VIEWPOINT

Students in enabling programs need support not deterrents

Paul Chojenta* is an educator in the enabling programs at the University of Newcastle, Australia

This article argues that the Australian Government's 2017 Higher Education Reform Package represents a significant reduction in support for underrepresented groups to access higher education in Australia. It suggests that proposed changes to funding models for enabling (access) education programs will disproportionately disadvantage people in the six equity groups recognised by the Australian Higher Education Policy: low socioeconomic status (low SES) students; students with a disability, Indigenous students, students from regional and remote areas, women in non-traditional areas of study (WINTA); and students from a non-English speaking background (NESB). It further proposes that beyond those six categories, many students in enabling programs face additional barriers that are not formally recognised or supported, which make their success even more challenging, but ultimately more rewarding. Finally, it considers the larger role that enabling programs play in supporting diverse communities of learners.

Keywords: enabling, access, student equity, funding, support

Background

In May 2017 the Australian Federal Government released the Higher Education Reform Package which, despite $2.8 billion in cuts, was widely promoted by the government as supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Education Minister, Simon Birmingham's (2017a) press release stated that the package ensures, "Australians who want to study have the support to do so", and specifically mentioned supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the package also included significant changes to the way that enabling education programs are funded in Australia. Enabling (sometimes called access, bridging or foundation) programs provide a pathway into higher education for students who have not otherwise met the entrance requirement of their chosen institution. Open access to higher education relies on adequate alternative pathways, so that those students who have not followed the traditional path are not locked out. Places in enabling education programs have been Commonwealth supported in Australia since 2004, meaning students enrolling in such a program incur no fee or debt. The proposed changes will remove enabling loading, leaving students with a debt of several thousand dollars. This feature of the proposed reforms is deeply problematic, as enabling programs consistently have a significantly higher representation of students from low SES backgrounds than their counterpart undergraduate programs (Pitman et al., 2016). Imposing a debt on these students represents a significant deterrent for them to begin their higher education journey.

*Email: paul.chojenta@newcastle.edu.au

Much of the justification of these funding changes revolves around student 'success rates', whether students who enrol in enabling programs complete the program and are retained in their undergraduate study. While the figures themselves are highly debatable, as Bennett, Harvey and Fagan (2017) assert, it is also important to carefully consider the backgrounds of students in enabling cohorts, which can be understood in several ways. Enabling program cohorts are consistently over-represented by students from the six formally recognised equity groups: students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds; students with a disability, Indigenous students, students from regional and remote areas, women in non-traditional areas of study (WINTA); and students from a non-English speaking background (NESB). This over-representation alone suggests enabling students require funded support, given the Education Minister's claim that, "more targeted support for students th[at] enrol from equity groups" (Birmingham, 2017b), is a priority of the government. Yet, the over-representation of the six equity groups in enabling programs does not reveal the full picture of the students who enrol. Students enrol in enabling programs because they are unable to gain direct entry into university which can be for one of two reasons. Firstly, they are a recent school-leaver who either did not complete or did not receive a high enough admissions rank, or secondly, they have had a substantial gap since last engaging in formal education. Both scenarios suggest that there are certain life circumstances, in addition to typical equity issues, that leave a potential student in need of an enabling program.

Equity funding

In announcing the Higher Education Reform Package, Education Minister Simon Birmingham (2017a) acknowledged that, "Students from disadvantaged backgrounds attract guaranteed taxpayer support through their universities to help boost their learning experience and chances of completion, with the Higher Education Participation and Partnership program being enshrined as a per student legislated loading". This was welcome news to university enabling education programs, many of which have utilised Higher Education Participation and Partnership program (HEPPP) funding for several years. Indeed, enabling programs don't just attract high percentages of students from equity groups, they actively cater to those groups with a variety of specialty programs. The University of Newcastle's Yapug Program, specifically catering to Indigenous Students, is a good example. Federal MP Sharon Claydon recently stated:

> It is no coincidence that Newcastle has 1000 Indigenous students enrolled. It is no coincidence that the University of Newcastle trains more than half of this nation's Indigenous doctors … Those incredible successes are directly attributable to the decades of hard work and Newcastle's steadfast commitment to delivering equity in education through high-quality enabling programs. (McCarthy, 2017)

However, the Higher Education Participation and Partnership program is limited in the scope of support that can be funded, excluding many teaching and learning programs that enabling students rely on. Also, HEPPP provides competitive funding across all university programs, meaning enabling programs must compete with undergraduate and postgraduate programs. This is concerning because, as Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion (2016) recently argued, "the focus needs to shift from enrolments, to also lifting retention and completion rates". This statement suggests that the government will not be prioritising support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enrol, which is the pathway that enabling programs provide.

The disproportionately high percentage of students from equity groups enrolled in enabling programs suggests that they need to be supported above and beyond the baseline support available to all university programs. Yet, equity group status is only part of the challenge facing

enabling program cohorts. The very fact that individual students do not already have an admissions qualification, and therefore need an enabling program to gain entry into an undergraduate program, suggests that there are further factors to consider.

Recent school leavers

For many Australian students, secondary schooling culminates in receiving an admission rank and subsequent offer of enrolment to a university. This is the 'typical' and most straightforward pathway into higher education. But some do not follow that pathway, for a variety of reasons. While high school retention rates have been steadily increasing, currently 84.6% of students complete Year 12 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), there are still a significant number that do not. Even those who do complete Year 12 do not necessarily receive an admission rank, because they either did not achieve high enough grades or because they enrolled in vocational courses that preclude them. These outcomes, occurring at age 17 or 18, can have a profound impact on future educational and employment opportunities. It would be easy to suggest that these individuals are not capable of succeeding at university, although even Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (2017) has rejected this notion. Surely access to higher education should not be shut off at such an early stage of life. Enabling programs offer students a second chance at achieving a university admission rank, while simultaneously preparing them to succeed in a university environment.

It would also be erroneous to assume that not receiving an admission rank is the 'fault' of the individual. Numerous external factors can contribute to a person not completing secondary school or not achieving the necessary results. Firstly, family commitments can adversely impact a student's success. This might be the result of the death or serious illness of a parent or caregiver, the need to support and care for siblings or the need to work to financially contribute to the family. Secondly, health concerns can negatively impact students, whether this be an ongoing physical or psychological disability or a serious illness or injury during Year 12. Thirdly, secondary schooling might simply have been an unsuitable or unsupportive environment, due to a learning disability or bullying. Then there are more complex issues; pregnancy during school, homelessness, being a victim of domestic violence or arriving in Australia as an asylum seeker (perhaps with English as a second language). Often it can simply be a lack of guidance during secondary school, perhaps because no member of their family has ever attended university, as Pitman et al. (2017) report, or because they live in a regional or remote area lacking a university campus. It can even be the result of a student focusing their efforts on non-academic pursuits, such as professional sport (Robbermond, 2017) or performing arts. While these barriers can overlap with recognised equity issues, they often do not, and therefore receive little recognition or support. Even where they do overlap, and perhaps attract some support, they add a layer of challenge to succeeding in study. This additional challenge is critical as none of these numerous scenarios are under the individual student's control. These are students who require an additional, later opportunity to study and access higher education. Opportunity is what enabling programs provide.

Mature-age students

Access to higher education has its own set of obstacles for individuals who completed their formal education ten or more years prior. University admission ranks or other sub-bachelor qualifications are no longer valid considerations after that time period, so again, an alternative pathway is necessary. In an economic environment where Employment Minister Michaelia Cash (2017) sees helping "workers make transitions to new and better jobs" as essential, and where the cost of living (particularly housing) has made two-income families a necessity, it is little

wonder that people are seeking to return to education later in life. It is also understandable that a university qualification, rather than vocational training, is the aspiration of many because employment for university educated workers in Australia has tripled in the last thirty years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Once again, enabling education provides a pathway for a cohort of students who have not followed the traditional path and again, this is often due to factors outside their control.

The life circumstances of mature-age students who enrol in enabling programs are diverse, but as with recent school leavers, they are often experiencing hardships that, whilst sometimes overlapping, do not necessarily fit standard equity issues and therefore do not attract adequate support. Those life circumstances frequently relate to family. Sometimes these are dire situations; students who have lost their financially supportive partner due to death, divorce or escaping an abusive relationship. Sometimes people (particularly women) left education early to support children. Indeed, many students acknowledge that they enrolled in enabling programs when they perceived 'time' to have become available; for example, children had become older and more independent (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017). Many also see enrolling in education later in life as role modelling for their children, encouraging their aspirations. This is a good example of the layering of a (government) supported equity circumstance (low SES) with a far more complex scenario, which requires additional support, and potentially because of the generational impact, reaps richer rewards. Other mature-aged enabling students are responding to their employment situation. They may have been made redundant, suffered an injury or illness that precludes them from maintaining their prior vocation, they may be seeking a move away from manual labour as they age, they may be business owners who have never had a formal qualification, or they may simply be seeking better paid or more fulfilling employment. These are people who have worked throughout their adult lives and are simply seeking the opportunity to continue to do so. It is also important to consider that many mature-aged students completed their secondary schooling at Year 10, at a time when that was commonplace and when there was no shortage of employment opportunities. Those conditions have changed, and it is therefore important that people are encouraged and supported in their efforts to adapt. Again, it is enabling programs that provide this.

Enabling programs

Given the unique and complex nature of enabling program cohorts, it is perhaps worth framing enabling programs as a public service, rather than simply an educational pathway. This shift in thinking is critical, as another aspect of the Higher Education Reform Package proposes opening up enabling places to tender from private education providers. This move is troubling, as most private providers have no history or expertise in supporting the complex educational and equity needs of this particular cohort.

Existing, university-based, publicly funded, enabling programs provide a community service. They are able to not only support their diverse cohorts, but also provide programs for marginalised groups that would otherwise be ignored. They often exist on regional campuses, supporting small groups of students across wide geographical areas, such as programs run at the University of the Sunshine Coast (Salvaire, 2017) and Charles Darwin University (Shaw, 2017). Enabling programs at La Trobe University (*Shepparton News*, 2017), Western Sydney University (Stevens, 2017) and the University of Newcastle support groups of asylum seekers seeking to further their education. An enabling program at the University of Southern Queensland delivers education to prison inmates across four states (O'Keeffe, 2017). It would be highly unlikely for private providers to offer these types of programs, and yet it is exactly this supportive, community-based approach that makes enabling programs so critical.

Continuing support

Ultimately, enabling programs, and the students they support, are an important part of the structure of Australian society. Enabling programs provide access to higher education to thousands of students every year. Without them, many of the nation's most vulnerable would never have a chance to reap the benefits that a university education can bring. Their life circumstances, whether they be short-term challenges such as illness or redundancy, or long-term challenges like inter-generational forms of disadvantage, mean that educational opportunities beyond school to qualify and prepare for higher levels of learning and performance (whether at university or in other forms of education and employment) are critical. For these people an alternative pathway to educational outcomes is necessary, one that is built on a successful and long history of existing expertise in the form of university-based programs. It is surely incumbent on the government, who purport to be giving all Australians access to higher education, to make good on that pledge and continue to support free and accessible enabling programs and the students they serve.

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