The Office of Widening Participation (OWP) at Western Sydney University delivers more than 50 programs in schools and around the university that aim to increase young people’s educational engagement and aspirations for higher study. These programs are particularly focused on students from low SES backgrounds, supported by WSU students who have received training as Student Ambassadors. Although evaluations of specific programs and impacts on school students have been undertaken, there has never before been a focus on the Student Ambassadors themselves, on their experiences and perceptions of the program, and the impact of their contributions.

RESEARCH AIMS
The project evaluated the impact of participation of Student Ambassadors in widening participation programs at Western Sydney University. It reported on their self-efficacy beliefs, academic and professional resilience, professional skill development, civic and social awareness, connectedness to community and academic outcomes.

FINDINGS
Students and stakeholders were in agreement that the Student Ambassador program was highly beneficial for both ambassadors’ personal and professional growth. Further, it has immediate and ongoing impact for Western Sydney University and its wider community.

Altruistic and personal benefits
While students identified the pragmatic benefits of gaining professional experience and earning money, the majority of students prioritised altruistic benefits such as helping young people and making a difference in their lives, engaging with and giving back to the Western Sydney community, and the satisfaction and enjoyment the experience gave them.

Professional skill development
Professional skill development was a motivation for participating in the Student Ambassador program. These valuable soft skills included leadership, communication, interpersonal skills, flexibility, responsibility, teamwork, time management and initiative. The development of profession specific skills were beneficial, particularly in relation to teaching, social work and nursing careers.

Increased self-efficacy beliefs
Increased self-efficacy was evident across all cohorts and is a significant impact from participation as Student Ambassadors. Feeling you can make a difference in the community was seen as a significant outcome of being a Student Ambassador, who reported they experienced pride and satisfaction in helping others, in particular young people.

Civic and social awareness and connectedness to community
Students’ sense of civic and social awareness was enhanced as a result of their experiences as student ambassadors. Exposure to and engagement with a wide range of people, cultures, and levels of disadvantage through the program led to greater understanding of the barriers to education as well as its potential to transform the lives of individuals and communities. Further, the first-hand experience of the impact they have as student ambassadors in inspiring young people towards higher aspirational goals fostered an ongoing interest in, and commitment for some, in continuing this kind of work.

Academic and Professional Resilience and Academic Outcomes
Alumni reported that their retention and resilience were impacted; they acquired greater confidence in their ability to engage and achieve academically.

Challenges and suggested improvements to the Ambassador program
Organisational aspects included the distribution of work which was identified as an issue by both current students and alumni, and many of them requested both more frequent and consistent work.

Increased or enhanced training was identified as an area that could potentially be improved.

Alumni and program leader interviewees suggested broadening the scope of recruitment to include a wider range of faculties, and to increase opportunities for teaching students to participate.
The Student Ambassador program should be continued, expanded and celebrated as it not only encourages school students to move into Higher Education but also fosters professional and personal growth for the Student Ambassadors themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognise and promote the benefits of working as a Student Ambassador in developing a wide range of skills and dispositions amongst Western Sydney University students.

2. Investigate submitting an application to have voluntary Student Ambassador activities recorded on the Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement given the contribution the role makes to the extension of the experience of the student’s program of study.

3. Recognise that Student Ambassador work is taken up within a network or ecology of outreach activities conducted by the university.

4. Ongoing data collection for program evaluation: We recommend that OWP continue to administer the pre-/post- surveys at two time points annually.

5. Expand recruitment of Student Ambassadors to include students across the breadth of university schools and courses.

6. Given students’ reports of learning about university support structures and programs via their participation as a Student Ambassador, rather than through orientation and communication, we recommend that the university continue to monitor and improve these strategies.

The full report can be found at https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/widening_participation/home/research