



## RESEARCH PAPER

### **Tales from the borderland: Enabling students' experiences of preparation for higher education**

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The fundamental aim of pre-university courses is to prepare non-traditional students with the skills, knowledge and confidence to enter higher education. However, for many students, this unfamiliar learning context can feel like a 'not so sure' place, a borderland between their previous lives and the anticipated goal of a university education. Drawing on the work of Alsup (2006) and Gee (2005; 2011; 2015), this paper takes the analysis of a corpus of student data from one Australian university to demonstrate how borderland Discourses can provide a porthole into the dichotomous space navigated by many students as they engage in an enabling course. The borderland Discourses of inclusivity, exasperation and empowerment discussed in this study are testimony to the contradictions and ambiguities that can arise when institutional expectations pertaining to studenthood enhance and/or unsettle the multiple identities negotiated by enabling students who are on the threshold of a university education. In their expressions of frustration regarding personal limitations and positivist, institutional practices, students provide poignant insight into issues that cause tension for them. Conversely, the sense of belonging experienced by students in 'safe', supportive learning environments with compassionate teachers, and structured, scaffolded curriculums that imbue a sense of capability, confidence, and empowerment, seemingly allow for a fuller, positive embodiment of a student identity.

*Keywords:* enabling programs; higher education; student preparation; widening participation; borderland Discourses

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#### **Introduction**

Employing the student voice as a form of evidence, through course evaluations written by them, this paper seeks to provide insight into the somewhat dichotomous experience that reengagement with formal education through an enabling course (program) can be for many non-traditional students. Those studying via an enabling course travel a metaphorical bridge that spans a space that can be broadly conceptualised as a 'borderland' between their everyday, ordinary world (Vogler, 2007) and the unknown world of university. It is within this borderland that many students experience opportunities to become more *au fait* with the 'rules' of academia, and develop the confidence and competence to more fully embody their developing student identity. As they become more immersed in the intricacies of how to 'act' and 'be' in the higher education context, they enact identities associated not only with their previous selves but also with their

future “possible selves” (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011) as university students.

For many enabling students, the borderland represents an emotional, dichotomous space, often fraught with tension, yet also a place where self-development and even personal transformation can flourish. Underpinned by Gee’s (2005, p. 5) conceptualisation of Discourses (“Big ‘D’ Discourses”) as the language and “non-language stuff” that individuals use to enact specific identities and activities, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) notion of the borderland, a space where individuals experience a junction of their multiple worlds and multiple ways of knowing, this paper posits borderland Discourses (Alsup, 2006; Willans, 2010) as a methodological and analytical approach to gain insight into how non-traditional students can experience participation in an enabling course. Likening their engagement in CQUniversity’s Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) to the notion of the borderland permits a demonstration of how competing Discourses mobilised by students provides insight into the intellectual, physical, emotional and other challenges they can experience. Ignoring these vital dimensions does little but trivialise and undermine a students’ learning journey as they prepare for university. A further purpose of this paper is to foreground empirical findings that demonstrate how particular pedagogical and relational practices that promote a positive learning experience for students can assist in the development of studenthood, and in turn, have the potential to enhance student retention in higher education contexts.

This paper commences with a brief discussion of the context in which the research was situated, namely STEPS, a long-standing pre-university enabling course offered by CQUniversity in Queensland, Australia. It highlights student retention as an important focus, acknowledging its complexities and contradictions, and suggests that certain pedagogical and relational practices used in STEPS positively impact retention. Borderland Discourses as a methodological and analytical frame is also discussed, and details related to data sourcing, sorting and analysis are explained. Using quotes from student evaluations of STEPS units, the discussion of findings presents three dominant borderland Discourses – inclusivity, exasperation and empowerment. These are representative of the mixed experiences typical of “the borderland” and illustrate the various ways students positioned themselves and others as they experienced STEPS. The paper concludes that while progressing through enabling education can be a truly dichotomous journey for some students, learning environments that are cognisant of this can provide a ‘safe’ yet stimulating harbour that ensures a mostly positive experience.

## **Context**

Like many preparatory, bridging, access, foundation or enabling pre-university courses (programs) both in Australia and abroad, STEPS aims to prepare students with an appropriate level of knowledge, academic skills, competence and confidence for higher education studies. Offered since 1986, STEPS is available as an on-campus option at eleven regional and metropolitan campuses, as an online (distance) choice, or as a multi-modal selection. The course can be undertaken in full-time or part-time mode. Depending on the number of units (subjects) enrolled in, STEPS must be completed within a two-year period but can be accomplished within one 12-week term of study. Students have two opportunities to repeat failed units. Students must be 18 years or older at the completion of STEPS, be an Australian citizen, a New Zealand citizen, a permanent resident or a holder of a humanitarian visa and residing in Australia. By virtue of Australian Government funding, there are no tuition costs for students. Depending on their personal circumstances and number of units enrolled in, students are eligible for fortnightly welfare payments from the Australian Government Department of Human Services. Students only study those units mandatory for the undergraduate course they plan to undertake. Unit enrolment is negotiated during a pre-STEPS interview between the student and the Access

Coordinator (AC) located on the campus the student intends to study on. An AC is also assigned to online students and their interview is conducted by phone.

University-based enabling programs have grown in number in Australia since the first was offered in 1974, representing an authentic pathway to tertiary study for many non-traditional students, and currently offered by many of Australia's thirty-eight public universities. However, as alluded to by Hodges et al. (2013), the diversity of enabling programs makes it difficult to draw comparisons when extrapolating information such as attrition and retention data, particularly when the typical measures of retention and attrition are suited to undergraduate programs. STEPS has long celebrated a strong retention rate of approximately 72% and an average articulation rate to undergraduate study of approximately 65%. This retention rate compares favourably to an estimated average 50% retention rate in Australian enabling courses (Hodges et al., 2013), although it is acknowledged that some pre-enrolment online screening of literacy, numeracy and computer skills of STEPS applicants is undertaken. This measure provides some indication as to whether students can demonstrate readiness for STEPS. Those few students who do not meet the minimum standard for entry are provided with online and other learning resources to upskill their competencies and strongly encouraged to retest in the following academic term. Since its inception, STEPS has attracted more than 12 000 students, the average student age being consistent at 27, and more females than males have enrolled in the course. The majority of students are "student-workers" (Munro, 2011) who study part-time and work either full-time or part-time. Online students represent the largest cohort. Nationally, STEPS typically enrolls one of the highest number of students from Australian government designated equity groups. These groups include students who: are from non-English speaking backgrounds; have a disability; are women in non-traditional areas; identify as Indigenous; are from low socio-economic status (SES) locations; and who are located in regional and remote locations (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Additionally, many STEPS students are 'first in family' to study at a higher education institution. Thus, the broad diversity of STEPS students and their typical characteristics generally position them on "the periphery of higher education" (Thomas, 2015, p. 37); their multiple identities cross-cut by typical demographic characteristics that potentially "restricts their sense of belonging and recognition within dominant institutional discourses" (Thomas, 2015, p. 37).

In cognisance of this concern and in light of ongoing systematic problematisation of attrition in higher education, a deliberate focus on strategies that promote retention offers a more productive use of time, energy and resources. Relying on neoliberal, deficit approaches that foreground the negative implications of attrition do little but quantify drop-out rates. They disrespect the associated, complex minutiae of the lives of students undertaking higher education studies (Bennett et al., 2013; Burke, 2013; Burke et al., 2017; Leathwood & Hey, 2009; Zepke, 2014; 2018). Such an insular approach superficially positions retention merely as the "flipside of attrition" (Australian Government, 2017, p. 8), fundamentally ignoring the importance of uncovering more about why and how students persist and what really matters to them (Naylor, 2017). As Tinto (2006) argues, "leaving is not the mirror image of staying" (p. 6).

Literature attests that enabling students withdraw from formal study because of personal, financial, institutional and a number of other reasons (Bennett et al., 2013; Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018; Department of Education and Training, 2017; Gale & Parker, 2016; Hodges et al., 2013; Lane & Sharp, 2014; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Morison & Cowley, 2017; Willans & Seary, 2011; 2018). Zepke and Leach's (2018) recent critical reflection on contributions of research to knowledge about student learning in higher education identified ways in which students can integrate into higher education, but also highlighted the need for institutions to be

more adaptive in terms of their cultures and practices designed to cater for needs of the diverse range of students now typically participating in higher education. Much of the literature on retention in higher education focuses more specifically on undergraduate and postgraduate students (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Krause, 2005), so, as Hodges et al. (2013) urge, caution is required if extrapolating these findings to enabling courses. This has been attributed to the substantial differences in course purpose, entry and attendance modes, and associated financial costs to the student and the institution (Hodges et al., 2013; Morison & Cowley, 2017). Nevertheless, findings in this paper have relevance to undergraduate contexts in the supposition that the use of appropriate pedagogical practices in supportive learning environments, coupled with acknowledgment of the importance of relational aspects, can be influential in a student's decision to persist with their studies. Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003), point out that even many 'traditional' students can feel alienated or isolated by the culture of academia, "even in institutions where there are significant numbers of students of the same age, class and/or ethnicity" (p. 270).

For a sustained period of time, retention has been an expansively studied issue in higher education. However, according to Tinto (2006), despite such resolve, translating what is known about student retention into "forms of action leading to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation" (p. 5) is still beyond the capacity of the majority of institutions. Tinto (2017) suggests a proactive stance, whereby listening to students, engaging with them as partners, learning from their experiences and understanding how those experiences shape their responses, will encourage them "to want and have the ability to persist and complete their programs of study within the university" (p. 6). This paper seeks to take his sage advice.

### **Methodology and methods**

In this qualitative study, the theory of borderland Discourse is used as both a conceptual and analytical frame. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) conceptualises the borderland as a space in which multiple identities are at play, and where contradictions and ambiguities arise as "two or more cultures edge each other" (p. 19). Anzaldúa's conception related to her own personal experiences of culture, identity and ideology and what it was like to exist in the borderland between two cultures as a lesbian of American and Mexican heritage. Janet Alsup (2006) adapted Anzaldúa's notion of the borderland in her multi-layered study of tensions surrounding the teacher identity development of six trainee teachers. Her application of borderland Discourses has been used in this study that seeks to use the student voice to learn more about what it can be like to prepare for higher education via an enabling course. The intention is to foreground three emergent borderland Discourses mobilised by students in this study as evidence of tensions, rewards, and contradictions that can arise when novice students negotiate unfamiliar educational institutional expectations and protocols, and how ambiguities associated with the development of 'student' identity influences and is influenced by life roles beyond the institution.

According to James Gee (2011), ('Big' D) Discourses are about "being kinds of people" (p. 136), and while "small d" refers more specifically to the analysis of language in use, Discourses ('Big' D) are comprised of the characteristic ways in which people speak, listen, read, write, and are "*coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, and believing" (p. 136, emphasis in original). As individuals, we are members of multiple Discourses that are embedded in social institutions, each with its own 'rules' and 'kits' that allow us to live out our social lives "as different and multiple kinds of people, different for different times and places" (Gee, 2005, p. 33). According to Gee (2005), various Discourses comprise each of us as people and our identities are not static nor are they often fully consistent with each other. Therefore, the 'ways of being' that are associated with each identity can come into conflict

with each other, giving rise to dissonance (Willans, 2010). An example of this can be when a non-traditional student participates in an enabling course, where the developing identity kit of 'student' is added to their repertoire of existing 'kits'. As noted by Willans (2010), "at the individual level, each 'kit' jostles for the individual's attention, while at a social level, the 'kits' of other individuals may be at odds or contrary to one's own, and tension can emerge within and between those Discourses" (p. 61). New Discourses can be the manifestation of such tension. Thus, in this research, Gee's (2005; 2011; 2015) and Alsup's (2006) theorisations of Discourse analysis have been drawn upon to enable a conceptual and analytical framework for the identification of emergent borderland Discourses. The intention is to illustrate the dichotomous range of emotions experienced by many students in this study as they participated in a course that assisted in the transition from enabling student to university student. As Van Rijswijk, Akerman, and Koster (2013) contend, borderland Discourses provide a way of "making sense of the relation between different characteristics of oneself as a person and as student" (p. 47).

The voices of students are important in any research about their experience of participation in higher educational contexts. Zepke (2013) and Varnham (2018) consider paying attention to the student voice as ultimately helpful in creating a sense of community and connection with their institution. Upon receiving the necessary ethics approvals, the data for this study were obtained from institutional records consisting of approximately 5030 end of term standardised student unit (subject) evaluations for a twelve-month period (Term 1 2016 to Term 1 2017). Given that most students were enrolled in one or more units, multiple evaluations were from a lesser number than 5030, but the anonymity of student evaluations makes it impossible to quantify specific details. Evaluations were gathered from all twelve STEPS units, that in addition to seeking responses to seven standardised questions about unit satisfaction, assessment and resourcing, elicited voluntary, anonymous feedback from students formally enrolled in their STEPS unit(s) during weeks 10-12 of the 12-week term. This feedback related to the 'Best aspects of STEPS', and aspects of the unit that students considered required improvement. Data was collated according to student comments for each STEPS unit. It must be acknowledged at this point that although the feedback was voluntary and anonymous, student feedback mechanisms such as standardised unit evaluations do reflect neoliberal hegemonic practices of an accountability culture that can stymie the authenticity and frankness of student opinions. The more genuine use of non-standardised course evaluations might, as the Hanover Research Council (2009) suggest, "engage students in the task of more serious evaluation" (p. 4). Such a practice would inevitably challenge "hegemonic masculinities premised upon subjectivity reproduced through audit culture and ranking" (Bennett & Motta, 2018, p. 632) and perhaps generate more authentic feedback.

Thematic analysis similar to that espoused by Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016) was utilised to begin data analysis by establishing commonalities and discordances. The phases and stages of this approach consisted of initialization, construction, rectification, and finalization. Initialization entailed immersion in the data, constant reading and re-reading, enabling the compilation of recurring items of interest and contradictions. In keeping with tenets of qualitative research, I remained mindful of my own stance as researcher in the consideration of constructions of possible meanings emerging from the data. To reduce the data, coding enabled "the transformation of raw data to higher-level insights or abstractions" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 104), resulting in the ability to make comparisons and contrasts in the initial findings. Ongoing research notes facilitated reflexivity and provided the opportunity to revisit, interrogate and remember aspects of the data. The construction phase allowed for reflection on the codes and their diverse meanings, wherein comparison, labelling, translating and transliterating, and defining and describing were undertaken. The rectification phase was marked

by stepping back from the data so as to increase my sensitivity and possible projections about the data findings, necessitating checking and confirming. This phase entailed immersion and distancing, relating themes to established knowledge and stabilizing (Vaismoradi et al., 2016), thus allowing for the emergence of a story giving a far more holistic view.

There were dominant trends in ‘best aspects’ of STEPS and those that ‘need improvement’, but it was the various ways in which students positioned themselves and others in conveying this information that is focal in this article. Thus, from the final data synthesis emerged dominant borderland Discourses, evidence of the important role the affective dimension of learning can play in an enabling course. This was evidenced in the way particular pedagogical and relational strategies were cited by students as being highly beneficial to their learning. In the following section, the use of ‘I’ statements are presented to demonstrate various ways in which students voiced their positions or “speaking personalities” (Van Rijswijk et al., 2013, p. 45), thus revealing a particular viewpoint about aspects of their engagement in STEPS. It must be noted at this point that data excerpts include comments from both online and on-campus students, and it was not always easy to discern the mode of study of each student. Furthermore, the anonymity and privation of demographic and other student information is acknowledged by me as the researcher to be counterproductive to the ethos of enabling courses such as STEPS, where standardised, institutionalised feedback mechanisms do not necessarily represent the authentic student voice.

## **Discussion of findings**

Analysis of data revealed three borderland Discourses, namely inclusivity, exasperation and empowerment. These are suggestive of the enlightenment, conflict and tensions some students experienced as values, beliefs and attitudes associated with the various Discourses that constituted them as individuals jostled for the attention of their developing studenthood. Findings in this study suggest that tensions associated with the embodiment of studenthood can be alleviated through the use of appropriate pedagogical and relational strategies aimed at enhancing a student’s experiences of success. This was evidenced through a borderland Discourse of inclusivity.

### ***Borderland Discourse of inclusivity***

A Discourse of inclusivity was strongly recognisable in student responses to course evaluations. It is fairly logical to assume that welcoming learning environments are generally favourable to a student’s sense of inclusion. This study found that fundamentally, students attributed ‘comfortable’ learning environments in which they felt supported and valued by authentic teachers, as encouraging greater self-knowledge, independence and inspiration. Much literature attests to the importance of creating a sense of belonging for students in higher education settings (see, for example, Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; Kahu, 2014; Lane & Sharp, (2014); Leach, Zepke, & Prebble 2006; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Naylor, 2017; Shields, 2015; Stone & O’Shea, 2016; Tinto, 2017; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). This sense of belonging is essentially denoted by the “students’ ease of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, and feeling that they are an important part of the life and activity of the classroom” (Thomas, 2012, cited by Masika & Jones, 2016, p. 138). In their report on enabling pedagogies, Bennett et al. (2016) establish a student’s sense of belonging “as fundamental to the enactment of an enabling pedagogy” (p. 39), yet like others, acknowledge that classrooms are not always ‘safe’ spaces in that they inevitably involve levels of discomfort (Bennett et al., 2016; Lane & Sharp, 2014; Motta & Bennett, 2018). However, such uneasiness is generally expected, and, from a pedagogical point of view, considered more an imperative to learning and teaching than an obstacle (Bennett et al., 2016).

Integral to a sense of belonging is the notion of support, a contestable, multi-layered and complex construct. Some researchers focus on the importance of supporting the development of strong peer and tutor-student relationships and fostering a sense of community (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; Lane & Sharp, 2014; Whannell, 2013). Others acknowledge issues related to the need for greater financial support for students (Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Munro, 2011), while others position the assurance of supportive classrooms with teachers who utilise appropriate pedagogical and relational approaches as vital in helping students transition to higher education (Bennett et al., 2016; Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). It is the latter notion of support that is of relevance to the findings informing this paper, namely support from empathetic teachers who provide authentic, learning environments in which students feel comfortable and included, and where they have their unique circumstances acknowledged. This experience was reported by one student who wrote:

*The lecturers and support lecturers are absolutely wonderful!!! The fact that they take the time out of their day to email through and congratulate me on my score on a quiz or that I am keeping up with the work load feels great and makes you feel like as a distance student you are not forgotten.*

Student support can also be present through the provision of pedagogical tools that enhance a sense of inclusion that nurtures the developing 'student' identity. This provision for inclusion was made evident by one student who felt they were "*more a part of the course and more like one of the students*". Other students expressed surprise at an unexpected sense of inclusion, reflecting a general lack of cultural knowledge about the university, typical of many enabling students. As one wrote:

*In the beginning, I thought I would be left alone and just be expected to learn without any interaction (being a Distance Education student) but I've been well looked after with the lessons posted each week online. Thank you so much.*

Incredulity about this form of support was similarly expressed by other students, such as one who shared: "*I did expect to be left to my own devices a lot more and thankfully I wasn't – it was a great experience and a very nurturing and encouraging environment even from an online perspective*". The theme of surprise extended to the empathetic acknowledgement by staff of student life challenges and circumstances. As one student explained:

*I really had no idea what to expect and found it was such a supportive learning environment that totally suited my needs as a working mum. I also found the staff to be very understanding when I hit a few personal issues three/four weeks ago. Thank you. The information provided couldn't be clearer and the resources were abundant – CQU provided everything they could to help us to succeed in this course – including encouragement and prompt support when needed.*

Other students talked about contentment during their study experience, one student writing: "*I feel like the course structure and the environment in which we worked ... was very helpful and calming. I always felt comfortable within the classroom and happy in knowing that I had the materials I needed to study*". Feeling "comfortable" supports the findings of others (Tinto, 1987; Kift et al., 2010) that students who experience this, and who feel confident and connected, are more engaged and have better chances of success. Inevitably, as Bennett et al. (2016, p. 57) point out, "comfort" generally co-exists with "severe 'discomfort'" upon re-entry to formal learning via an enabling course. Nevertheless, such learning opportunities can, as Motta and Bennett

(2018) suggest, “create moments of pedagogical possibility [and] can create new possibilities” (p. 636). This notion was reflected in the words of one student:

*The course pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me face my fears. I was really worried about Fundamental Maths as I was terrible at high school, but this changed very quickly and now it is one of my favourite subjects.*

Facing discomfort can also lead students to greater clarity regarding their future selves, reflected by one who commented: “*I now understand what my goals are ... putting me out of my comfort zone helped me gain confidence*”. For others, discomfort had personal social benefits, such as for one who confided: “*I am not good at making friends, but this course has made me a lot more confident by taking me out of my comfort zone to make new friends*”.

Tinto (2017) encourages educators to view the issue of persistence through the eyes of the student and to adopt measures to minimise their educational disadvantage. Thus, when students participate in inclusive classrooms in which tolerance, encouragement and care are central, and where they experience authentic recognition and support from teachers who do not pathologise them in deficit and derisive ways (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003), but who teach and respect them, then there is a greater propensity for an overall positive learning and teaching experience (Bennett et al., 2016; Lane & Sharp, 2014; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Relf et al., 2017; Rosiek, 2003). In their course evaluations, many students revealed that they felt valued and included, for instance, in comments such as “*I was not forgotten*” and “*I was made to feel part of the whole process [and] I experienced a very nurturing and encouraging environment [that was] helpful and calming*”. Another student shared: “*I always felt comfortable and felt a part of the course where I was well looked after*”. However, despite many students expressing their sense of inclusion, there were others who expressed frustration with particular aspects of STEPS, manifested in the borderland Discourse of exasperation.

### ***Borderland Discourse of exasperation***

In the review of student voice data, exasperation was found to be a prevalent borderland Discourse. This can be attributed to students’ general lack of familiarity with protocols and expectations of higher education, and its neoliberal imperative of placing costs and responsibilities on individuals (Bennett et al., 2016). The neoliberal model places a strong focus on independent, productive learners for the future and it is not unusual for enabling students to experience varying degrees of frustration due to a sense of confusion and lack of surety about what to do and how to act within the institution. Kahu, Stephens, Leach, and Zepke (2015) caution that such frustration and anxiety can provoke disengagement, reduce motivation and negatively impact student engagement. For enabling students, many of whom are from low SES status backgrounds and other government designated target groups, the very system that categorises them as such, immediately positions them as lacking the necessary cultural capital to stand them in good stead in a tertiary academic environment. As Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) point out:

For the new student entering the academy, such practices (the grading system, 50 minute lectures, prerequisites to courses, behaviours) can seem alien and unsettling, especially for those who lack prior knowledge of university culture through the related experiences of friends or family, and/or those who have already internalised a sense of themselves as ‘other’. (p. 270)

This discrepancy between university and low-status economic background can create “painful dislocation” (Baxter & Britton, 2001, p. 99) for students, and can be fraught with tension as they straddle the borderland between their social backgrounds (family, friends and broader community) and the unfamiliar field of higher education (Sani, 2008, cited in Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009, p. 1104). The multiple identities subsumed in students’ competing life roles can situate them in a borderland where they are “betwixt-and-between multiple identities” (Ralston, Nicolazzo, & Harris, 2017, p. 11), and learning to come to terms with institutional expectations and protocols can be challenging. Additionally, underpinning a sense of frustration can be feelings of uneasiness, doubt and anxiety associated with personal transformations that students may experience when they reengage with formal learning (Reay, 2005). As Waller (2005) notes, caution and self-doubt can preclude fully embracing the identity of student while ‘shifting identities’ are at play. This was evident in ways students wrote of institutional and other issues that evoked frustration. These included personal time restraints that thwarted their progress in STEPS, the perceived rigidity of institutional protocols, lack of time for cognitive processing of new knowledge and information, and irritation with regards to certain curriculum issues.

As is well documented, it is often pragmatic life-related challenges related to finances, competing work and family demands, and health issues that conspire to prevent the participation and/or completion of many students in enabling and university education (for example, Burke et al., 2017; Gale & Parker, 2016; Hodges et al., 2013; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Munro, 2011; Nelson, Picton, & Martin, 2017; Read, Archer, & Leathwood (2003). The fact that students in this study completed an evaluation of the STEPS unit during Weeks 9-12 of term indicates that they were still retained in their unit(s) of study. However, this by no means dismisses any challenges they experienced with competing life demands and consequential time pressures, well documented in the literature as reasons why students withdraw from their studies (Bennett et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2017; Hodges et al., 2013; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Morison & Cowley, 2017; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2013; Munro, 2011). These very challenges created anguish for some of the students in this study, such as shown by the following:

*I struggled with this course ... mainly due to the workload. As a mature (50 year old) I found the workload too high. Especially for a full time employee. It was estimated at 12.5 hours a week which I had no trouble on the subjects that suited me but on a couple of them that I was not familiar with, I spent about 20 hours on them.*

Although one student described a particular unit as “*VERY frustrating*” (emphasis in original), they were able to apportion some of this to personal circumstances and affective and cognitive challenges that likely impacted their study time. Another recalled: “*I recognise that I procrastinated and I did have a lot going on personally with my partner in hospital. Sometimes I was trying to find certain references to templates and then had some difficulty finding what they meant*”.

Other students expressed displeasure about institutional expectations and assessment regimes. For example, when it came to the requirement of being on campus at a specified location for exams, or if unable to attend, having to provide their own invigilator, some students were justifiably exasperated, for example, one who wrote:

*I got so annoyed. Some of us work full time and cannot make the date set for tests. Most professionals required to supervise cost a lot of money to hire for 2 hours or can't fit you in due to their work commitments.*

Another student alluded to their annoyance about assessment protocols and how this affected their motivation:

*50% on one paper when you only have one other assignment to really base your understanding feedback on is not fair. I am finding the pressure high because of that which is affecting my learning of all aspects of essay writing – I am only really doing what I need to get the mark.*

This was also the case with another student, whose irritation and consequent disillusionment related to rigid assessment regimes:

*I also found it very unjust that module tests don't count for any marks at all. Leaving it all to 2 tests is very high pressure. Especially as many of the students doing this unit are only just coming back to study after many years off. To me it seems the focus is on rote learning and getting assessments in rather than truly learning and immersing yourself in the subject and in fact by the end of this unit I am so burnt out I don't even care about learning the concepts and it's a shame as I started out quite enjoying it.*

Some students were vexed about the lack of time at their disposal to allow for cognitive processing of new knowledge and information, and they expressed aggravation regarding curriculum content and pace. Feeling unable to adequately complete curriculum content in the confines of a 12-week study period was very challenging for some students, articulated by one who lamented about:

*... lots of information in a short period ... I have found it hard to take it all on board and put into practice successfully. As students we exert pressure on ourselves to do well, this leads to frustration if one feels they are not keeping up.*

This was similarly expressed by others, such as one who wrote “*I think the scope was too ambitious to complete in the time frame available*”, and another who wrote that “*I felt that there was too much information to learn in a short time period*”, and yet another who shared that “*I believe there is too much material to go over in the short class time we are given per week*”. Another student alluded to the confusion they experienced as they described the pace of their learning progress: “*Sometimes I found that my Lecturer was a bit too quick in explaining things. I started to feel flustered and lost and I had nobody at home to ask*”. And, in perhaps diverting focus from themselves to another, this student further added that “*I think even the teacher seemed to have found it stressful to try and go over all that course material in the small amount of class time we had*”. This emerging area of research about the construct of time (see Bennett & Burke, 2017; Bunn, Bennett, & Burke, 2018) is vitally important in terms of exploring models of curriculum delivery that more thoughtfully compensate for the very different ‘timescapes’ in which students negotiate their engagement in higher education. Further research about this significant concern and how it could be addressed would be invaluable not only to the enabling education sector, but to higher education as well.

Frustration experienced by some students may be partially due to their unfamiliarity with the educational context, common for many enabling students who are often from families where a university education is not typical. Consequently, many enabling students may encounter challenges in relation to their confidence as learners and in navigating university systems due to limited educational advice and reassurance from family or friends, who themselves have had no

experience with higher education (Lane & Sharp, 2014; Reay, 2005). For one student, their understanding of the level of necessary skills to complete an assessment resulted in frustration:

*I have made mistakes in my assessments due to simply being unaware of the subtleties of grammar and punctuation. It was very frustrating to be told I made a mistake when, as far as I could tell, my assessment was all ready to go.*

Annoyance was also expressed in terms of confusion and uncertainty about how to follow directions in class, and complete assessment tasks and curriculum activities. It was also clear that some students lacked competence and confidence in interpreting meaning. As such, some apportioned blame to lecturers for not explaining things clearly and consistently, while others expressed exasperation around what they considered to be a lack of response from lecturers. Given the systemic issue of casualisation in higher education and issues related to staffing and underfunded mass audiences that place academics under pressure (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), such comments may indeed be valid. Frustration regarding study materials was also expressed by another student, who referred to “*confusing wording in exams and manuals*”. There was also annoyance expressed in terms of short assessment turnaround times and students’ need for lecturer feedback to reassure them.

There were other signs of student frustration. In summary, these included: “*difficulties related to understanding the lecture*”; “*compiling an essay*”; “*keeping up with the pace of learning*”; “*navigating the online management system*” (i.e. Moodle); “*having enough one-on-one time with the lecturer*”; “*understanding referencing protocols*”; “*maintaining motivation*”; “*comprehending curriculum content*”; “*studying by distance*”; “*dealing with a lack of clarity in study guide explanations*”; “*absorbing new information*”; “*seeing relevance of curriculum content*”; “*deciphering lecturer feedback*”; and, “*lack of specific details*” (related to assessment; content). Despite these sources of frustration, many students experienced a great degree of self-confidence and a borderland Discourse of empowerment was found to be most prevalent in their course evaluations.

### ***Borderland Discourse of empowerment***

A student’s progression through an enabling course is far more than the acquisition of technical academic skills; it is also about moving towards or assuming a student identity. Findings in this study of student evaluations of STEPS units revealed that in taking the locus of control for their learning, many students came to entrust more faith in their potential and future prospects as they more fully came to embody their identity as a student. Similar to the findings of Sagan, Foulkes, Wallis, Barron, and Wicks (2007), students in this study drew their views of education from their own experiences and future projections. This was evidenced by one student, who by virtue of his developing studenthood (Blair, Cline, & Wallis, 2010), felt empowered to help another:

*The wow moment for me was when another student was having difficulty understanding a topic in the 4th unit and I was able to explain it using the terminology and understanding I had gained and was able to transfer that knowledge onto them.*

A sense of empowerment was also evident in those whose competence led to increased confidence, and in turn, pride. For example:

*I believe that I have gained more knowledge in the past 13 weeks than my whole high school years combined. As I have never been very good at math this subject has*

*really helped me in conquering my mathematic phobia. I am extremely happy ... and I am proud of how much I can take away from this experience.*

Pedagogical and relational practices in STEPS that encourage the development of studenthood and confidence could be said to improve student retention. As one student shared: “*The activities in this course have built up my confidence and given me a sense of power over my destination. It has taught me how to be strong but mindful and resilient and how to manage stress*”. Similarly, in alluding to their perception of a more deliberate future, another shared that: “*I learnt more about myself ... instead of just dreaming I could do this Uni thing ... now I am more confident in what my future can look like*”. Another described a closer affinity to a student identity, feeling more prepared for future studies:

*This unit has shown me how to read, write and respect English and academic learning. I have gained a tremendous amount of knowledge. I have a long way to go but for now I feel that I'm on the right track.*

Another shared an emerging student identity and expressed gratitude “*for getting my mind moving again and providing so much support! I have never been a very good student and now my friends have labelled me an overachiever*”. Another revealed a developing student identity and a new self-awareness allowing for a more confident transition to university: “*It [the Preparation Skills for University unit] has provided me with invaluable insight into myself and also into life as a university student. I feel I'm far better equipped for study now than I was 12 weeks ago*”. This strong theme was articulated by another student who wrote that due to the relevance of unit material, they “*now feel so much more prepared, as well as more confident to start [their] degree than [they] did before*”.

The students’ usage of institutional terminology was suggestive of their growing identity with the learning context. Their use of academic vernacular was indicative of a more empowered persona as they approached the end of STEPS and neared the commencement of their intended university studies. Confidence and empowerment were expressed by several students, one who appeared to have acquired some of the expertise to claim a degree of legitimacy as a ‘university student’:

*The best aspects of this course was I understood how I could use everything I have learnt in my future studies. I definitely feel we have the upper hand as STEPS Students who took essay writing over those going straight into their degree.*

Others similarly alluded to a sense of empowerment within the institution, revealing that they felt they had, for example: “*a head start on other students*”; that STEPS units give “*you a heads up to the rest of ... University studies*”; that “*great insight into what will be expected of Uni life*” was provided; and that STEPS was valuable for “*learning how to be a Uni student*”. Another referred to learning a great deal more about themselves “*with regards to an academic future*”; while others praised pedagogical and other strategies that were “*helpful to become an undergraduate student*” and “*provided vital information to survive university*”.

Some students valued the use of appropriate pedagogical approaches that enabled the building of their personal capability and confidence. This was voiced by one, who felt the best aspect of STEPS was “*helping to educate adult learners on actually undertaking adult learning and apply it to your strengths as an individual*”. They added that the course “*taught me more self-awareness going into learning*”. Other students valued highly the clarity they had gained in

visualising future courses of university study and career projections, alluding to what Tett, Cree, Hounsell, and McCune (2008) refer to as “hopeful anticipation” (p. 567). As one student wrote: *“Personality and career profiling has changed my world for the better. I now have a clear path towards my future in Business”*. This idea was similarly reflected by other students, such as one who wrote: *“I liked that exploring my future career was part of the course. It has given me a clearer picture of what I need to do and what some job specifics are”*, and another who wrote: *“I was amazed at how much confidence I gained from this course, especially in myself. I really feel that this course has prepared me extremely well for my Bachelor Degree”*.

Like Stevenson and Clegg’s (2011) findings about strategies to help students visualise their futures, this study has affirmed the value of a structured, scaffolded curriculum supported by quality resources and flexibility around study options. This approach imbued a sense of capability and achievement in students and consequently increased their confidence and feelings of empowerment. As one student shared, *“I have learnt so much more than I anticipated. I have gained so much confidence by studying this Unit. This really builds my self-esteem and wants me to learn even more”*. The pedagogical and theoretical considerations underpinning STEPS units were highly valued by many students, particularly with regards to structural elements. Students expressed this in a variety of ways, including: *“I loved how it was set out one step at a time”*; *“scaffolded, with each module building on the last and all the pieces came together in the end for the final finished product”*; *“very clear and explained topics”*; *“set out in a logical sequence that was easy to follow”*; *“logically structured with a lot of ‘real world applications’ that are valuable”*; *“in a sequential [sic] manner that I found interesting and enjoyed very much”*; *“very well structured and each learning area compliments [sic] the next”*; and, *“easy to understand and follow, yet provided some form of challenge with the length and depth of the assessment”*.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that borderland Discourses provide some insight into how students can experience their return to formal study via an enabling course. It provides evidence of both the tensions and the joys that can arise as students negotiate their developing sense of studenthood whilst undertaking enabling studies, during which Discourses associated with their multiple identities and other life roles jostle for attention. The borderland Discourses of inclusivity, exasperation and empowerment emerging from analysis of students’ voiced opinions about their participation in and experience of STEPS has revealed poignant insight into the various ways they positioned themselves and others. The students’ mobilisation of inclusivity and empowerment Discourses attests to the very important role supportive formal learning environments can play, in which appropriate pedagogical and relational strategies utilised by empathetic staff can enhance student identity. However, the emergence of an exasperation Discourse necessarily alerts educators and associated practitioners to be mindful of not perpetuating institutional and other practices that thoughtlessly problematise the student experience of enabling education. Further research in this area would be a valuable contribution to the field of enabling education and be instrumental in challenging neoliberal practices that equate students to mere numbers. Finally, the findings in this paper contribute to the growing body of best practice in enabling education as identified by others (Burke et al., 2016; Bennett et al., 2013; Hodges et al., 2013; Tinto, 2006), and the important goal of making more visible the perspectives of students who undertake enabling courses. Furthermore, these strategies have potential application in other higher educational contexts in which non-traditional students engage.

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