INTERNATIONAL STUDIES IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION

RESEARCH PAPER

Practical and profound: multi-layered benefits of a university enabling program and implications for higher education

Nicole Crawford*

University of Tasmania, Australia

This small-scale study focused on the University of Tasmania's (UTAS) University Preparation Program (UPP) in Launceston, Tasmania. It set out to identify the benefits of UPP from the perspectives of former UPP students, once they were in a degree. The research approach is qualitative; former UPP students were interviewed one-on-one or in focus groups, and data were analysed thematically. The themes that arose were expected and practical, such as development of academic skills, confidence and connections, and understanding the expectations and demands of the university culture. In addition, some findings were unexpected and profound; former UPP students had taken on leadership roles in their first semester of undergraduate study, and had changed their long-standing attitudes towards, and understandings of, people from cultures different to their own. Enabling programs, such as UPP, have multi-layered benefits, influences and flow-on effects, which students carry into their degrees, benefiting other students and the university, as well as potentially influencing their families, friends, and communities. Such impacts prompt a reconsideration of the meaning of 'success' in higher education, and challenge the argument that widening participation risks decreasing course quality and lowering university standards. Furthermore, enabling programs are a transition strategy and social inclusion in practice.

Keywords: enabling program; preparation program; bridging course; academic skills; transition to university; social inclusion; student leadership; intercultural understanding

Introduction

Enabling programs, also known as preparation programs, bridging courses, and access programs, have been operating on the margins in the higher education scene for decades, in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA, equipping students from under-represented backgrounds with the skills to make a smooth transition to degree-level studies. High attrition rates and default measures of success (such as reports on numbers of students per unit, withdrawals, retention, and pass/fail rates), often eclipse the positive outcomes of enabling programs, as do arguments about the widening participation agenda lowering universities' quality and standards. The default measures of success are based on quantitative data and are only one perspective. This study offers another perspective, of a qualitative nature; it explores former enabling students' perceptions of the University of Tasmania's (UTAS) University Preparation Program (UPP) once they are studying in a degree. An analysis of the qualitative data reveals expected, unanticipated, and profound benefits of undertaking studies in an enabling program, some of which make an impact on the former UPP students' new classmates in their degree programs, thus benefiting the university, and also, potentially, their families, friends, and communities. The multi-layered benefits, influences, and flow-on effects of enabling programs also have implications for universities

---

* Corresponding author. Email Nicole.Crawford@utas.edu.au

in terms of higher education agendas and policies, such as social inclusion, widening participation, and transition to the first year.

To provide a broader context for this study, the article will commence with background to enabling programs, UPP, in particular, and a brief overview of the literature on enabling programs. Then the methods will be outlined, before presenting and discussing the themes that arose. Finally, some implications of the findings will be raised.

Context and characteristics

The last thirty years have seen an expansion of under-represented groups in higher education, with a focus on widening participation for equity, economic, and social justice reasons (Tomlinson & Basit, 2012). In the UK, for example, many of the so-called new universities (also known as post-1992 universities) have embraced the widening participation agenda (Tomlinson & Basit, 2012). The emphasis in Australian universities on widening participation and social inclusion, in response to key documents, such as Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, and Scales' (2008) *Review of Australian Higher Education* and the Australian Government' (2009) *Transforming Australia's higher education system,* has seen renewed interest in university enabling programs (Klinger, 2010; Muldoon, 2011). Echoing the mantra of the renowned American researcher of student success in higher education, Vincent Tinto, the core philosophy of enabling programs is the belief that simply providing students from under-represented backgrounds with access to university is not enough; access alone does not guarantee success and is not opportunity (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Klinger, 2010; Smith, 2010). As a result, many universities offer enabling programs to provide students with the skills to participate, engage, and succeed at university.

University enabling programs aim to improve students' academic skills, and, facilitate the development of their connections to the university, staff, and peers by immersing students in the university culture and environments (Klinger, 2010; McIntyre, Todd, Huijser, & Tehan, 2012). Enabling programs attract students from under-represented groups (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014; Klinger & Tranter, 2009); students tend to be mature-age and/or from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, humanitarian-entrant backgrounds (that is, from refugee backgrounds), and rural areas. They are frequently also first-in-family. In addition to preparing students' academic skills, enabling programs are often an alternative pathway into a degree for under-represented students, who would otherwise not contemplate nor qualify for entry to a degree program (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011). Enabling programs attract students who desire to change their economic and social circumstances, and those of their families (Klinger & Murray, 2009). They are usually exempt from the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), which means they are free or have minimal fees (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999). While enabling programs vary, they tend to be run over a semester or year; some are skills based, while others offer study in discipline areas. Potential students are not usually tested prior to entry, and their previous educational results do not normally have a bearing on them being accepted (Archer et al., 1999). Enabling programs and staff working in them generally aim to be inclusive in their enrolment procedures and teaching practices; as Archer et al. (1999, p. 35) explain: they 'tend to be imbued with a social equity ethic'. Although not universal, they are inclined to create supportive atmospheres, both between staff and students, and between students (Archer et al., 1999; Klinger & Wache, 2009).

Typically, attrition is high in enabling programs, substantially higher than for undergraduate courses (Muldoon, 2011; Ramsay, 2004). In Australia, attrition rates for enabling programs range from approximately 45% to 58% (Bennett et al., 2013; Cooper, Ellis, & Sawyer, 2000; Muldoon, 2011). Given the diverse educational backgrounds of enabling students, and the fact that entry qualifications are not required, high attrition rates are not surprising and need to be interpreted carefully; in fact, some attrition can be viewed as positive (Bennett et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2000; Klinger & Murray, 2011; Muldoon, 2011; Onsman, 2008; Smith, 2010). The experience in an enabling program, as Onsman (2008, p. 11) explains, may allow a student to make 'the informed decision that university will not provide the education desired'. Similarly, Bennett et al. (2013, p. 144) point out that what may be viewed as negative (for instance, a student not completing the course), may, with a broader understanding of 'success' and 'failure', actually 'be "positive" for the student who has experienced a significant shift in aspiration, opportunities and education as an outcome of engaging in enabling education for a period of time even though they did not complete.' Examples of positive attrition include students withdrawing to commence employment or to commence a TAFE course, which they deem is more suitable for them than university (Cooper et al., 2000). In other cases, in the early weeks of an enabling program, students may realise that the commitment required is not feasible at that time in their lives. They may resume the course subsequently, once they have organised practicalities like transport, day-care, IT, and work schedules.

Literature: Outcomes and impacts of enabling programs

In recent decades, researchers have investigated the outcomes and impacts of enabling programs. Several studies have compared undergraduate students who entered a degree via an enabling program with students who entered via general entry pathways. Clarke, Bull, Neil, Turner, and Birney (2000) found no significant difference in either retention or academic success. However, looking at grade point averages in a study of enabling programs at the University of South Australia, Klinger and Tranter (2009) reported that enabling students performed better. Archer et al. (1999) discovered that the enabling students were motivated to understand the work, more likely to persevere, and more confident. Using Charles Sturt University's (CSU) enabling program, StudyLink, as a case study, Smith (2010) argues that the skills, knowledge, and confidence gained assists with the transition to the first year and facilitates a positive first-year experience. Similarly, in an Australian higher education funding report, Lomax-Smith et al. (2011, p. 125) suggest 'that enabling courses are providing more than just academic preparation and also help the adjustment to the university environment'.

Several researchers have highlighted the transformative effects of enabling programs. In addition to the academic outcomes, such as learning content knowledge, Cantwell (2004, pp. 355-356) explains that enabling students begin 'to think differently about the nature of knowledge and learning and about themselves as learners'. Willans and Seary (2007, p. 450) describe the STEPS enabling program at Central Queensland University as being a 'transformative experience', particularly as the environment leads students to challenge their often long-held assumptions. Furthermore, it is viewed as potentially life-changing (Willans, Harreveld, & Danaher, 2003). Debenham and May (2005) also discuss the transformations that students undergo, as do Klinger and Murray (2009). In regard to StudyLink at CSU, Smith (2010, p. 9) concludes that it provides 'tangible and widespread benefits to students, the organisation, the higher education sector and the community in general'. This paper will reiterate findings in the literature of enabling programs, but it will also extend and add to the

field by highlighting some profound benefits, which fit into the category of transformative outcomes, and have not been detailed in previous studies.

The University Preparation Program (UPP) at UTAS

UPP is a pre-degree program at UTAS, which is delivered state-wide in Hobart, Launceston, and Burnie, as semester-based and intensive courses. As its name suggests, UPP aims to prepare students to succeed at university by improving their generic academic skills, such as written and oral communication, numeracy, and critical thinking. Mirroring the delivery of degree courses, UPP students enrol in units, and attend lectures and tutorials, the major difference being that UPP units are skills-based, and tend not to focus on disciplinary content. Units are taught on-campus and by distance (via the UTAS Learning Management System). Students can study the semester-based course full-time or part-time. Since 2012, UPP has been part of the UTAS formal institutional enrolment processes, which, as Smith (2010) points out, is useful for the students to become familiar with the broader university administrative systems before commencing their degrees.

UPP was developed on the UTAS Cradle Coast campus, a small regional campus in Burnie; delivery commenced there in 1996. Since its inception in Burnie, the program was gradually extended with support for distance students based in Hobart and Launceston. Since 2011, the program has expanded greatly to the extent that most units are now taught on-campus on the three campuses, and via distance. With the introduction in 2012 of the Bachelor of General Studies (Foundation year) pathways, UPP is now part of a suite of pre-degree programs at UTAS.

UPP caters for students individually; while one student may study three to four UPP units per semester (that is, full-time study) for a year, in order to be prepared for the transition to a degree, another student may launch into a degree after studying one UPP unit. Therefore, a student's prior educational and work experiences are considered, as well as other commitments they have in their lives, and their aims, when assisting students to select the type and number of UPP units. In addition to participating in the units' lectures and tutorials, UPP students receive support from Campus Coordinators, and can also attend weekly drop-in help sessions.

At the Launceston campus, where the study was conducted, the UPP cohort is diverse in age, cultural background, and life experiences. A typical UPP lecture/workshop class in Launceston would consist of twenty to fifty students from a variety of backgrounds such as: single parents from low SES backgrounds; young men and women who have worked in unskilled areas or have been unemployed for many years; humanitarian-entrants (many of whom have spent numerous years in refugee camps in Africa and Nepal[i]); voluntary migrants; students with mental illnesses, physical and learning disabilities; and retirees, who are part of the 'Tasmanian Healthy Brain Project.' UPP, then, is well established and caters for a range of individuals through scaffolded academic skills-based units, support and pastoral care, and flexible delivery options.

---

[i] In recent years, approximately two thousand migrants from refugee backgrounds have been resettled in Launceston and Hobart. Several hundred Bhutanese live in Launceston, as do humanitarian-entrants from African countries, Myanmar, and Afghanistan.

Methods

The main aim of this research was to discover students' perceptions of their experiences in UPP once they were in a degree. As the raison d'être of UPP is to prepare students for university, examining the experiences of former students offers a student perspective on whether and/or how the program prepares them for further studies. The research is qualitative; a qualitative approach is an obvious choice for a study in which the researcher aims to understand and explore the participants' personal experiences (Creswell, 2008). A major advantage of a qualitative approach is the depth the data provides (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In keeping with the qualitative approach, data were collected from interviews (one-to-one, and focus-group). Interviews enable the researcher to explore the participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections more deeply than quantitative surveys or institutional data on retention, attrition, and grades.

Former UPP students were selected as participants for this study as they would have had more time to reflect on their experiences in the previous semester in UPP; the assumption is that the students' understandings of the benefits and challenges of the program would be richer once they were in a degree and among other students who had not studied in UPP. Furthermore, medium-term benefits could have begun to emerge. At the same time, UPP would not have been a distant memory.

Following ethics approval, Launceston UPP students who completed a core UPP writing unit the previous semester were emailed with an invitation to participate in interviews/focus groups with the author during the first semester of their degree program (the semester after they finished studying in UPP), which was in first semester, 2012. The timing depended on their availability and ranged from meeting during the mid-semester break up until the end of semester. The original intention was to hold focus group interviews, but due to student availability, some of the interviews were one-on-one and others were focus groups. A total of nine former UPP students attended the one-hour interviews on the Launceston campus. Open-ended questions were asked 'so that the participants [could] best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher' (Creswell, 2008, p. 225). The interviews were semi-structured.

The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission; they were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was performed, following steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes emerged from each student, as did common themes between students. The findings were then compared with Australian literature in the field of university enabling programs and related areas.

Limitations of the study include the small-scale nature of the project; given it is a pilot project, though, there is room for performing further research to validate these findings. However, it is not unusual for qualitative studies to have low participant numbers compared to quantitative studies. Another possible limitation is the power imbalance between the interviewer (also the author) and the interviewees (Creswell, 2014, p. 188). The interviewer was known to the interviewees, as their former teacher; it could be the case that the interviewees may have wanted to please the interviewer. A counter-argument is that the interviewer was no longer the students' teacher at the time of the interviews, as they had moved on to degree courses; that is, the interviewer had no involvement in their current course. It could also be suggested that the interviewer may have had a vested interest in good outcomes. These limitations were addressed by following interview guidelines, and by triangulating the findings against the literature.

Findings and discussion

As someone who works in the area, I did not arrive at this research free of assumptions and opinions. I expected (and hoped) to hear that UPP students were improving their academic skills, and learning how to be university students, in order to make a smooth and successful transition to their degree studies. To some extent, I heard what I expected to hear. More interesting and profound, though, were the somewhat unexpected benefits and flow-on effects that students articulated in the interviews.

The main themes to arise from the interviews can be divided into five areas:
1. Academic skills
2. Confidence
3. Connections, belonging, and identity
4. Leadership roles: students helping students
5. Intercultural understanding
The first three areas are goals of the program, and, therefore, were not entirely unexpected; they are, indeed, confirmation that UPP was achieving its intended aims. The last two areas were what might be described as more profound benefits or flow-on effects. This section will discuss the five areas. The names provided when quoting or paraphrasing the interviewees are pseudonyms and reflect the participants' gender.

1. Academic Skills

All interviewees mentioned that they had learnt academic skills, including: essay writing (question analysis, essay structure, referencing); critical thinking; oral communication (student-to-student and student-to-teacher in the context of a tutorial or lecture, and in front of their peers and teacher in the context of presenting a talk on a subject); and general study skills (such as time management). Wayne added that these skills were now 'second nature' to him; he did not need to stop and think about how to structure an essay, for instance. Steve stressed that learning about essay structure had been very beneficial, and that having completed the first semester in an Arts degree his essay structure had never been questioned by his markers. Most students commented on learning critical thinking skills in terms of it being a revelation to them. Hyori emphasised the benefit of critical thinking, saying that it 'was the best best part' and 'Uni is all about this'. She added:

> *'I wasn't really aware of critical thinking. … I wasn't aware of it – different angles. The whole thing is* [the] *foundation for me and pretty sure for others too – especially when doing assignments. Answering the question – I think it's based on critical thinking too.'*

Hyori was shocked by the lack of attention her new peers paid to this step. Max (a general labourer since leaving school six years earlier) commented that he broke essay writing down into the micro skills of sentence and paragraph structure, and grammar. He also highlighted referencing as a crucial new skill. The students' comments implied that they had the ability to dissect academic skills, and also illustrated that they had developed a more holistic approach and understanding, as the skills became 'second nature' to them.

Given the central focus of UPP is the teaching and learning of generic academic skills, it was anticipated that the interviewees would mentioned the various practical skills that they

had developed. The extent to which they remembered the fine detail of micro skills, appeared to acquire the skills more generally, and spoke of using the skills gained in a new context is of note, as is the fact that questioning information/thinking critically is a new and revelatory concept to them.

2. Confidence

In the process of articulating the aforementioned academic skills, most of the interviewees noticed that the new skills were aspects that they were comfortable with, but their new peers (in degrees) were not. They felt they had confidence in their skills, and, as Max articulated, were 'ahead of the ball'. Max continued by saying he is 'less stressed' and does not need constant affirmation from staff, as he knows he is on the right track. Fiona and Wayne agreed that they were quicker to interact than the new students. Steve noticed that 'the kids [i.e. students straight from high school] struggled a lot with essay writing'. Lara offered a different perspective. In her Arts units, she noticed that all of the students were at different levels. In contrast to Steve's perception, she found that 'some of the young ones are really switched on', and she would not claim that she has an advantage. She felt that UPP 'created a level-playing field'; she would have felt 'behind if she hadn't done it'.

The interviewees explicitly remarked that UPP had boosted their confidence with their studies, and with interacting with their peers and staff. Hyori explained that doing UPP has

> 'helped to build my confidence, especially with answering questions in [the] classroom, [which] can be quite confronting… [Now] I do contribute [in class] I do contribute cultural aspects, different aspects.'

In regard to communicating with people, Max added: 'I probably don't have the greatest social skills, but it helped me with communicating with other people'. Max stressed that UPP had given him a lot of confidence. He 'was at least six years out of school. UPP was confronting and intimidating at first… bit of a culture shock [having been] a general labourer.' For Nellie (a mature-age student studying Visual Art), in UPP she learnt that she could ask questions and she gained the confidence to do so.

These comments are supported by findings in the literature of enabling programs. In their study of undergraduate students at the University of Newcastle, Archer et al. (1999, p. 52), for example, found that mature-age students, who entered degree courses via an enabling program were 'coping at least as well' as younger students who entered via the mainstream pathway. Furthermore, they highlighted the fact that the former enabling students 'appear to possess the confidence and motivational orientation that should help them to persist with their studies even when difficulties arise' (Archer et al., 1999, p. 52). Smith (2010) also found students attributed the program to their increased confidence, as did Walter (2000) in a study at UTAS. To summarise, the interviewees felt ready and even ahead of the other new students when they commenced their degree. They had the confidence to engage with new students and their new course, and the skills to cope.

3. Connections, belonging, and identity

A third major outcome of the program, mentioned by all interviewees, is the connections that students make with their peers, staff and the institution. In regard to the students' peers, their relationships were both academic and social. The interviewees were comfortable asking questions, and seeking help and support from each other. Fiona and

Wayne articulated the importance of making social connections, as did Lara, who made the point that the social contact meant she was not isolated. Hyori explained that she felt emotionally supported by her peers, adding: 'we were in the same boat; we understood each other [and] encourage each other'. She mentioned that she still contacts the UPP classmates she met the previous year (via text, email, and they have lunch together), and that it is 'nice to have people I know'. Max has a chat to the acquaintances/friends he has made when he sees them around the campus. For Steve, knowing some people (from UPP) was very important in the first month of his degree, and he has since made new connections.

In relation to connections to the university, Fiona and Wayne listed off staff and campus services, such as the library, café, newsagent, student support services, and security. Likewise, other interviewees showed an awareness of the support services available, and expressed a familiarity with the physical environment, such as the library. In addition, the interviewees commented that they felt connected to the university and had an identity as a UTAS student. One student commented that the campus felt like a 'second home now' and they 'know where everything is'. Similarly, another said that they 'feel at home' and that the campus is 'familiar territory'. Another mentioned that she 'feels every right to be here'. Nellie, who is significantly older than her peers in Visual Art, feels that she belongs despite her age. She quoted an encouraging comment from a young student in her course: 'I've seen you around and you're so cool'. The connections that students made with their peers, staff, and the University led to students gaining a sense of belonging to the institution and developing a new identity as a university student.

Again, the above comments are supported by the literature. Writing about an entry course at the University of South Australia, Ramsay (2004, p. 297) highlights the 'unusually powerful' support amongst the students:

> '[The students] *bond together as a cohesive group, sharing life as well as study difficulties, arranging social activities out of school hours as well as choosing to work together rather than at home alone, despite their many other responsibilities and the time pressures they face as a result.*'

The same supportive relationships and bonds developed between UPP students. In an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) study of commencing undergraduate students, '[m]ost students agreed (54%) or strongly agreed (37%) that having a close group of friends at university would be important to provide support at university. However, 25% of students did not have any friends who were attending the same university' (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke Da Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011, p. 13). The experience of UPP students, though, is that friendships are formed. Cocks and Stokes (2013) also found enabling students built peer and staff networks. Debenham and May (2005) mention the importance of an enabling student's connection to their peers, as well as to staff.

The three anticipated outcomes mentioned so far (academic skills, confidence, and connections) are interrelated; the acquisition of skills leads to confidence, and confidence leads to creating connections, feeling a sense of belonging, and developing a student identity. Academic skills, the institutional environment and its expectations become 'second nature' to students. Furthermore, thinking critically transforms students on many levels, within and outside of university (Willans & Simpson, 2004). Through academic study, students undergo changes, beyond acquiring academic skills (Debenham & May, 2005; Willans & Seary, 2007;

Willans & Simpson, 2004). This new identity as a student is a 'new way of being in the world' (Maher in Debenham & May, 2005, p. 96).

Cantwell (2004, pp. 355-356) suggests that the teaching and learning that occurs in enabling programs goes deeper than the superficial acquisition of skills; the process students go through to be prepared for degree studies is a process of 'getting it'. Cantwell (2004) reports that the enabling students change the way they think. In regard to the University of Newcastle enabling program, he asserts that the students' experience 'has resulted not only in gaining certain content knowledge, but has also resulted in the beginnings of fundamental metacognitive and affective development' (Cantwell, 2004, p. 357). Cantwell (2004, p. 357) elaborates:

> 'Getting it', then, may be seen as a process of transition. It reflects a shifting capacity on the part of the learner to conceptualise the nature of learning problems and to provide strategic options in meeting and surpassing these problems. At a certain point in the transition process, we might suggest that the student has achieved a critical level of competence that we deem appropriate to undertake undergraduate level study.

In terms of transition and First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) literature, numerous studies and projects have focused on the various challenges students face in the first year of their degree (Elliott, 2002; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Kift, 2009). The findings thus far from this study show that enabling programs help to combat and overcome many of the academic-related and social barriers, thus confirming suggestions made in the literature of enabling programs that they are a successful transition strategy (Cantwell, 2004; Klinger, 2010; Smith, 2010; Walter, 2000; Willans et al., 2003).

Grouped together, the three aforementioned benefits can be seen as a transition strategy to university studies. More profoundly for the individual student, these outcomes, in combination, result in transformations. The next two profound benefits to be discussed are a result of the confidence a student gains and the transformations they undergo.

4. Leadership roles: students helping students

The first unanticipated theme to arise was the fact that some former UPP students took on what could be called leadership or mentoring roles in their first semester of their degree studies. For example, Fiona and Wayne explained that they 'teach/help' other students. They talked about passing skills on to other students and becoming teachers to other students. Steve also behaved as a 'student teacher'. Particularly in the first month of the semester, he showed 'young' students what he had learnt about essay writing in UPP. Fiona was a fount of all knowledge to her new peers and even to a new staff member. She described herself as being 'like a student teacher', as she was often showing her peers 'how to be students', what is required in academic writing, and how to reference. Wayne commenced nursing in 2012, and in the first few weeks of semester, he and another former UPP student 'recognised the need for a study group'. They approached students in their two tutorial groups to form a study group. They booked a room in the library for weekly study sessions, which often went for several hours. The former UPP students took the initiative, and had the confidence, to form study groups and/or to help their peers in the first semester of their degree. This leadership or helping others was informal, voluntary, and not prompted by staff.

This particular finding around student leadership fills a gap in the literature, which is minimal. Cooper et al. (2000, p. 6) note that former bridging students in their first semester of

their first year in Nursing and Social Work degrees 'can be seen to be actively supporting the new students'. The findings of the UPP study show peer support being taken to a higher level. Showing this type of initiative in the early weeks of a student's first semester in a degree would appear to be unusual. This theme of leadership or peer mentorship could be viewed as a 'positive spin-off' or 'value-adding' for the university. This is not a specific aim of the program, but a beneficial flow-on effect. What needs to be highlighted here is that the once 'unlikely' university students (that is, the former enabling students, who would not have gained entry without an enabling program) are the students who are helping the new students that entered via general entry/a mainstream pathway.

5. Intercultural understanding

Perhaps an even more profound impact of UPP is the increase in intercultural understanding that students identified. In one of the focus groups, two students (who both live in rural areas outside of Launceston) spoke openly and honestly, and entirely unprompted, about their new experience of meeting and becoming friends with students in UPP from refugee backgrounds (that is, humanitarian entrants). For example, Fiona spoke of the positives in relation to the diversity of backgrounds in the UPP cohort:

> *'I like how there are [migrant] students. I've made friends. This is the first time I've met people from these countries or even seeing [sic] people from these countries. Most of my friends [at uni] are from different countries.'*

Wayne, a mature-age student in his forties, observed the difference between how one could behave at uni compared with in so-called 'normal' life:

> *'The uni setting is very different to the school setting. It's not segregated; it's inclusive.*[ii] *Interaction with lots of nationalities in UPP is very beneficial….broken down barriers and stigmatism. It's a good way to open up your eyes to different groups without prejudice. I lived a sheltered life.'*

The above quotation suggests that Wayne found university life to offer a sense of freedom to cross what he perceived as social/cultural barriers, and he reflected deeply about the life he had lived. He added:

> *'The size at Newnham* [the campus in Launceston] *is the right mix. Groups accept anyone without discrimination and you don't have to qualify to be in a group… you can draw* [migrant] *students into your group and … It's a great opportunity for Tasmania. Interaction of different groups.'*

He further stressed the possibility to interact with any group in the university context and contrasted it with life in what he called the 'mainstream':

[ii] Wayne's use of vocabulary, such as 'segregated', 'inclusive', 'barriers', 'stigmatism', 'prejudice' is of interest. This language flowed freely and was entirely unprompted. While the word 'inclusion', for example, is common parlance for teachers and researchers, there had been no mention of the word until it brought up by the interviewee.

> *'Uni is an exception to the rule. If you want interaction with ethnic groups, go to uni – it's allowed. A little pocket of westerners interacting with ethnic groups – doesn't hold the rule of what happens in mainstream. An education for us.'*

Fiona emphasised the reciprocal benefits of the engagement and friendships:

> '[UPP is] *a way of introducing* [migrant] *groups* [from refugee backgrounds] *to Tasmania – possibly the only interaction they have. We learn off one another. We learn to be patient. We learn to listen. We learn about different religions and cultural backgrounds.*'

For Fiona, meeting students from different countries has been 'the best thing about coming to uni', and she also recognised that it was a benefit of being an on-campus student. Max also brought up the fact that he enjoyed the experience of communicating with his peers from different countries, such as from South Sudan and Bhutan.

For these interviewees, experiencing rich diversity in the on-campus classes in UPP has had a profound impact. These students have, some for the first time in their lives, engaged in intercultural communication; have become friends with students from cultural backgrounds different to their own; have become interested in cultures and religions other than their own; and have reported learning patience, tolerance, and understanding. Finally, some admit changing their ideas and attitudes. No specific reference is made in the literature of enabling programs about this type of benefit, which shows that this research is adding original findings to the field. It is an example of critical thinking and of the 'thinking differently' referred to by Cantwell (2004), and the transformation that occurs to enabling students as discussed by Willans (2010), and Debenham and May (2005).

A divergent, but significant, topic of concern for many universities is the fact that domestic students and international students tend to be involved in passive engagement, rather than deeper two-way engagement. It is unclear what has caused the productive and powerful two-way intercultural engagement found in the UPP cohort; it may be due to the context and size of classes on the Newnham campus, and to the particular atmosphere found in enabling programs. Whatever the case, more research may shed light and be insightful for staff and universities concerned with the isolation of international students.

In the literature about enabling programs, several writers make concluding remarks or suggest that enabling programs have the ability to benefit the university more broadly, the students' families and communities, and/or that this is an area that needs to be researched further (Murray & Klinger, 2011; Ramsay, 2004; Smith, 2010). The examples in this paper of student leadership and intercultural understanding, in presenting explicit illustrations of the multi-layered impact of enabling programs, address a gap in the literature on the benefits of participation in university enabling programs.

Implications for higher education

Enabling programs are a contained site for considering higher education agendas and strategies, such as widening participation and social inclusion, and related issues around 'quality', 'success' and university 'standards'. The benefits of enabling programs discussed

in this article prompt a consideration of how these agendas and issues play out in the context of enabling programs. While there is not room to explore these areas fully in this paper, this section will briefly pose three related implications.

Firstly, the benefits of enabling programs prompt a reconsideration of the notion of 'success' and 'quality' in higher education. The benefits discussed in this paper are not measurable in the same way as grades, and rates of retention and attrition. In studying attrition in enabling programs, Bennett et al. (2013, p. 142) argue that the complexity of reasons why students leave enabling programs cannot be adequately understood when using the narrow definitions of educational 'success' and 'failure' used by institutions. Using the same argument, it can be said that the multi-layered benefits of enabling programs are not adequately understood because of limited understandings of 'success'. Therefore, broader definitions of 'success' are required. The same reasoning applies to the term 'quality', which is often 'measured by league tables and other performance indicators' (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010, pp. 124, 128).

Secondly, the 'flow-on' effects of enabling programs highlight the benefits of the widening participation agenda in higher education, and challenge the notion that widening participation impacts negatively on 'quality'. The findings suggest that some successful enabling students go on to do more than originally expected of them. They are unanticipated peer helpers/teachers, and unexpected peer leaders. They are the catalysts for flow-on effects on the university, and potentially for their families, and communities, thus illustrating that in addition to creating a level playing field, enabling programs 'value-add' for the university. The findings that enabling students 'value-add' and have 'flow-on' effects challenge the perception that massification in higher education and maintaining 'quality' are mutually exclusive. This suggestion is supported by the work of Gidley et al. (2010), and Willis and Joschko (2012) who challenge the perceived conflict between increasing access to universities and maintaining quality. The positive 'flow-on' effects highlight the benefits of engaging and preparing students from under-represented backgrounds, and, of the widening participation agenda.

A final implication is that enabling programs are an exemplar of social inclusion in higher education. Gidley et al. (2010) offer three perspectives on social inclusion: Neoliberalism, Social Justice, and Human Potential. Using these terms, which present degrees of inclusion, providing 'access' accords with neoliberal theory; 'participation' accords with social justice theory; and 'success' with human potential theory (Gidley et al., 2010, p. 131). The benefits of an enabling program clearly go beyond providing access, to include participation and engagement, and go even further by creating the conditions for 'broader cultural transformation' (Gidley et al., 2010, p. 135). The provision of enabling programs, therefore, is a social inclusion strategy, and the nature of enabling programs is such that they promote social inclusion in a number of ways and on a number of levels. Cocks and Stokes (2013) make a similar point in regard to an enabling program.

Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that students who transition from an enabling program to a degree arrive in their first semester of their degree course equipped with generic academic skills necessary to make a smooth start. In addition, they already have support networks (academic and social) with their peers, familiarity with staff in student services, and are adept at navigating the built and online university environments. Furthermore, they have an identity

as a university student, a sense of belonging to the university, and the confidence and skills required to take the next step.

The benefits of enabling programs, however, go beyond the original intentions and expectations of the institution, staff and students; they are multi-layered and profound. The leadership shown by former UPP students in setting up study groups and/or 'helping' and 'teaching' their new classmates is an invaluable flow-on effect of UPP. Without an enabling program, the students from under-represented backgrounds could be labour intensive for faculty and support staff, and face many obstacles. With an enabling program, not only are they prepared for degree studies, but they are the mentors/helpers of the new first-year students. In other words, the very group that would ordinarily be considered resource and labour intensive actually become a resource to the university. Enabling programs, therefore, can be seen to create students with leadership qualities, who are the catalysts for learning in their degrees and communities. Perhaps even more far-reaching are the flow-on effects from the deep self-analysis and resultant attitudinal change triggered by students being in classes with students from cultural backgrounds different to their own. These changes have the potential to influence not only the particular campus's culture, but also a person's family and community.

These powerful multi-layered benefits of an enabling program offer a qualitative perspective, which is contrary to the picture often painted by quantitative default measures of 'success' based on attrition and retention rates, and encourage the use of broader understandings of 'success' when assessing the 'value' of a program. Furthermore, although enabling programs tend to operate on the margins of universities, they could be useful case studies for understanding and gauging key agendas, strategies and issues in higher education, such as widening participation, social inclusion, and transition. Although based on research from an Australian university, the findings and implications are relevant for universities in other countries with widening participation and social inclusion agendas, and that have been grappling with the ramifications of the policies for their students and institutions. Given this is a small-scale study in one enabling program on one campus, larger-scale studies are required to confirm and extend the findings in relation to the multi-layered benefits of participation in enabling programs, and to explore the implications in further detail.

Acknowledgements

References

Andrewartha, L., & Harvey, A. (2014). Willing and enabled: The academic outcomes of a tertiary enabling program in regional Australia. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 54*, 50-68.

Archer, J., Cantwell, R., & Bourke, S. (1999). Coping at University: an examination of achievement, motivation, self-regulation, confidence, and method of entry. *Higher Education Research & Development, 18*, 31-54. doi: 10.1080/0729436990180104

Australian Government. (2009). *Transforming Australia's higher education system*. Canberra, ACT, Australia.

Bennett, A., Hodges, B., Kavanagh, K., Fagan, S., Hartley, J., & Schofield, N. (2013). 'Hard'and 'soft' aspects of learning as investment: opening up the neo-liberal view of a programme with 'high' levels of attrition. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 14*, 141-156.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations, Australian Government.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.

Cantwell, R. (2004). Positioning the bar: outcomes associated with successful completion of an enabling course. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 44*, 354-388.

Clarke, J., Bull, D., Neil, C., Turner, L., & Birney, D. (2000). *The cost and effectiveness of enabling and related programs in Australian tertiary education*. Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia.

Cocks, T., & Stokes, J. (2013). Policy into practice: a case study of widening participation in Australian higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 15*, 22-38.

Cooper, N., Ellis, B., & Sawyer, J. (2000). *Expanded future opportunities provided by a bridging course at a regional university campus*. Paper presented at the Proceedings 4th pacific rim first year in higher education conference, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

Creswell, John W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Fourth ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. (2008). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evalutating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Debenham, J., & May, J. (2005). Making connections: a dialogue about learning and teaching in a tertiary enabling program. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 45*, 82-105.

Elliott, A. (2002). *Factors affecting first year students' decisions to leave university*. Paper presented at the Sixth Pacific Rim First year in higher education conference, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Engstrom, C., & Tinto, V. (2008). Access without support is not opportunity. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 40*, 46-50.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*, 219-245.

Gidley, J., Hampson, G., Wheeler, L., & Bereded-Samuel, E. (2010). From Access to Success: An Integrated Approach to Quality Higher Education Informed by Social Inclusion Theory and Practice. *Higher Education Policy, 23*, 123-147.

James, R., Krause, K.-L., & Jennings, C. (2010). The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education: Final report for ALTC senior fellowship program*: Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Klinger, C. M. (2010, 2011). *Firm Foundations for the Future in a Knowledge-Based Global Economy: an Australian Perspective on Access Education*. Paper presented at the From Access to Success: Closing the Knowledge Divide, Higher Education for under-represented groups in the market economy, Stockholm, Sweden.

Klinger, C. M., & Murray, N. (2009). *Enabling education: adding value and transforming lives.* Paper presented at the 2009 Enabling Pathways: Proceedings of the 3rd National Conference for Enabling Education, University of Southern Queensland, Queensland, Australia.

Klinger, C. M., & Murray, N. L. (2011). Access, Aspiration and Attainment: Foundation Studies at the University of South Australia. In L. Thomas & M. Tight (Eds.), *Institutional Transformation to Engage a Diverse Student Body* (pp. 137-146). Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Klinger, C. M., & Tranter, D. (2009). Firm foundations for the future. Paper presented at the 2009 Enabling Pathways: Proceedings of the 3rd National Conference for Enabling Education.

Klinger, C. M., & Wache, D. (2009). *Two heads are better than one: community building in the Foundation Studies program to promote student engagement in learning* Paper presented at the 2009 Enabling Pathways: Proceedings of the 3rd National Conference for Enabling Education.

Lomax-Smith, J., Watson, L., & Webster, B. (2011). *Higher Education Base Funding Review: Final Report.* Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

McIntyre, J., Todd, N., Huijser, H., & Tehan, G. (2012). Building pathways to academic success. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 3*, 109-118.

Muldoon, R. (2011). *Tertiary Enabling Education: Removing barriers to higher education.* Paper presented at the Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World, CiCe European Conference, Dublin City University, Ireland.

Murray, N., & Klinger, C. M. (2011). *Enabling education: Adding value in an enterprise culture.* Paper presented at the From Access to Success: Closing the Knowledge Divide. Proceedings of the 19th EAN Annual Conference Sodertom University, Stockholm, Sweden, 14-16th June 2010.

Onsman, A. (2008). STUDY LINK: An Evaluative Review. Melbourne: Monash University.

Ramsay, E. (2004). Blurring the boundaries and re-thinking the categories: Implications of enabling education for the mainstream post-compulsory sector. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 44*, 273-305.

Scutter, S., Palmer, E., Luzeckyj, A., Burke Da Silva, K. L., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). What do commencing undergraduate students expect from first year university? *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 2*, 8-20.

Smith, L. (2010). *StudyLink: A case study of an enabling programe supporting the transititon to the first year of University.* Paper presented at the First Year in Higher Education Conference.

Tomlinson, Sally, & Basit, Tehmina N. (2012). Introduction. In T. N. Basit & S. Tomlinson (Eds.), *Social Inclusion and Higher Education.* Bristol: The Policy Press.

Walter, M. (2000). Normal people can go to university too. Unpublished report. University of Tasmania.

Willans, J. (2010). *Navigating personal change: transforming perceptions of self as learner.* (Phd), doctoral dissertation, CQUniversity Australia, Queensland.

Willans, J., Harreveld, R, & Danaher, P. (2003). Enhancing higher education transitions through negotiated engagements of learning experiences: lessons from a pre-undergraduate preparatory program language education course. *Queensland Journal of Educational Research, 19*, 1-9.

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2007). 'I'm not stupid after all' - changing perceptions of self as a tool for transformation. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 47*, 433-452.

Willans, J., & Simpson, J. (2004). *'Somewhere and sometime I changed': Student voices from an Enabling Program.* Paper presented at the Lifelong Learning Conference.

Willis, S., & Joschko, L. (2012). A 'high quality, high access' university that aims to marry excellence and equity. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 14*, 8-26.