



GUEST EDITORIAL

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This issue of the journal is focussed on the theme of ‘success and opportunity in challenging times’. This was the focus of the 2015 *National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia* (NAEEA) conference and a number of papers included in this collection come from that event, while others contribute to the discussions more generally.

For many in the community of scholars that read this journal and who are part of the NAEEA, times are indeed challenging. Government policies around tertiary education in many countries are changing, traditional funding models are being questioned, and government and non-government providers actively compete for students. In the middle of these discussions, the widening participation agenda has gained momentum so that in Australia increasing numbers of students from named equity groups are accessing higher education.

For many of these students, enabling education is their first step into the tertiary environment. Enabling education has been the lynch pin of widening participation in higher education in Australia for close to fifty years, yet as a term it is interpreted differently according to context. An enabling program may assist students to reach the necessary qualification for entry into university study and some programs have been alternatively called preparatory, bridging or foundation studies. However, the word enabling has a much deeper meaning. Synonyms that attach themselves to enabling include ‘empowering’, ‘assisting’, ‘permitting’, ‘qualifying’ or ‘supporting’. But each word on its own is not enough to describe what an enabling program actually does and how they work. This issue of the journal helps us to explore the concept of enabling and some of its success stories that have provided opportunities for students and institutions to negotiate challenging times.

The first papers describe and evaluate different enabling programs. Typically, they have been designed to meet the needs of their target groups of students and hence are quite different. The STEPS program described by Karen Seary and colleagues has been offered since 1985, but underwent significant change in 2011 to meet current students’ needs. Lasting for 12 weeks, it capitalises on online testing to help students decide on their pathway within the course. The voice of the students comes out strongly in favour of this single but flexible course.

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The program described by Angela Jones and colleagues presents a very different solution to access to university studies. They discuss the learning challenges of students who have only just missed out on admission to university. Using Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) transition pedagogies they describe the design and evaluation of a 4 week intensive bridging program. The academic achievement of students who have completed the program was on a par with students who had not completed the program and points to the fact that a short program can be effective if designed to directly address a cohorts' learning needs.

Alan Beckley and colleagues then take up the opportunity presented by the challenges of widening participation and changing government agendas to explore the pathways through vocational education (VET) to higher education. They report on part of a larger project that aimed to connect vocational education with higher education and enable students to succeed in the latter. A key part of the success was the formal establishment of articulation pathways to allow students to more seamlessly transfer from VET to university with as much advanced standing as possible. They describe a number of strategies, but of interest is the Diploma Plus alternative which combined vocational and academic elements as part of a VET diploma. Such alternative pathways contribute significantly to widen the participation of students hitherto underrepresented in higher education.

The suite of papers to this point captures a range of entry strategies. Harvey and Szalkowicz argue for strategies that stretch beyond entry or enabling and advocate for an expansion of nested undergraduate courses where students can exit at multiple points. This allows for students who have completed only part of a degree to receive a qualification, usually at the diploma or associate degree level. They recommend this alternative in direct response to the implementation of the demand driven system in Australia, which they believe could disadvantage some students who may prematurely enrol in bachelor level studies.

The final 'viewpoint' paper is contributed by Sladek and King and presents an approach to an issue of growing importance to higher education. As the numbers of people from humanitarian and refugee backgrounds increase across many countries they ask - what provisions have been put in place for them to be recognised and gain access to, and success within, tertiary studies? These authors argue that in Australia there is no formal recognition of these students within the equity groupings that drive policy. Currently, these students are captured within other equity groups, which Sladek and King believe does not recognise the complex backgrounds of disadvantage these students bring to their studies. The authors present a final passionate plea "that for such students to remain hidden in data collections and unnamed in equity targets is, arguably, a secondary injury to their original displacement".

The compilation of articles presented in this volume provides an overview of some of the opportunities to widen participation in higher education. The evaluation strategies incorporated into a number of the papers well represents quantitative and qualitative evidence to support their claims and ensures that the students' voice is heard. In this editorial we have travelled from VET pathways, to university based enabling programs, to access and exit pathways within degrees, to a discussion of how we can further expand participation through

acknowledgement of students' humanitarian and refugee backgrounds. With these types of initiatives and approaches in place, the future looks more positive for widening participation despite the political challenges surrounding higher education today.

References

- Kift, S. M., Nelson, K. J., & Clarke, J. A. (2010). Transition pedagogy: a third generation approach to FYE: a case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1-20.