



## STUDENT VOICE

### **It's not trains, planes and automobiles, but it is trains, STEPS and nursing: My journey to arrive at a career destination**

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As a high school student, some would say I only went to school to socialize and play hockey. I was definitely not academic nor did I have any interest in further study on completion of Grade 12. I had no direction or passion for a certain career. I always struggled to understand and adapt to the way of learning in high school. I saw myself as 'dumb' and just stopped trying as it was 'too hard'. I was the odd one out in my friendship group with many continuing on after high school to university. I completed school in 2003 with a very poor OP score<sup>1</sup> and no aspiration to even use it or ever attend university. At the age of 21, after doing administration roles for a few years, I had a once in a lifetime job opportunity—I became a Locomotive Driver in Central Queensland. Driving coal trains, 10,000 tonne and two kilometres long, was and still is one of the biggest achievements in my life. I loved my job, I made lifelong friends and gained experiences I'll carry with me forever. My job as a female train driver was certainly unique and as a profession, more generally, requires pretty resilient people; the rostering is awful and not family friendly at all, 12 hour shifts 24/7 with unpredictable start times with two days' notice, and one weekend off a month. After five years in the role, I finally fell pregnant with my daughter Cadence following a long road of infertility issues and IVF treatment.

During my maternity leave I hit a crossroads. What did I want to do with my life? I thought, 'I have a daughter now. I need to be a good role model. I need to contribute and support our family'. The pressure of returning to work grew. I knew that if I went back to work as a train driver I would miss out on much of my daughter's younger years which I would never get to experience again. I returned to work casually, working around my husband's shifts but I knew, deep down, that train driving was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I became depressed and felt lost about what to do. Being a mum was amazing and a very special role which I took seriously, and my daughter was my biggest motivator to be the best I could. However, at the time, I did not consider attending university, instead brainstorming for months, thinking of possible business ventures and career moves. Until fate decided for me. A personal experience that has touched me forever, helped lead me to my dream job of being a nurse.

At the end of 2016, my dad was diagnosed with Thymoma. Living in a regional town, travel was required for surgery and treatment so my parents moved temporarily to Brisbane while they began dad's battle. As such, I started spending a lot of time in hospitals visiting him. On

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<sup>1</sup> Before 2020, the Overall Position (OP) was a university admission rank awarded as part of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE).

this one occasion, a day or so after my dad's major surgery, I was sitting in his room with a nurse present. A simple task that dad was fully capable of performing prior to his surgery was now so difficult for him and to watch his pain and frustration while he attempted it was heartbreaking. In my view, your dad is the rock of the family, the strong one, and to see him so vulnerable was gut-wrenching. That is, until the nurse, helping him, made my dad laugh and smile. The actions of one person, one lovely nurse, helped my dad overcome that frustration and pain with laughter, even if it was just for a second. That moment there and then, is what made me decide what I wanted to do in life. I wanted to help people, sick people, vulnerable people, when they can't help themselves. That was when I thought, 'How the hell am I going to do that? I can't go to university, I'm not smart enough or would even know where to start. I have never written an essay, my vocabulary and grammar are shocking, I graduated high school over 14 years ago. I have no hope!' These were all the doubts running through my head as I pondered the thought of becoming a nurse.

I started researching getting into university and discovered a pathways program called STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) at Central Queensland University. I registered and attended the Open Day at my local campus in Gladstone. Nervous as anything and wondering if I was even smart enough to attend university, I enrolled in the recommended courses. I completed my STEPS journey over two terms and commenced nursing in 2019. Me, a university student, who would have thought? Not me! In STEPS, I learnt many skills that have helped me immensely throughout my degree so far. STEPS gave me the confidence I lacked in my ability to write academically. STEPS guided me through the tools needed for university, ranging from how to navigate Moodle, writing essays and how to reference. STEPS taught me that there isn't just one way of learning. I thought because I couldn't retain or understand things at school, I was just dumber than others. After being taught step by step on the different ways of learning—visually, verbally, and so on—things started to make sense. My confidence started to build and the words I put on paper started to become more academically written. Never in my wildest dreams as a younger person had I thought attending university was possible, but with the help of STEPS and my amazing unit coordinator, Helen Holden, I am now completing subjects in my nursing degree with a range of Credits, Distinctions and High Distinctions. If I had not completed STEPS, I would not have had the confidence, skills and ability to complete the units I have so far or achieve these results.

On days when I crumble from the stress and anxiety over assignments and exams and think 'Why am I doing this?' I look back at what I have achieved over the last few years and say to myself, 'I've come this far, I can keep going'. I also want my daughter to be proud of me, I want her to know that no matter who you are or how old you are, it is never too late to follow your dreams if you're prepared to put in the hard work to achieve them. Everyone is on a journey; some people just take a different route to get to their destination. There is no 'right' way to enter university or even an age limit, and if you ever doubt yourself, that your grades at school were not good enough or you're too old and forgotten how to study, enabling programs like STEPS give you the skills and the confidence for university.

With the foundation provided by the STEPS program and the staff, along with support from my partner, daughter, friends and family, I have completed two years of my nursing degree with a great GPA score, an invitation to become a member of the Golden Key International Honour Society, and grades I never thought I would achieve. After doing my first nursing placement in 2020 I had the realization of how close I am to working in my dream profession. I knew I was on the right path and loved every minute of it. If my story can influence anyone thinking about a career change or someone who thinks they don't have what it takes to go to

university, I highly recommend considering a university pathway like STEPS as a stepping stone into a degree and am so glad I did it.