further indicate that students valued inclusivity and collaboration highly. The data collected throughout this project demonstrates clearly that the needs, expectations, and contributions represented by this cohort requires a vastly different approach to attracting, supporting, and retaining undergraduate students than is currently deployed by most higher education institutions.

Creative intervention findings

The experience of musical collaboration and performance within a group context has been found to contribute to changes in behaviour and attitude of students, increasing their sense of peer acceptance and orientation towards mainstream culture (Frankenberg et al. 2016). Given the aim of social inclusion, arts-based workshop methods were selected for this project due to their capacity to enhance a sense of belonging among students, and for their ability to integrate students' lived experiences in their current environment.

Each day began with a check-in, which was a brief contact between individual peer mentors and their group of 3–4 students. The check-in acted as a mood, health and energy check to quickly assess student readiness for participation in creative practice sessions. If mentors felt that a student might not be ready for a planned activity the mentor either exercised their own discretion and encouraged the student to sit out until they were ready, or escalated the matter to supervising academic staff. If relationships strengthened between a student and a creative peer mentor from a different group, they were able to switch mentor groups throughout the week.

To maximise student participation and engagement, the creative sessions were informed by a student-led, strength-based model. In each session the creative peer mentors would introduce skills and concepts that built on the previous session for the students to add further content and themes that reflected their own interests and talents. With each successive session the students led the direction of activities while the peer mentors supported and guided them in the foundations of creative skills. The absence of a deficit-based assessment process nurtured a positive atmosphere of creative play and supported risk-taking. While the project began with a structured set of activities designed to encourage participation and collaboration, this framework receded during the week as students begin to take ownership of the creative direction of the project.

A key aspect of the programme was the reduction of uneven power relationships between facilitators and participants with the treatment of students as directors of their creative work. This allowed for a relationship between facilitators and learners that uses Rogers' (1969) notion of prizing which involves facilitators trusting learners. Rogers (in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, 321) argues that when learners are trusted to develop their own ideas and content, the climate for learning is enhanced. A clear example of this prizing and the application of musical and embodied methods can be seen in how the music peer mentors approached collaboration with the students. Music peer mentor Moss explained that they observed that many of the students enjoyed the

music of Diamond Platnumz in their spare time so when helping to shape the tone of the song they 'tried to shape it so that we were being on the same level as their idol, and making a song and beats that they thought was cool'. They observed that the effect of this was that when the students heard the beats it 'was like their first step into "being Diamond Platnumz". I think it pushed them to have even more fun because they were living their dream also'. This prizing was also evident in the way the dance peer mentors collaborated with the students. Peer mentor Moss commented

> Going into this, I thought it would be us predominantly showing our own choreography and moves that we knew. But 90% of the dance and choreography that will be on stage is theirs. It is moves that they have shown us and taught us.

The prizing that occurred between mentors and students was an essential part of the creative programme as it enhanced the experience for the students, and also allowed the peer mentors to learn what this cohort of students valued most. MSHS home-room teacher Mary Hannigan noted that the most important contribution from peer mentors during the programme was their 'warmth and their consideration of each and every student' rather than their technical skills, again providing evidence that prizing was an integral part of the programme (Figure 3).

Break times were catered with food and drinks and these mealtimes provided a vital role in nurturing social connection and creative discussion. Additionally, the show-and-tell sessions provided an opportunity for all project participants to reconnect as a group and share creative work. New content ideas (both artform specific and interdisciplinary) were frequently mooted during these presentations. Finally, the post-school transition workshops were a sequence of structured interactive presentations that invited students to identify individual interests, aptitudes, and passions, and map these across a sequence of stages from idea to practical implementation. Tools such as the Humanmetrics Jung Typology Test (2018) teased out individual attributes and related workstyles. e.g. Enterprising, Practical, Creative, Helping, Analytical and Administrative.

In keeping with the findings from the pre-intervention focus groups, students continued to value collaboration highly throughout the creative programme. For example, in
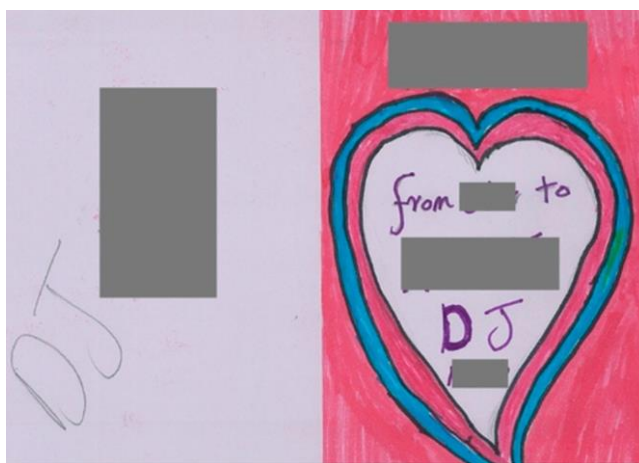

Figure 3. Thank you card from student for peer mentor.

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interviews during the programme when asked what they were enjoying about the experience, one student responded with 'teamwork' and many others described positive aspects of the programme with the word 'respect'. When describing the week's programme another student responded, 'our week was good. I have been in Australia for 7 months. This is the first week I have had fun in Australia'. Another student described the programme by stating 'I have [had] a very good time with funny moment[s], with [both the] mentors and my friends'. These comments illustrate the feeling of belonging and comfort that the process established among the students.

Interviews also revealed students felt excited and comfortable engaging in new activities during the programme. For example, one student described the programme as 'good and life is changing because at school we don't have much, we don't have these activities'. Similarly, a student told the research team, 'I'm feeling excited because it was my first time to sing a song and show everybody' while another explained, 'I have never danced before. Now, I am more experienced. Teamwork'. The post-programme workshop also revealed that friends, classmates, mentors, university staff, and school staff were considered more important by students than performing, place, equipment, or practice. These responses show that this cohort valued respectful collaboration over any material assets higher education institutions may offer (Figure 4).

Post-intervention findings: evidence of transformative experiences

After their engagement in the creative programme, some students displayed more confident perceptions of their post-school transition plans. For example, when asked what they learnt about life at university after the week's programme, one student responded, 'university is not easy, but you have to work on it, you have to try your best to go to university'. The researcher followed up the student's response by asking if it felt like something they could do and the student responded 'yeah, of course'. This quote is representative of a significant portion of students stating that they believed

Figure 4. Room 17 students performing for a video clip.

they would be studying at university in the future. Given that before engaging in the creative project many students related higher education with the words 'hard', 'panic', and 'far away', these interview answers are evidence that the creative programme increased some of the students' confidence in their own abilities to engage in higher education.

Careers counsellor and transition workshop facilitator, Clive May, also observed an increase in confidence commenting that

> I thought it was pretty awesome, that they come in and they're quite quiet and reserved and then we get to the performance and everyone had a role to play. Some of those students who were quite quiet and reserved in the first career session and having a conversation with them was tricky because they were so reserved. And then you see their level of confidence when they put on the performance at the end of the programme.

He went on to note that

> I could see there were times when the students were lacking in confidence and they were supported to push through and get involved and partake in a different activity. So, I think that we have to acknowledge these students are coming from so many different experiences. They have different perspectives but when they were challenged, they were supported to overcome those challenges.

Some students also appeared to have clearer ideas about post-school pathways after the creative programme. For example, one student commented after the creative programme, 'there is not one way to get into university. There [are] many ways to get into university' while another discussed learning about scholarships and how they now feel they have 'more options'. This is perhaps the most significant change in student perceptions of higher education given that when asked 'what are the ways that you know of to get into university?' before engaging in the creative programme students responded with words such as 'no idea', 'have lots of money', 'do your homework' and 'study hard'. MSHS staff such as Room 17 home-room teacher Mary Hannigan also confirmed this increase in clarity of post-school pathway knowledge among students observing that the programme allowed students to 'see where their strengths were' and that students had 'a stronger focus on where they want to go'.

There was also evidence that the programme had a transformative impact on the staff and peer mentors at QUT. For example, dance peer mentor Sarah commented on how her teaching style was transformed by the experience,

> whenever I go into a classroom, it is always on me to engage the students and it is my job to walk into a classroom and have a lesson plan. Whereas for me, the process [in this project] was very much an equal conversation with them rather than me trying to teach them something.

Teaching style was not the only transformation peer mentors commented on; others described how their approach to practice was transformed through the programme. Film peer mentor Alex commented,

> when you are working towards a commercial goal there is often fairly strict guidelines as to how you make the film and how you edit. What that can leave you with is an entrenched view of how things should be made. I think doing this process has changed that for me in some ways − just seeing how kids approach something is very different to how I would do it.

Dance peer mentor Lachlan commented, 'I guess this week has been less commercial and less about getting the steps perfect and getting technique solidified. But this week has been about building relationships with the people we have worked with'. This observation from the mentor aligns with what students said they valued about the mentors ('support', 'respect', being 'friendly' and 'kindness'). These changes in creative and teaching practice approaches from the QUT mentors are evidence of Huss et al.'s (2015, 3 684) assertion that arts-based methods can destabilise 'dominant global "expert" knowledge' as the mentors' expert knowledge of practice and teaching was transformed through collaborative creative processes. These transformations are also evidence that the project fostered what Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012, 926) describe as 'mutual benefit and capacity building' between communities and universities as both QUT staff and MSHS students benefited from the programme.

Universities are uniquely situated in the national education landscape to articulate a best practice model for diversity and inclusion, however, their policies and procedures must develop through engagement with diverse communities. Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012, 926) note that in order to encourage access to universities they must 'challenge the assumptions and practices that underpin and express the values of the university itself'. Meuleman et al. (2015, 515) write that the institutions must move 'away from the notion that it is the students who need to "adapt" to university' and instead find ways to adapt as an institution and provide for increasingly diverse student cohorts. Consequently, Naidoo et al. (2015, 22–24) comment that tertiary institutions need to 'improve support and transition pathways for this particular group' and conduct more research to devise these pathways. Arts-based approaches such as those implemented in 'Room 17 Goes Large' provide an ideal strengths-based model and Huss et al.'s (2015, 685) notion of an indirect symbolic space that fosters inclusion. The processes in this project also exemplify Roger's 'community of learners' in a democratised self-directed open space guided by Roger's humanistic values of unconditional positive regard, empathy, respect and reciprocity.

Conclusion

The imposing front doors of the university sector are a challenge to enter, even for young people equipped with the cultural and economic capital to navigate the higher education system. For senior school students from diverse backgrounds who are more likely to experience equity and access obstacles, obtaining tertiary education and post-secondary school training requires a supported transition process that connects schools and their students with universities and their entry procedures. The ways in which universities engage schools and students requires an understanding that capacity building is not just for prospective students, it is also required by universities. The capacity to recognise and acknowledge the contribution a diverse student population makes is crucial for universities to be willing and able to shift their current practices and procedures, which otherwise can act as barriers for particular student cohorts. Creative post-school transition programs such as 'Room 17 Goes Large' provide a sustainable framework which supports cohorts of diverse young people to engage with the university sector in a way that embraces their unique expert knowledges in a safe and inclusive environment. As discussed throughout this

article, the findings have encouraged the research team to deploy and refine the creative research methods in ongoing projects with diverse cohorts in multiple post school environments to consolidate a mode of practice that is adaptable and evidence based. The role of the creative arts in amplifying the strengths of diverse young people and providing a language through which to share those capabilities should not be under-estimated. The sense of joy, belonging and confidence demonstrated by the participants during their public performance on the final day of the programme was equivalent to any mainstream undergraduate presentation. And this acceleration in place-making and belonging draws its success from the safe and indirect symbolic space that creative practice and play provides.

'Room 17 Goes Large' and similar creative post-school transition programs also provides the University sector with a model to adapt their aims and mission to create an inclusive sense of belonging and to include more of the voices that reflect the diverse society that all education institutions represent.

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