



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Design for success: Did we get it right? Measuring the success of STEPS as a remodelled CQUniversity enabling offering

Karen Seary*, Julie Willans & Chris Cook

Academic Learning Services Unit, CQUniversity Australia

As a consequence of a 2011 external review of enabling offerings at CQUniversity Australia, the well-established Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program (CZ01) underwent a significant remodel. Several recommendations of the review were adopted and the seven existing enabling program offerings were collapsed into a single enabling program which incorporated the best aspects of each of the prior offerings. The single enabling program model retained the name STEPS and was premised on the need to build greater flexibility into the offering as an acknowledgement of the conflicting demands that pose as challenges to students' time. A curriculum refresh saw the STEPS program adopt one core course supported by a suite of eleven electives from which students can draw in accordance with the requirements of the undergraduate degree programs to which they will articulate. The desire for improved retention drove the establishment of the Access Coordinator role to manage the program on each campus and provide pastoral care to participating students, particularly those at risk of withdrawing from the program. The new model provides a more tailored preparation through the adoption of online diagnostic testing to ascertain student readiness, and the establishment of an individualised Required Study Plan for all students. This is based on the students' career aspirations and the predetermined requirements of their chosen undergraduate program. Three years on, this paper captures the student voice as an indicator of the success of the new model.

Keywords: STEPS; enabling; preparatory; bridging

Introduction

Brief history of STEPS

Founded in 1967, CQUniversity Australia is currently Australia's largest regional university with over 35,000 students and 20 delivery sites in the states of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia (CQUniversity Australia, 2016a). It is also a large provider of distance education, and reflective of its inclusiveness, caters to a comparatively high ratio of students from 'mature age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, first-in-family and low socio-economic backgrounds' (CQUniversity Australia, 2016b).

The Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program was initially conceived in 1985 when the Commonwealth Government's Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) presented CQUniversity Australia (then known as the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education) with the opportunity to fund a fee-free tertiary bridging program that would provide a pathway into university for students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. The program was open to adults who were 25 years or older, ineligible for admission to accredited higher education programs, unemployed, absent from full-time

education within the last year, and who experienced some kind of social disadvantage with access to higher education, e.g. Aboriginal or Islander, female, handicapped, migrant, poor, family dysfunction, or technologically redundant (Doyle, 2006, p. 4). In 1986, 22 students commenced the inaugural STEPS pilot program on CQUniversity's Rockhampton, Queensland campus, attending classes from 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday for a 13 week period. The modules in which the students enrolled included an *Introduction to Research and Communication Techniques*, *Elementary Mathematics*, *Word Processing Skills*, *Organisational and Study Skills* and *Basic Science* (Doyle, 2006, p. 8).

Over the ensuing 25 years, CQUniversity Australia increased the number of locations and modes in which STEPS was offered and broadened the criteria for eligibility resulting in significant growth in enrolments. STEPS continued to be offered on CQUniversity's Rockhampton campus, and was also offered at other CQUniversity Australia Queensland campuses, including Gladstone in 1989, Bundaberg and Mackay in 1990 and Emerald in 1998. Study options were expanded to include the Accelerated program (12 weeks, 4 days per week), the Extended program (24 weeks, 3 days per week), the Flex program (24 weeks, 3 nights per week), and the External program (15 hours per week). The curriculum was modified to consist of four compulsory core courses: *Language and Learning*; *Transition Mathematics*; *Tertiary Preparation Studies*; and *Computing for Academic Assignment Writing*, with additional electives introduced for students who required further preparation for intended maths and science related undergraduate programs. Eligibility was broadened to include anyone from a socially disadvantaged background, and the minimum age requirement for enrolment was reduced to 21 in 1996, and then further to 18 in 2006. The combination of these changes contributed to a steady increase in enrolments with a total of over 6,000 students completing STEPS by 2011.

At the same time that STEPS was evolving, other Commonwealth funded enabling programs were also introduced at CQUniversity Australia. This included the Women into Science and Technology (WIST) program, the Lift program (a short term equity program), and the Tertiary Entry Program (TEP, an enabling program delivered by the Office of Indigenous Engagement specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students). Each of these additions to CQUniversity Australia's enabling programs catered to different cohorts of students, but at the same time, maintained the university's strategic goals of accessibility and inclusion, and pursued the fundamental objective of student articulation into and successful completion of undergraduate study.

Time for review: Embracing the recommendations

In April 2011, Bruce King, Emeritus Professor of the University of South Australia (UniSA) and an Adjunct Professor of the University of New England (UNE), was commissioned to review the existing enabling programs at CQUniversity in terms of their relevance, structure, viability, quality, administrative practices and location within the organisation (King, 2011). After compiling feedback from STEPS, WIST and Lift management, staff and students across multi-campus, Professor King proposed several recommendations for change, the main one of which was to create a single enabling program that would incorporate the best features of

the existing enabling programs. The aim of creating a single program was fundamentally to remove the existing duplication of program and course offerings to establish a program that was clear in its structure, retained the combination of academic rigour and student support and goals, and remained true to the ethos and aims of enabling programs in ensuring completing students are ‘undergraduate ready’.

The recommendations of the King report (2011), many of which have now been addressed, effected significant change to the enabling programs at CQUniversity Australia. To begin with, the STEPS suite of offerings, WIST and Lift were reconfigured as a single enabling program, achieved through the termination of Lift, which was only ever designed as a short term initiative, and the two year phasing out of WIST. The decision was made to retain the name ‘STEPS’ because of its long history with CQUniversity Australia, its recognition in various communities within CQUniversity’s footprint as a successful brand name, and the fact that it already clearly articulated the philosophy of transformative learning that is central to many tertiary enabling programs. It was considered important to absorb some of the flexibility of the WIST Program, its main point of difference from STEPS, but put in place measures and expectations for completion that would raise retention and lower attrition rates in the new program model. The creation of a single enabling program at the commencement of 2012 allowed for increased course offerings, more flexible course combination options and more choices in mode and method of study.

The King report recommended that CQUniversity Australia accept, for the purposes of the review, that the Tertiary Entry Program (TEP) offered by CQUniversity Australia’s Office of Indigenous Engagement, constituted a special case and should not be incorporated into the single enabling program; however, King recommended that the TEP program should be benchmarked against similar offerings in the tertiary sector and that measures be taken to effect the rationalisation elements proposed in his report. Such rationalisation has resulted in the TEP Program now constituting a limited number of courses with students extending their choice of courses through cross-enrolment in constituent courses from the STEPS Program.

Benefits and challenges

There were many perceived benefits and challenges that accompanied the restructure of CQUniversity Australia’s suite of enabling programs. Institutionally, it addressed the confusion that was associated with many options, both for external stakeholders and for internal staff who were charged with providing program and course advice to prospective students. For academic staff, the introduction of the single enabling program entailed a significant workload in terms of ensuring the adequate provision and rigour of STEPS courses. In preparation for the single enabling program, all existing courses were revised to ensure suitability and consistency across both distance and on-campus offerings, and the completion time frame of 12 weeks had to be accommodated throughout. This entailed a significant amount of curriculum development and collaboration with Course Coordinators and teaching staff, leading to the establishment of one core course, *Preparation Skills for University (PSU)* and seven electives: *Essay Writing for University (EWU)*, *Technical Writing for University (TWU)*, *Fundamental Mathematics for University (FMU)*, *Intermediate Mathematics for University (IMU)*, *Technical Mathematics for University (TMU)*, *Positive*

Learning for University (PLU), *Computing Skills for University (CSU)*. In 2012, four introductory science courses that had been available from faculty, were officially added to the suite of STEPS courses. These courses were: *Foundation Science*, *Introductory Physics*, *Introductory Biology* and *Introductory Chemistry*. Thus STEPS was comprised of one core course and a total of eleven electives.

The range of STEPS courses across multiple campuses also required ongoing professional development for teaching staff. The frequent use of technology and reliance on the university's content management system, Moodle, necessitated that teaching staff were both competent and confident in their use of such technologies, and it was often difficult to find adequate time for the professional development and training of staff for them to muster the confidence related to these technologies. Furthermore, while certain technologies enabled weekly opportunities to virtually unite STEPS students across multiple delivery sites and thereby ensure a degree of consistency in information dissemination, technical issues would inevitably arise from time to time, frustrating both staff and students.

The appointment of Access Coordinators on each campus to oversee all Academic Learning Services Unit (ALSU) activities was another recommendation of the review, effectively replacing the previous STEPS Campus Coordinator positions. These new appointments were of a permanent nature, with Access Coordinators simultaneously engaged in academic teaching positions. Depending on the particular campus or delivery site, the student cohort for each Access Coordinator ranged from 30 students to 180 students for on-campus Access Coordinators, and approximately 600 students for the distance Access Coordinator, with workload allocation determined by the number of students they supported. Access Coordinators were charged with responsibility for the organisation and pastoral care needs of students from pre-admission through to completion. Modifications were made to the STEPS pre-admission testing and information process, resulting in a focused individual interview between the Access Coordinator and each STEPS applicant, during which a Required Study Plan (RSP) was co-created. With new possibilities around program modes, course numbers and options and program completion time frames, study plans could be tailored to suit each student's needs, the aim being to ensure a more specific pathway to adequately prepare each applicant for their intended undergraduate degree. Access Coordinators were thus required to have a broad understanding of undergraduate programs and possible STEPS course combinations, and manage the data related to students' study plans. These challenges were exacerbated by a sizeable number of students who changed their study plans multiple times throughout the term. Further tracking complications arose when students changed from one study mode to another or were simultaneously enrolled in both on-campus and distance programs.

In adherence to adult learning principles (Foley, 2000, 2004; Jarvis, 2012; Knowles, Elwood & Swanson, 2014), new opportunities were provided during the STEPS pre-admission testing process, allowing applicants to receive exemptions from courses in which they could demonstrate current competence. This proved particularly beneficial for those students who displayed high levels of mathematics and/or computer literacy, and was important for these students to have such skills acknowledged by the offer of a fast track option or an exemption.

Conversely, students who struggled with particular aspects of the pre-admission testing could be counselled to take on additional courses to further strengthen academic preparation for their chosen undergraduate program. In cognisance of the demands and pressures many students experience upon a return to study (Darab, 2003, 2004; Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012; King, Luzeckyj, McCann & Graham, 2015; Willans, 2010), greater flexibility regarding study timeframes was also introduced. Prior to the inception of the single enabling program, STEPS students were required to complete four compulsory courses over a 12 or 24 week period. To fail or withdraw from any one of the compulsory four courses meant failing STEPS outright. This shortcoming was addressed with the new single enabling program whereby students could complete STEPS over a maximum of six terms with a minimum of one or maximum of four courses per term. Statistical data shows that such choice in managing workload per term has led to fewer withdrawals and less pressure on STEPS staff and students to complete the program within a shorter time frame. The flexibility in enrolments has attracted more applicants to STEPS, particularly as Distance students and the period since restructure has seen a significant increase in enrolments.

From the students' standpoint, the removal of barriers to allow more flexible enrolment options, be they internal or distance delivery modes or full-time or part-time enrolment, was essential; however, the changes to enrolment processes have disadvantaged a small proportion of students. Prior to the review, students with poorer academic and personal study skills had the option of completing most STEPS courses over a 24 week period instead of the standard 12 weeks, the extended time frame allowing for a less pressured assimilation and demonstration of new knowledge. With this extended option no longer available, all students had to comprehend a large amount of new knowledge and, via compulsory assessment, successfully demonstrate their understanding within the standard 12 week term. The interview stage of the enrolment process was key to attempting to address this issue in that Access Coordinators used the results of the pre-enrolment diagnostic testing, which includes information about the student's personal circumstances, in combination with information ascertained through the interview process to establish a suitable study plan for the student. In cases where a student was identified as having poorer academic and/or personal study skills, the Access Coordinator would structure the student's RSP such that in one or more academic terms the student would have fewer course enrolments to allow concentration on those courses. While this has helped to make the study load more manageable for students, in some cases, it has also resulted in students being ineligible for government benefits when enrolled in less than a full-time study load.

Refinements since the inception of the revised STEPS (CZ01)

Early in 2013, reflective of the tenets of action research, some of the challenges that arose from the inaugural iteration of the newly revised STEPS program were identified through feedback from staff and students. New processes to streamline administrative processes and encourage greater student responsibility prior to commencement were subsequently introduced. One such measure was the shift from paper based pre-enrolment testing, which had until that point been administered on campus or sent via post and then marked manually, to testing that is now conducted fully online and marked automatically. This has saved Access

Coordinators and other staff administrative time, permitted testing and interviews to be conducted at any time of year instead of being limited to specific times and locations, and allowed for a faster turnaround time for students between application and enrolment.

Another measure was for Access Coordinators to send each new student a 'start-up' email to the student's personal email address approximately three weeks prior to the nominated term of commencement. This email includes a guide about the STEPS program and what to expect when term commences, a guide to accessing CQUniversity Australia's systems, a list of administrative tasks to be completed prior to the STEPS on-campus Orientation (for on-campus students), information on where to purchase or download study resources and how to perform essential tasks such as accessing the Student Portal, completing the Commonwealth Assistance Form (CAF) and downloading course profiles. It also includes a link to an online Orientation that includes videos, interactive activities, information and links to other resources. These various tasks circumvent a substantial amount of administrative work previously undertaken by Access Coordinators and Administrative Officers prior to, during and after the on-campus Orientation, and helps prepare students more adequately for their studies.

In order to ensure consistent and relevant advice to students, the STEPS Head of Program (HoP) collaborated with CQUniversity Australia's undergraduate program advisers and key faculty staff to develop a list of required and recommended STEPS courses for each undergraduate program. Referred to as the Direct Entry Document, Access Coordinators now use this list, along with results from the student's pre-enrolment testing and information obtained about the students' personal circumstances at the interview, to establish a personalised study plan, which the student must complete to be eligible for direct entry to their undergraduate program of choice. Fewer STEPS courses were listed as required in the Direct Entry Document, ensuring that the appropriate Grade Point Average (GPA) was calculated on only those courses deemed essential for entry to any particular undergraduate program. This then guarantees greater responsibility around government funding by not over enrolling students in courses unnecessary for their chosen degree program, and in turn, further reduces administrative work for staff. It also minimises the time students spend as an enabling enrolment before transitioning to undergraduate study.

There have also been some significant changes surrounding processes related to the completion of STEPS. Due to their time consuming nature, exit interviews, previously conducted upon the student's completion of STEPS, are no longer conducted. Much of the information that was previously captured during exit interviews is well known to the Access Coordinator via their relationships with students throughout their time in the program. This information is stored on a central/dedicated database. The evaluation and feedback that students once shared during exit interviews is captured through regular teaching and course evaluations and evaluations of the Access Coordinator role. Access Coordinators no longer monitor the often tedious process of Direct Entry to CQUniversity Australia applications as students now submit these directly to the university Admissions Office. The Admissions Officer, on approval by the Head of Program (STEPS), then makes the student an offer of an

undergraduate place at CQUniversity Australia, and should it be required, the provision of assistance with the progress of accepting or deferring the application.

Another change relates to the previously time consuming yet rewarding activity for both staff and students - the STEPS Completion Ceremonies. Given that STEPS can now be commenced in terms 1, 2 or 3 and that there is no common completion time for all students, formal STEPS Completion Ceremonies no longer occur. While this has been of some disappointment to the STEPS and wider community, it does alleviate some STEPS staff of yet another very time consuming process, allowing time for other professional pursuits. Completion of STEPS, however, does not go unnoticed or unrewarded as at the end of each academic term, students on each campus congregate for a less formal occasion to acknowledge and celebrate with those students who have completed STEPS.

Impetus for the Research Project

Fundamentally, this article aims to show how student feedback can be utilised to ensure continuous improvement in an enabling program. The benefit of time since the STEPS review in which to evaluate and ‘test’ the program, the increase in national and international enabling and access education research and scrutiny, and our willingness to contribute findings to this context and the widening participation agenda, have all provided an impetus for this research project. A motivation closer to home was the encouraging statistical data from CQUniversity Australia’s Governance Committee and Academic Dashboard, indicating a marked improvement in retention of STEPS students. This rose from 73.5% in term 2 of 2013 to 79.5% in term two of 2014, and then 79.6% in term one of 2015. Also of significance has been the reduction in the STEPS attrition rate of 26.5% in term 2 of 2013 to 20.5% in term 2 of 2014 and then 20.4% in term 1 of 2015. Further quantitative data shows that students are highly satisfied with the refinements made to all STEPS courses. The student overall satisfaction rate in Term 2 of 2012 to Term 1 of 2015 reveals a significant increase across all 12 STEPS courses. In some instances, the overall satisfaction rate rose from 2.5 of a possible 5 to an average of 4.5. In combination, the above statistical data suggests that refinements made to STEPS have indeed reaped rewards. The next step was to use the student voice to ascertain if, in fact, the changes made were positive in nature.

The research methodology and process

The research informing this paper took the form of a case study. In this small study, a case study approach was the preferred research methodology because the research question aimed to bring forth the participants’ views of a specific situation. As this research involves the study of a multifaceted educational support system, with the aim of understanding the expectations and experiences of stakeholders, the nature of this method of inquiry is very well suited to a case study approach. This approach is supported by Yin (2002), with the argument that the primary aim of case study research is to gain a deep understanding of a specific theme, policy, program, institution or system, and to generate insights that can be used for policy debates and professional practice. Similarly, Stake (2005, p. 450) perceives case study as able to generate ‘thick description, allowing the researcher to make decisions about what will and what will not be included’. As Patton (2002, p. 437) notes, it is this

description that ‘takes the reader into the setting being described’. In keeping with the use of qualitative methods, data were gathered in the form of both face to face semi-structured focus group discussions and via an on-line ‘open-ended questions’ survey.

Data gathering

Focus group interviews

Two focus group interviews with a total of 10 student participants were conducted and recorded: one on the Bundaberg campus, the home campus of one of the researchers and the other with a group of STEPS students studying via distance education. This was conducted on the Bundaberg campus with videoconferencing links to Brisbane, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Mackay and Noosa campus locations. The participants were either (a) current in the STEPS programs or (b) STEPS students who had transitioned into undergraduate programs. Two questions initially posed were:

1. What aspects of the STEPS program did you find beneficial in preparing you for your undergraduate program?
2. What aspects of the STEPS program would you change if you could?

To elicit more targeted responses, the following more specific questions were posed:

3. Would you have been able to participate in the STEPS program if it were compulsory for students to enrol in four courses in one term of study? If no, what factors would have precluded you from doing so?
4. Did you feel the interview process for STEPS helped guide your path to undergraduate study?
5. Would you please consider each of the courses you studied and comment on how much value you place on them as preparatory courses for the first year undergraduate study you have completed.
6. How do you view the role of the Access Coordinator for STEPS?

On-line ‘open-ended questions’ survey

An on-line survey was chosen as an additional data source due to the many benefits such can provide. These include the opportunity for open-ended confidential and frank conversations, freedom to respond when participants choose to, the ability to overcome geographic and financial constraints, convenience for the researchers, and the elimination of transcription bias (Meho, 2015; Mann & Stewart 2000; Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). A total of 111 students completed the on-line open-ended survey, which in addition to information relating to mode and program of study, enrolment status, and commencement date, posed the following open-ended questions:

1. What aspects of STEPS did you find beneficial in preparing you for your undergraduate program?
2. What aspects of the STEPS program would you change if you could?
3. Would you please consider each of the STEPS courses you studied and comment on how much value you place on them as preparatory courses for the undergraduate study you have completed so far.

4. Other comments about STEPS.

Fifty-one of the 111 survey respondents indicated that they were engaged in undergraduate studies, 60.78% of them having commenced in term 1 of 2015 and 35.29% in term 2 of 2015. The remainder of respondents were still current in the STEPS program with the exception of a few who indicated that for a variety of reasons that they had either withdrawn from STEPS or completed STEPS but not continued into undergraduate study.

Data analysis

To sort and analyse the data, the 'Framework' analytic approach as espoused by Ritchie and Spencer (2002) was employed. As they note, regardless of the particular route the qualitative analyst takes, the processes are basically the same, namely that:

[t]he analyst reviews the charts and research notes; compares and contrast the perceptions, accounts, or experiences; searches for patterns and connections and seeks explanations for those internally within the data. Piecing together the overall picture is... [about] weighing up the salience and dynamics of issues, and searching for a structure rather than a multiplicity of evidence...[requiring] leaps of intuition and imagination (p. 321).

Thus in the research informing this paper, the familiarisation stage involved immersion in the data, resulting in the noting of recurrent themes and issues of importance to the participants. Cognisant of the original aims of this research, a thematic framework was established to sort and sift (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002) the data, commencing as a largely descriptive exercise that focused predominantly around the interview questions and pre-supposed themes. Then, at a more analytical yet intuitive level, abstraction and conceptualisation followed to inform the thematic framework, allowing for salient themes and their linkages to particular patterns or behaviours and issues to be interpreted and made explicit. Due to the small size of the corpus of data, manual organisation and sorting were undertaken by the grouping of common emergent ideas or themes. The audio taped focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the researchers, while the survey data were copied, collated and reviewed by the researchers. Emergent themes are presented and supported by participant's/survey respondent's actual discourse (italicised in the following sections of this paper), and no one theme was favoured over another. Analysis of the data identified five themes: flexibility; online testing and interview; required study plan, role of the Access Coordinator and benefits of a curriculum refresh. The following section uses student reflections on the remodelled offering as an overview of those findings.

Emergent themes

Flexibility

The degree of flexibility in undertaking the number and mode of STEPS courses was valued by the interview participants and survey respondents. A commonly held view by many interview participants was that they, alongside many fellow students they had studied with over the last two terms, would have '*struggled*' should it have been a requirement to fulfil the pre-review expectation of the successful completion of four STEPS courses in one 12 week term. They felt that most students would not have managed to commit the recommended

hours of study (48 minimum per week), and that it would have been *too overwhelming to cope with all the content of four courses at once*. One participant revealed that he barely managed the three courses in which he was enrolled with the external responsibilities he had as an employee and family man, and said that four courses at once would have *crushed* him. Another interview participant shared that because of his ADD/ADHD diagnosis, the reality was that his processing speed meant that *one course was more like 30 hours each week* rather than the 12.5 hours recommended to manage each enrolled course. As he said, if four courses had been compulsory, he doubted that he would have *been able to keep up*.

Flexibility related to study modes was highly valued, summed up by one survey respondent who shared that *the flexibility of studying distance was fantastic as I could do my study in my own time*. Another survey respondent echoed this in saying that *being Distance allowed me to work life around it*. Another respondent applauded the flexibility of STEPS modes and program rules, sharing: *I loved being able to change modes, especially as distance didn't suit my learning style. I liked being able to have a couple of goes at a subject if at first I didn't succeed*. Others appreciated the 'taste and see' approach of STEPS as an *opportunity to familiarise oneself with [modes] of study prior to commencing undergraduate studies which of necessity are by Distance*. Conversely, however, a small number of students were critical of the number of times students could attempt courses because they felt that *some students took the free program for granted*.

Confidence was found to be an important association with flexibility, with one survey respondent revealing that *being able to do study at my pace allowed me to be more confident learning and understanding the relevance of subjects preparing me for my undergraduate study*. Another related how STEPS had helped to *build content knowledge, adopt good habits as a student and built my confidence to continue the learning journey*. Others made broader references to the confidence they felt in being adequately equipped for undergraduate studies, such as *STEPS really helped me prepare for my undergrad!* This was similarly iterated by another survey respondent whose familiarity and confidence with university systems was clearly of benefit: *I feel as though going through STEPS helped me understand and navigate Moodle, which has helped immensely through my first time of undergraduate studies. Also just the program in general prepared me for the road ahead*.

Online testing and interview

Although some negativity was expressed in terms of technical issues and the difficulty of some of the literacy questions presented in the diagnostic online testing, all interview participants appreciated the sense/need for a diagnostic entry test and considered the online completion as appropriate. One participant spoke of its suitability for potential students whose learning difficulty dictated a preference for testing in the comfort of their own home, rather than con-campus, in the midst of a group of strangers. Another participant indicated that the online testing represented *a way of sorting out those who are serious about doing the program*. She believed that if they were determined, they would work to overcome any technical challenge that may confront them on application. Furthermore, she saw testing via the internet as *a skill essential for undergraduate studies*.

Required Study Plan (RSP)

Interview participants were generally positive about the co-construction of a Required Study Plan (RSP) to prepare them for their undergraduate program choice. Generally, it was noted that they felt students could re-assess their progress if needed and then keep going with their study, whether it be at a much slower (or faster) pace or with a revised plan for a different undergraduate study goal. One interview participant praised the introduction of the RSP in terms of *its flexibility in allowing students to adjust their study plan* because of changing circumstances. She indicated that many of her fellow students had taken up the opportunity to adjust their RSP due to their changing personal circumstances. Cited circumstances included changes to work, family, course work results and other factors. Survey respondents similarly indicated their appreciation of having a study plan that accommodated their work, family and financial commitments, enabling them to *prepare for the workload and expectations of university*. The value of the focused nature of the RSP was articulated by one student, who noted that *the courses offered depending on your career choice is a good preparation to enter University*. It was generally appreciated that students who were unsuccessful in STEPS courses the first time round were given the opportunity to repeat a failed course, and that students who reconsidered their career objective were able to adjust their RSPs by studying additional courses (e.g. required mathematics and science courses).

An area of discontent related to the RSP expressed by a number of survey respondents was the issue of appropriately tailored preparation for the referencing protocols required by the student's chosen degree program. As one somewhat disgruntled albeit misguided respondent said, *the referencing guide for STEPS advised that it would be for all undergraduate degrees, yet it is not the case for the bachelor course I am undertaking*. However, some respondents suggested a way to improve this by noting that *if the student knows what undergraduate study that they are going to do, then the STEPS course should be designed how that course of study works. An example is that the STEPS programme taught me Harvard referencing but my course uses APA referencing*. This was reiterated by others who called for a focus on referencing styles *other than Harvard* in order to adequately prepare them for their undergraduate studies.

Role of the Access Coordinator (AC)

The Access Coordinator (AC) role, described by one interview participant as *the face of STEPS*, was overwhelmingly considered essential to students' success. Perceiving the AC as *advisor, counsellor and administrator*, one interview participant described the AC and their role as *a place to go to always get help*. Without exception, interview students agreed the role of Access Coordinator should be filled by a mature person who has *life experience as an adult learner* and who could *calmly help and resolve issues*. Other interview participants appreciated the role of the AC in terms of how they *guided students to solve their own problems* or *redirected them to professional assistance* should the personal issue require it. The participants unequivocally appreciated the non-judgemental nature of the ACs and the solace in *knowing someone [was] there to talk {to} about fears and always there ready to help* without judgement. In terms of survey respondents, similar sentiments were articulated,

several reflecting the various roles Access Coordinators fulfil. One respondent referred to their Access Coordinator as *very knowledgeable and extremely helpful when it came to subject selection and study options*. Others made reference to the *helpfulness and counselling* advice provided by the Access Coordinator as being particularly valuable, with particular reference to their *support, advice and encouragement*.

Benefits of a curriculum refresh

Many benefits of the STEPS curriculum refresh were articulated by the research participants. Expressed by both the focus group participants and the survey respondents were differing opinions as to which STEPS courses should be compulsory. Thoughts ranged from only the compulsory Preparation Skills for University (PSU) course to others, such as Essay Writing for University (EWU) and Computing Skills for University (CSU) or both. One undergraduate interview participant cemented the belief of another (a current STEPS student), believing that PSU *softened fears* of university study as it provided *the tools to tackle anything*. This participant's viewpoint supported the inclusion of PSU as a core course in that his first attempt at undergraduate study many years earlier was thwarted by his lack of knowledge on how to *format and structure an essay*, while knowledge of his learning style preferences and personality type, collectively, were exceptionally useful concepts. He further relayed that he now *knows what to do to get around difficult things* with his study and *now knows to ask questions*. In terms of readiness for undergraduate study, one interview participant clearly articulated an appreciation of the value of CSU. This was evident through his observation of the regret expressed by some of his undergraduate friends who had not done CSU in STEPS. He observed their lack of knowledge/expertise in areas such as the use of Power Point or Excel. Other participants made references to EWU, one suggesting that she *could not have survived undergraduate without doing EWU*. This was reiterated by a survey respondent who believed EWU *should be made mandatory [as it] has helped me in nearly every other course I have studied. This subject is very useful for further studies*. Interestingly, only one respondent indicated the need for advanced learning in academic writing, calling for *another Essay writing course at a higher level before starting undergrad*.

There was general consensus from both interviewees and survey respondents about the compulsory nature of PSU. There was praise about transferrable benefits, one respondent saying *I found that the Preparation for University course was the best possible start for university because that course gave me a down to earth look at how university runs. It was fantastic*. The value of PSU in allaying apprehension was also appreciated, captured by one survey respondent who said that *I would place this course at the top of the list for useful content as I have found that I use the skills that I learned every day in my undergraduate studies, and because of it I think that I am less anxious about the tasks I'm asked to complete. This is definitely a course that all students entering university should complete*. Other respondents made reference to the more personal benefits of PSU, such as how it gave them a *great understanding of ourselves and what we would be best suited to in future study*. This theme of adequate preparation for future study was noted by another respondent, believing PSU to *make you ready for the year ahead and for undergraduate programs that you wanted to get in in the future*.

However, there were a small few who did not find PSU advantageous. Perhaps by virtue of the anonymous survey and the frank honesty they can invite, some respondents viewed PSU as *a bit of a waste of time and not particularly helpful ... just explaining a lot of things we already know, common sense really*. Some suggested there *could be better content in the course*, and rather than problematising, suggested a solution by calling *for some type of interactive aspect for the distance students* as a way to be more connected.

Recommendations

Perhaps as testimony to the efficacy of the revamped program, the interview participants made few recommendations to further enhance STEPS. One participant recommended that all STEPS courses delivered solely by distance, particularly that the science-based courses, should include virtual tutorials via Blackboard Collaborate to facilitate closer student to student and student to staff interaction. Likewise, some interview participants called for an internal component for distance courses, the inclusion of a residential school being one suggestion. As a way to enable students who wanted to study in advance, one survey respondent called for the uploading *of all the videos and topics for the whole term* as a way to enable students *to look through it and start working out*.

The interview participants made suggestions related to preparation for the transition to undergraduate studies. One proposed that *all STEPS students be required to study at least one course via distance study in order to be fully prepared for the undergraduate arena where they may not have the choice to internal study*. As another way to prepare for the undergraduate context, one participant suggested that *greater emphasis and attention be placed on making clear the differences STEPS graduates articulating to undergraduate study will experience, particularly the fact that they will not have ready access to an undergraduate staff member in an equivalent role to that of the STEPS Access Coordinator*. Another suggestion was to include more formal or informal opportunities for undergraduates to interact with STEPS students throughout the term of study. This would represent a way for STEPS students to keep abreast of the undergraduate experience, *to imagine and see what it takes...at uni* and thus allow for discussions about the *lived* experience of current undergraduate students whose pathway to undergraduate study was via the STEPS program.

All interview participants agreed that more assistance to become familiar with the undergraduate enrolment process whilst in STEPS was desirable. It was agreed that this process was the most difficult to navigate aspect of the transition to undergraduate study and a closer investigation of the process involved while still in STEPS would alleviate the angst felt by many transitioning students.

In suggesting solutions to perceived and actual limitations of STEPS, one survey respondent called for *the provision of a better pathway for people who do not have a solid education in academic pathways, such as people who left a manual labour job going into a more academic strain*. Others called for the lengthening of STEPS courses *to allow for better retention of information and printed textbooks for all courses*. Finally, one survey respondent suggested *the option of studying term 3 on campus as this would improve studies of the students who struggle on their own*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the student voice in this paper indicates that changes made to STEPS as a consequence of the institutional review of enabling programs at CQUniversity Australia have been overwhelmingly positive. Change to policy and greater flexibility around systematic procedures and processes has resulted in the program having a more focused strategic and rigorous academic orientation than before the review. A more coherent rationale and shared institutional perspective as to its function now underpins the program. A curriculum refresh and a more rigorous and strategic connection with the undergraduate experience and University systems have been established, and while flexibility and support for students may have resulted in additional administrative work for staff, much has been achieved in ensuring a more efficient and cost effective approach to service delivery.

The Head of Program (STEPS), in collaboration with the Associate Dean and the team of Course Coordinators, Access Coordinators and teaching staff will consider the findings from this study and refer recommendations to the STEPS Program Committee for change where deemed desirable. Consideration will be afforded to the suggestion of a compulsory distance course for all students, the option of on campus study in all academic terms and the duration of the program. Particular attention will be paid to recommendations that can be actioned immediately, including: more frequent opportunity for interaction with former STEPS students now in undergraduate study; the wider offering of Blackboard Collaborate sessions for all courses; a clearer articulation of the role of the Access Coordinator as specific to STEPS; a greater emphasis on the undergraduate enrolment process; and the motivation behind the use of one particular referencing style in STEPS, making clear to students that the skill learned in this area of academic study is transferable to other referencing formats and that the time available in a 12 week term precludes a more in-depth focus on alternate referencing systems. This rationale will be reflected in the referencing guide made available to students and emphasised within class sessions.

The limitations of this study are acknowledged, namely that it is a small-scale study that situates the researchers/writers within the context from which the data has been drawn. As a way to ensure continuous improvement, the research design aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students in the re-vamped STEPS program. Thus, particular questions asked during the data gathering process inevitably influenced the responses generated. Different questions would possibly have yielded dissimilar information, but these will be the focus of future research as it is the intention of the authors, one being the divisional leader of the organisational work unit within which STEPS is organisationally located, another the Head of Program (STEPS), and the other, a long time researcher and teacher in STEPS, to use student feedback to continually improve STEPS. This will ensure that STEPS continues to address the widening participation agenda and serve the needs of traditionally underrepresented groups as they seek to use higher education as a vehicle to a changed life.

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