Adult
Learning
Australia

AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ADULT LEARNING

From the Editor's desk
Tony Brown

A healthy well-educated population

National elections concentrate attention on matters of ongoing importance.

They provide a period of intense focus on policies aimed at the present and future and invite people to make choices about what sort of future they believe is best for themselves, their community and their country.

If polls and surveys are accurate then they affirm the sense that education has fallen down the list of priority issues. The Coalition has

abandoned its pre-election commitment of 2013 to fund Gonski, it has put on hold its efforts to de-regulate higher education fees, and is trying to keep alive its program of privatising vocational education. These have become primarily defensive measures aimed at quietening them as issues for the election. Labor says it is committed to funding Gonski for school age education, but its policies to progress and support other sectors of education are less clear.

There is a consensus that a shift has occurred in Australia's economy as the minerals and resources boom has waned and new industries will be needed. Innovation is promoted as the means of kick-starting the economy. If this is the case then education will be central to achieving change.

The policy stalemate that has afflicted education over the past decade or more needs to be re-thought. It is hard to envisage a dynamic innovative society where jewels in the innovation crown like the CSIRO are cut back, where National research institutions like the Co-operative Research Centres (CRCs) and National Library, Gallery and Museum have funds cut every year; where Higher Education policy sits becalmed, and where massive waste and fraud evident in the privatised VET system continues leaving both a terrible debt burden for students as well as a failure to deliver the skill needs of a modern economy.

Education needs to be understood as more than the school years and more than higher and vocational education as businesses. Education and learning go beyond that. Pre-school and child care are essential foundation stones of a learning society, and Schools, VET, and Universities are the centre-piece of the formal system. But there is more that makes vital contributions to a learning society, the non-formal education providers in community centres and colleges, in suburbs and in small and regional towns, in Men's Sheds and volunteer organisations, in campaign groups, trade unions and Indigenous associations, among older learners everywhere and so on.

It comes down to the vision of the role and purpose of education in society, and the values that underpin that.

America's election also has us thinking about the quality of public discourse, the tone of that debate, and whether a future that rests on

building walls against neighbours holds more promise than one that is based on extending opportunities to all to learn and to become active citizens.

In May President Obama hosted a dinner for the five Nordic Prime Ministers and their spouses at the White House. In his speech he acknowledged the adult education heritage of the Nordic Folk High Schools and its significant impact on American life:

Many of our Nordic friends are familiar with the great Danish pastor and philosopher Grundtvig who, among other causes, championed the idea of the Folk School — education that was not just made available to the elite, but to the many. Training that prepared a person for active citizenship, that improves a society.

Over time the Folk School Movement spread, including here to the United States. One of those schools was in the state of Tennessee. It was called the Highlander Folk School. Highlander, especially during the 1950s, a new generations of Americans came together to share their ideas and strategies for advancing civil rights, for advancing equality, for advancing justice. We know the names of some of those who were trained or participated in the Highlander school. Ralph Abernathy. John Lewis. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

They were all shaped in part by Highlander and the teachings of the great Nordic philosopher, and they ended up having a ripple effect on the Civil Rights Movement and ultimately on making America a better place. We would not have been here had it not been for that stone that was thrown in the lake and created ripples of hope that ultimately spread across the ocean to the United States of America. I might not be standing here were it not for the efforts of people like Ella Baker and the others who participated in the Highlander Folk School.

Around the same time Obama addressed a graduation ceremony at Rutgers University. As is common he spoke to the students about their future, and he concluded by reminding them of the importance of:

Facts, evidence, reason, logic, an understanding of science -- these are good things. These are qualities you want in people making policy. These are qualities you want to continue to cultivate in yourselves as

citizens.

We traditionally have valued those things. But if you were listening to today's political debate, you might wonder where this strain of anti-intellectualism came from. In politics and in life, ignorance is not a virtue. It's not cool to not know what you're talking about. That's not keeping it real, or telling it like it is. That's not challenging political correctness. That's just not knowing what you're talking about. And yet, we've become confused about this.

Our nation's Founders were born of the Enlightenment. They sought to escape superstition, and sectarianism, and tribalism, and no-nothingness... They believed in rational thought and experimentation, and the capacity of informed citizens to master our own fates....

But when our leaders express a disdain for facts, when they're not held accountable for repeating falsehoods and just making stuff up, while actual experts are dismissed as elitists, then we've got a problem.

You know, it's interesting that if we get sick, we actually want to make sure the doctors have gone to medical school, they know what they're talking about. If we get on a plane, we say we really want a pilot to be able to pilot the plane. The rejection of facts, the rejection of reason and science -- that is the path to decline. It calls to mind the words of Carl Sagan who said: "We can judge our progress by the courage of our questions and the depths of our answers, our willingness to embrace what is true rather than what feels good." The debate around climate change is a perfect example of this.

He was of course referring to an education that is conceived of much more broadly than just preparation for work, but one that has at its core the formation of a civil society made up of informed active citizens.

By the time this issue of AJAL appears Australia's election will be over and a new government formed.

It is to be hoped that if the positive notions of fairness, innovation, agility and being responsive to the new are to be met then the new government will see that greatest investment in the future is in a healthy, well-educated population.

In this issue researchers turn their attention to examining how initiatives to widen access and participation in higher education, which has been a central policy aim in Australia for nearly decade, are playing out. **Cathy Stone, Sarah O'Shea, Josephine May, Janine Delahunty** and **Zoë Partington** investigated the experience of 87 mature age students who were the first in their families to attend university. They enrolled in online study and through a series of interviews and surveys data was collected to identify the range of factors that helped these adult learners.

How culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students from refugee backgrounds make their transition into higher education in a regional setting is the subject that a group of researchers from the University of Southern Queensland - **Eric Kong, Sarah Harmsworth, Mohammad Mehdi Rajaeian, Geoffrey Parkes, Sue Bishop, Bassim AlMansouri**, and **Jill Lawrence**, report on. During the election campaign government Ministers suggested that immigrants were potentially a burden on the Australian economy and social welfare system. This research looks more closely at the experience of a group of students and also interviews university administrative staff to identify the wide range of challenges that need to be considered in developing effective strategies and policies to make transition successful.

Enabling programs that develop pathways into university study for students who might not otherwise take up higher education have become widely adopted by universities across Australia, and a number have been discussed in AJAL. **Joanne Lisciandro** and **Gael Gibbs** report on research into the types of mechanisms being used at one University to facilitate high retention rates among pathway students over a seven year period, and which has then converted into achieving a high rate of offers of places in undergraduate programs.

Jenny Chesters and **Louise Watson** also investigate the effects of pathway programs on student achievement and attrition, but apply a different research methodology. A number of barriers to gaining entry have been dismantled as part of the opening up of higher education to non-traditional students. This paper examines administrative data for a cohort of first year university students to examine the association

between pathway to university and student retention and academic progression. An important finding is that those students who completed an enabling course on campus prior to commencing their undergraduate program were less likely than students admitted on the basis of completing secondary school to discontinue their university studies.

Then there are those students who enter university who have been away from the formal education system for some years since completing school. Their transition into tertiary study is the subject of **Trixie James'** paper, and in particular the experience of attending preparatory programs for pre-skilling. A small group of students who decided to return to study by entering an Enabling program and then progressed to complete the first year of a degree program are the subject of this research. Four key themes are identified that contributed to the success of this educational journey to date.

In a far different setting **Vaughn John** reports on a case study of an adult education project in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal. The paper revisits the theory of transformative learning noting that it has been an underpinning theory of adult education for many decades and over that time it has also been the subject of some recurring critique. A central question raised here is whether the theory is able to be put to use in oppressive contexts, such as post-apartheid South Africa, that involve trauma and fear. It concludes by arguing that more varied and situated accounts of attempts to use transformative learning may help in developing the theory and understanding of adult learning.

In *Book Reviews* **Chris Speldewinde** reviews a new book on *Popular Culture as Pedagogy*, which takes a closer look at how popular moving image media like Disney movies, the Lego film, movies depicting on teachers on screen, TV shows like *ER* and *Doctor Who* can shape adults learning.

Finally, please note the Call for Papers for a Special Issue of AJAL in November 2017 on the *Getting of Wisdom – Learning in Later Life*, and the three Conferences scheduled for later in February 2017 on this topic.

Tony Brown

Australian Journal of Adult Learning

Call for Papers for a Special Issue on: Getting of Wisdom – Learning in Later Life

The Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw wrote that "We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future."

We have taken the *Getting of Wisdom* theme (from a 1910 Australian novel by that name by a female author, Ethel Richardson, who wrote as a male, Henry Handel Richardson) for this international exchange of people, researchers, policy makers and practitioners and ideas from opposite sides of the globe. Our aim is to acknowledge, share, listen to and learn from the accumulated wisdom of older people and researchers in the field to help secure and shape our diverse but interconnected futures.

The one week Exchange (12-18 Feb 2017), including three one day Conferences, is a unique collaboration between the Education and Learning by Older Adults (ELOA) Network of ESREA (European Society for Research into the Education of Adults); Adult Learning Australia (ALA), the peak adult and community education body in Australia; Federation University Australia, and ACE Aotearoa, the peak organisation inclusive of New Zealand's diverse Māori, Pākehā and Pacifika cultures and peoples.

Learning in later life is a relatively new and exciting field of research, and becoming increasingly relevant internationally. The two nations hosting the European exchange (Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa) have only relatively recently begun to acknowledge, celebrate and learn from their rich, diverse and vibrant Indigenous and European ways of being and knowing after centuries of very recent and often painful colonisation.

We have taken four intersecting themes in our attempt to collectively underpin the exchange and better understand the nature and future of learning in later life. These themes have to do with place, equality, empowerment and identity. We have woven these themes into the three conferences to be held in Australia and New Zealand 2017:

- Ballarat (13 Feb) will focus on *Older learning in diverse contexts;*
- Melbourne (14 Feb) on *Learning in later life and social inequalities,* and
- Wellington (New Zealand) (15 Feb) on *Learning, empowerment and identity in later life.*

Further information and registration details for the Exchange, including registering for and submitting papers to any of these Conferences, are available via the ALA and ACE Aotearoa websites.

Conference participants who submit papers by 25 November 2016 have the option of them being peer reviewed and published in the Conference Proceedings. There will also be an opportunity for a selection of these papers (and any later papers submitted to AJAL on related themes by 13 April 2017) to be published in a special, guest-edited November 2017 issue of the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* (AJAL).

Guest Editors

- Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha (University of Tubingen, Germany);
- Sabina Jelenc Krašovec (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia);
- Brian Findsen (University of Waikato, New Zealand); and
- Barry Golding (Federation University, Australia).

Notes for Prospective Authors

Submissions for inclusion in the AJAL Special Issue should be between 6,000 and 7,000 words and conform to the AJAL Style, details of which can be found via the 'Submissions' tab at www.ajal.net.au

Submissions must be made online at www.ajal.net.au before 13 April 2017 for publication in November 2017.

Further information about the special issue can be obtained by contacting Barry Golding at b.golding@federation.edu.au

Opportunity through online learning: Experiences of first-in-family students in online open-entry higher education

Cathy Stone[^]
Sarah O'Shea[*]
Josephine May[#]
Janine Delahunty[*]
Zoë Partington[+]

University of Newcastle & Open Universities Australia[^]
University of Wollongong[*]
University of Newcastle[#]
Open Universities Australia[+]

Online learning has an important place in widening access and participation in higher education for diverse student cohorts. One cohort taking up online study in increasing numbers is that of mature-age, first-in-family students. First-in-family is defined as those who are the first in their immediate family, including parents, siblings, partners and children, to undertake university studies. This paper looks at the experience of 87 first-in-family students, for whom the opportunity to study open-entry, online undergraduate units through Open Universities Australia made it possible for them to embark on

a university education. Using a qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews and surveys were conducted with these students as part of a wider study into first-in-family students (O'Shea, May & Stone, 2015). Findings include the important role that opportunity plays in providing the impetus for study, as well as the importance of support and encouragement from family, friends, colleagues and institutions in being able to continue the journey.

Keywords: *Online learning; first-in-family; higher education; open-entry*

Introduction

There is increasing evidence that availability of online learning is helping to widen access to higher education, making it possible for more students from diverse backgrounds to study for a university degree (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015; Knightley, 2007; O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015). This is particularly the case when there are also open-entry pathways into online university studies (Shah, Goode, West & Clark, 2014; Stone, 2012). The flexibility offered by online learning enables students to combine study with paid work, family and other responsibilities.

This paper examines the experiences of a group of students studying in open-entry online undergraduate units at Open Universities Australia, who have identified as being first in their immediate family to undertake university studies. Open Universities Australia (OUA) is an education company that specialises in facilitating open-entry online higher education in partnership with 13 Australian universities. In terms of student numbers, it is the national leader in online higher education, with an annual enrolment of over 40,000 university students (OUA, 2015). Through OUA, students can enrol in online undergraduate units as open-entry students, thence moving into full degree programs offered by universities in each state and territory of Australia, with the exception of Tasmania and Australian Capital Territory.

Enrolment data from OUA shows that 67.7% of its students enrolled in higher education units of study come from families where neither parent

has achieved university qualifications (OUA, 2015). This is considerably higher than OECD (2012) data, which indicates that around 51% of students enrolled in degree programs at Australian universities are from families where neither parent achieved university qualifications (Spiegler & Bednarak, 2013). Such high numbers, combined with evidence that these students are at higher risk of attrition and poorer academic outcomes (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013; Coates & Ransom, 2011; National Centre for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012), suggest there is a pressing need to explore their experiences in order to better understand how to assist them to persist and succeed.

Review of the literature

Research into the experiences of online learners indicates that there can be both positives and negatives associated with this mode of study. The positives mainly centre on improved access to higher education and the opportunity to balance study with other demands and responsibilities. For example, Knightley (2007) found in her study conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) at the Open University, that, for the students she surveyed and interviewed, online learning "transcended geographical, physical, visual and temporal barriers to accessing education, and reduced socio-physical discrimination" (2007:281). Other research suggests that having to leave home or change location, or incur significant travel costs to go to university is a significant deterrent for those from families where university education is not the norm. It is expensive as well as time-consuming and disruptive, and many families cannot afford this extra burden (Michael, 2012; O'Shea, May & Stone, 2015; Park & Choi, 2009; Shah et al, 2015). In particular, Park and Choi's study (2009) conducted in the United States (US) found that "Distance learning allows adult learners who have employment, family and/or other responsibilities, to update knowledge and skills… by saving travel costs and allowing a flexible schedule" (2009:207). Similarly, Michael's study (2012) conducted with first-in-family online students in Australia found that online study offered these students "an opportunity to study and work while still enjoying somewhat of a balanced lifestyle" (2012:158).

Additionally, providing an open-entry pathway into online higher education provides the opportunity to enter higher education for those

who do not meet traditional entry requirements. An open-entry pathway "attracts adults from various social and educational backgrounds who frequently do not have the qualifications necessary to gain a place at a conventional university" (Knightley, 2007:269). Shah et al.'s research (2014) with students undertaking the online, open-entry Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, finds that "the delivery of enabling programs online provide access and opportunity for many disadvantaged students" (2014:49).

However, online study has its own particular challenges in terms of student engagement, persistence and success. A recent report from the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2014) looking into completion rates of domestic undergraduate students in Australia, shows that of those students who enrolled in 2005, only 44.4% of fully external students (online) had completed their degree programs by 2012, compared with an overall completion rate in the same time period of 72.3%. The completion rate was higher for multi-modal study, at 69.5%, indicating that perhaps the lack of any face-to-face contact with the institution is particularly challenging. Indeed, much of the literature indicates that the two-fold challenges of understanding e-learning technology, along with a sense of isolation are key issues for online students. For example, Yoo and Huang's US study (2013) found that the technology associated with online learning could be overwhelming for 'novice adult learners' (2013:160). This finding is supported by Ilgaz and Gülbahar's Turkish study (2015) which concluded that the convenience factor of studying online is diminished by negative factors such as technical problems, lack of interaction with tutors and other students, problems with instructional materials and students' own difficulties with time management. Lambrinidis' (2014) research at Charles Darwin University found that the use of online learning tools to assist students to better understand the technology and to connect with other students and tutors more easily, increased student satisfaction with online learning. He comments that "For students from non-traditional backgrounds, social presence in particular is vital to creating a learning environment conducive to students feeling connected to each other and their respective tutors" (2014:257).

Background to the research

A qualitative research project, funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), was conducted in 2014-2015. Its aim was to explore the experiences of students who were first in their families to go to university, as well as the experiences of their family members and significant others (O'Shea et al., 2015). This project conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews and open-ended surveys, using a narrative approach, with three different cohorts of Australian domestic students, namely, on-campus undergraduates, enabling program students and online undergraduate students. A first-in-family student was defined as the first person in their immediate family to go to university, including siblings, parents, main caregivers, significant partners and children.

This paper is reporting on findings from the data that was collected from the 87 online undergraduate students who participated. Each participant was studying entirely online through a range of Australian universities, having enrolled via Open Universities Australia. The students self-selected to participate, by responding to an email sent to a cohort of students identified from OUA enrolment data as studying open-entry undergraduate units and having indicated on enrolment that neither parent had studied at university level. The email asked them if they were the first amongst their immediate family (parents, siblings, partners and children) to study at university level and if they would be willing to be interviewed by phone, or complete a detailed online survey, about their experiences of their studies so far. A total of 43 students agreed to be interviewed with a further 44 completing the survey.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone while surveys were completed online. In the 43 interviews, open-ended questions were used as prompts to elicit information around particular themes, including their motivations to begin their studies, their experiences so far, reactions of others around them (particularly family), how they managed their studies, any support that they received and the impact that their student journey so far had had upon themselves and others around them. They were also encouraged to discuss their reasons for choosing online studies, and how they were experiencing this mode of study and any particular study strategies they used. Support that

they received from family, friends and institutions was also explored. In the online surveys, students were asked open-ended questions about their experiences of being students, exploring the same themes as the interviews, and were encouraged to 'tell their stories' in their own words and with as much detail as they wished. Demographic information was elicited from each of the respondents, including age, gender, whether partnered or single and if they had any children.

A narrative method was used to interview the students, to construct the interview and survey questions and to analyse the data. Allowing the participants to narrate their personal stories in their own words resulted in rich and detailed accounts from each. The data was analysed using a combination of NVivo (10), with initial line by line analysis to identify codes and emerging themes, as well as manual analysis in order to delve further into significant themes. This involved reading through individual interview transcripts and survey responses, making notes and highlighting words, phrases and quotes, whilst using a reflexive approach to interpret the data (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). A narrative method recognises that these "first person accounts of experience" (Riessman, 1993:17) from a number of individuals in the same time and place, are culturally located and can reveal a collective experience, in that they reflect on shared life stages. It is therefore possible to tentatively extrapolate this collective experience more widely, to others who are sharing the same time, place and culture (Elliott, 2005; Ewick & Silbey, 1995).

Findings

All names of those interviewed have been changed for the purposes of anonymity. Survey respondents were already anonymous and each has been given a number (e.g. respondent #1) to distinguish them when reporting on findings. Quotes used within this paper were chosen to reflect predominant themes and where possible to provide examples of male and female responses, different age groups and both survey and interview respondents.

Demographics

The survey asked respondents to nominate their age group. The largest number was aged 30-40 (16 students), 15 students were 18-30 and 13 students were 40-50+ (Table 1).

Table 1

Survey Age Range	%	No.
18 - 21	4.55%	2
21 - 25	13.64%	6
25 - 30	15.91%	7
30 - 40	36.36%	16
40 - 50	22.73%	10
50+	6.81%	3
TOTALS	100%	44

The interviewees gave their exact ages, which ranged from 21 to 62, with a median age of 38. Table 2 shows that the highest number of interviewees was in the 41-50 age range (12 students) with 22 students 21-40 and nine students 51-61+ (Table 2).

Table 2

Interview Age Range	%	No.
21 - 25	18.6%	8
26 - 30	16.3%	7
31 - 40	16.3%	7
41 - 50	27.9%	12
51-60	16.3%	7
61+	4.6%	2
TOTALS	100%	43

With only two students (survey respondents) identifying as being 18-21, at least 85 of the 87 participants can be classified as mature-age students. Females were over-represented in both the survey and the interview groups, with 34 of the interviewees (79%) and 36 of the

survey respondents (82%) being women. Amongst those interviewed, 26 (60%) indicated that they had a partner and 23 (53.5%) had children, aged from one year through to adulthood. Eight were single parents. Amongst the survey respondents, 28 (63.6%) were partnered and 22 (50%) had children. Ages of children were not requested in the survey.

More than two-thirds of the survey respondents (68%) were in paid work, either full-time or part-time. Twice as many worked full-time (20) than part-time (10). Amongst the interviewees, 65% were in paid work, with 25 (58%) working full-time and three (7%) working part-time. Indeed as discussed below, employment overall proved to be an important motivator for respondents to engage in their studies.

Motivations and influences – why study and why now?

Predominantly, respondents were seeking to 'better' their lives, their children's lives and their futures. They were seeking practical benefits, through more secure employment and increased income, as well as seeking to fulfil personal hopes and dreams.

Career and employment

The motivations for starting university were overwhelmingly related to career and employment. As has been found in other studies with mature-age students "a desire to get a better job" (Stone & O'Shea, 2012:11) or to improve their career prospects is a significant driver, as illustrated by the quote below:

> I've gone as high as I can go at work without a qualification so it's for career advancement and opportunity I think because I'd like to change jobs but it's a bit difficult unless you've got that piece of paper. *(Gemma, 42)*

Similarly, Richard (29) says: "I'm the only income earner in our family so I thought it'd be good if I did actually earn more money than I do as a chef because it's not exactly a well-paid job", while for Natalie as a single parent with two children, a desire for self-sufficiency is the overriding concern, "I might one day actually pull off owning my own house and actually have some super – enough to survive on". Amongst the survey responses, examples include respondent #42 (female, 40-50)

who wanted to "return to the workforce after being a full-time mum... in a career that I am passionate about & a job that I really want to do" and respondent #16 (male, 40-50) who talks about his goal of "career advancement in my current work... to remain contemporary and viable in the workplace". However respondents revealed that engaging in higher education was also regarded as a springboard for personal change and growth.

Catalyst for change

McGivney's (2006) research into the reasons for adult learners resuming formal study, talks about an "often serendipitous" (2006:85) path that leads them into the decision. For most of the participants in this study, there was a change or an event which provided the impetus for the decision to start their studies. Sometimes it was a personal, internal event, as for Donna (36) who experienced "my own personal epiphany" through which "I realised I'm sure I've got potential to do more", while for others, such as Bethany below, a change in external circumstances proved to be the catalyst.

> When I retired from work, I thought "Okay, this is what I want to do". I don't know what I'm going to do with it but it's just on the bucket list. *(Bethany, 59)*

This experience that the 'time was now right' was also expressed through participation in higher education as an unfulfilled ambition.

A long-held dream

For many, it was a long-held dream that they would one day go to university and get a degree. Molly, now 62, "always wanted to go to university even when I was a kid" and for respondent #21 (female, 30-40) "it had been part of my plan to further my education". Sometimes a combination of factors aligned. One of the survey respondents describes a kind of 'awakening' - a sense that the time and the opportunity had come to embark on a new path in life and fulfil her dream from the past.

> I have always wanted to be a primary school teacher, since my first day of kindergarten. I sold myself short through high school, not thinking I was 'smart' enough to ever get into university;

however the thought never left my mind to undergo further
studies. Straight after school, I moved out of home... which in
turn forced me into full time work straight away. The dreams
of uni faded... I went through job after job after job. It did not
matter how great the pay was, how 'good' I was at the role I was
in – I was not happy with whatever I went into and was getting
increasingly frustrated in not being where I needed to be in life.
After 6 solid years of working job to job full time, I had my first
born and it finally dawned on me. OUA! I can give it a shot, whilst
I am at home with my little baby. I am surely not that stupid. I
tried a unit, and to my own shock, I got a credit! *(Respondent #18,
female, 21-25)*

This story illustrates how empowering it can be to have the opportunity
to study online while at home; university came to this respondent's
home as she cared for her new baby. Each one of the participants had
their own particular reasons for choosing to study online.

Why choose online studies?

Overwhelmingly, online studies had been chosen for the flexibility that
it offered, making it possible for the respondents to continue going to
work, to care for children and meet other responsibilities. For Glenda
(36), "It's just perfect because I can study at my own pace and my job
gives me the freedom to study when I want" while for Evan (29), he finds
he can "structure the study – to suit my sort of lifestyle instead of having
to make any dramatic changes to study on campus".

The open-entry undergraduate units offered by OUA made it possible
for those without university-entry qualifications to begin university and
progress towards their chosen degree.

I initially applied to [another] University as an external student
but was turned down. That made me even more determined to
find another way and I came across OUA, which didn't require
any prior qualifications. *(Respondent #26, female, 50+)*

Impact of opportunity

OUA's open-entry, online university units provided an opportunity

for students who had not previously considered this a possibility. For example, respondent #44 (female, 30-40) "…looked into online courses and found it easy to access University via Open Universities". This student previously thought that she would not be able to manage university.

> …it seemed too difficult with the thought of exams, workload, assignments, research. It was quite overwhelming the thought of it, particularly as I have to continue to work full time.

Her family did not encourage her education, nor do they now give her support in her studies.

> …my father, who claims that going to uni puts you in a higher class than others, and felt I was 'up myself' for wanting to better my life… [and] in all honesty, I'm not even sure she [mother] knows what I'm studying.

Yet now, this student finds that "It's made my self-confidence sky rocket and truly believe I am cut out for University, even though I come from a family who have barely completed high school".

This story is one of many that emerge from the interviews and surveys, in which participants describe the lack of opportunity for university study previously, and the way in which open-entry, online study now provides that opportunity. Perhaps not surprisingly, the word *opportunity* crops up again and again, both in relation to the lack of *opportunity* in the past:

> There's never the *opportunity* and, you know, when I was single and I had a mortgage there was no way I could have done anything else; I was barely keeping my head above water then, you know, so *opportunity* plays a big part. *(Hailey, 41)*

and in relation to *opportunity* presenting itself now:

> …a great *opportunity* and I'm really enjoying it… *(Holly, 43)*

 (Authors' emphasis added in example quotes above).

What role do others play in this opportunity? The evidence shows that

the decision to engage in university study takes place within a social milieu that sometimes positively and sometimes negatively influences the student's experience.

The role of others

There is a wealth of literature demonstrating the importance of student engagement and support from fellow students and staff for academic success, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2012; Tinto, 2009; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). However much of this is based on traditional on-campus environments. There is relatively little data on the types of support that are important for online students, who are limited to virtual contact with other students and staff. The stories of these first-in-family students indicate that support from family, friends and colleagues outside the institution is just as important as institutional support, if not more so. Families in particular played a significant role, beginning with their inspiration and encouragement to start the journey.

Others as inspirers

Partners, parents and adult children all played their part in inspiring the students to begin. For example, Phil (29) explained how his partner "really got me on there, got me to have a look at the website and see what I could do", while respondent #8 (female, 25-30) describes how "encouragement and support from my husband helped with the decision to go back and do a degree". Misti (30) credits her mother with being "always influential in my life in terms of wanting to progress to the next level" and respondent #29 (female, 40-50) describes how her son "inspired me to go on to university" through his own achievement of winning a scholarship to a private school and gaining a place at university.

Managers at work and previous teachers were also influential, for example Evie (34) whose boss "had been encouraging me to try and take on some form of study" and respondent #3 (female, 30-40) whose teacher "knew so much about artists, styles of painting and design, and this inspired me to aim higher for a degree in what I loved". Sometimes it was a friend who was a particular role model:

> I just have a friend a while ago do a university degree and I was sort of proud of her for doing that and thought it would be something I'd like to do in the future. *(Erin, 29)*

Others as critics, encouragers and motivators

Responses from family members to the decision to undertake university studies varied, yet overall there were more positive than negative responses. Some positive reactions were tempered by worry or concern, as illustrated by Lance (46) who reports that "My partner asked me if I was really sure I wanted to do it, given the length of time that it would take".

Approximately half the participants experienced unconditionally positive responses from everyone amongst their family and friends, whilst the other half experienced a mixture of responses, some positive, some negative and some a bit of both. Belinda (31) reports a very positive reaction from her family, with her brother saying to her "It's about bloody time" while respondent #17 (female, 40-50) experienced negative reactions:

> My parents have always felt it was a waste of time, ever since I left school in the top 3%... They are self-made people and think that one doesn't need to further education when one can be successful without.

Mostly, there were at least some family members or friends who reacted positively, even if others were negative:

> Everybody else has been very supportive and has considered it a good idea... A couple of people thought that I was too old to bother with it and it was a waste of my time kind of thing but that was only a couple out of a lot of people. *(Roger, 56)*

Parents were described by some as not really understanding about university and why the decision had been taken to study, yet proud of their daughter or son for being a university student.

> ...their opinion was why when you already have a good paying

> job and haven't you left it a bit late and why spend all that money
> you'd be better off putting it into your mortgage... Now my mum
> is extremely proud of what I am doing she tells everyone she
> can and my dad I think is impressed with my determination.
> *(Respondent #22, female, 25-30)*

Negative or mixed reactions inevitably impacted upon the type of
conversations at home. Some participants felt limited in what they
could, or wanted to say at home about university:

> ...they're not into university so it gets difficult to talk about it.
> They just say "Oh yes, you know, you're just going to be above us"
> sort of thing and it's not like that at all; I'm trying to achieve a
> goal. *(Sharnie, 57)*

However, in other families, participants welcomed the opportunity to
have conversations with family members, often their children, to build
their knowledge of education and of university.

> My son was unsure as to what uni life was all about and we were
> able to give him a lot of clarity. This is important for all kids
> today, as uni is a must, not a possibility, for ALL. *(Respondent
> #14, male, 40-50)*

Family members were also very important in terms of maintaining
motivation and providing ongoing support:

> Even though family members haven't studied at university,
> they do encourage me to keep going, to keep moving forward.
> *(Respondent #35, female, 18-21)*

Natalie (26) was one of a number of women who spoke particularly
highly of their mothers, saying, "Mum's really, really helpful, like mum
proofreads my essays for me... and makes sure my grammar's correct
and stuff".

Adult and teenage children who understood the rigours of study and the
technology were also a great help:

> My daughter, she's wonderful, she's the techno-head so, yes, so if
> there's something that I'm not sure of she'll come and deal with it

... (Nadia, 62)

Last but not least, support from the workplace was frequently mentioned:

> ...the team that I'm in, they've been just as supportive and encouraging which is great from a work perspective that they allow me to have that time and that encouragement. *(Barbara, 21)*

Park and Choi's study (2009) examining factors influencing online students to persist or to drop out, shows a strong positive relationship between student persistence and both family and workplace support. They conclude that "Adult learners are more likely to drop out of online courses when they do not receive support from their family and/or [work] organisation while taking online courses, regardless of learners' academic preparation and aspiration" (2009:215). Certainly for these first-in-family students, having an external network of support was very important in maintaining motivation.

> Family and friends support, push and motivate me to continue going ahead with it. *(Respondent #40, male, 30-40)*

Being offered and receiving institutional help and support was highly valued by these online students. An understanding and motivating approach from tutors was particularly appreciated as well as proactive 'outreach' support, checking how they were going and reaching out to them to offer academic assistance and other support.

> I got an email... telling me that they were here to help... uni is hard so give us a call if you ever want a chat... and then a couple of days later I thought I'm going to call these guys. It was really helpful. I had a chat to a woman over the phone who was really great. *(Corey, 30)*

A Transformative Experience

Reay, Ball and David (2002) in their study of mature-age students on university access courses in the UK talk about "the almost magical transformative powers of education" (2002:402). The transformative power of education has been well-demonstrated in many other studies

in the UK, Europe, the United States and Australia over at least two decades (Beck, 2006; McGivney, 2006; Quinn, 2005; Rendon, 1998; Stone, 2008; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Tett; 2000).

This is also the case for the participants in this study, despite the fact that they are 'attending university' in a virtual sense. Similar to other studies which have shown that women in particular develop a new sense of themselves through their university journey (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Edwards, 1993; O'Shea, 2014; Paasse 1998; Stone & O'Shea, 2012; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006) it was the women amongst these online students who most eloquently described the ways in which they were seeing themselves differently. One example is Donna, who at age 36 and with two children is experiencing a new sense of herself as a psychology student, instead of 'just' a mother and 'just' a cleaning lady.

> And, it's very strange for me because… during the day, I'm just a mother and I'm just a cleaning lady so, you know what I mean, like in the world of the work chain, I'm down the bottom… and then here I am, at night, studying psychology. So, I have a lot of moments where I'm like "Wow, hey, no-one would pick that".

The male students more often expressed this sense of transformation in terms of employment, career and future, such as Paul (47) who says that he will "stay in the workforce a bit longer and… pick up management positions that I'm interested in as a result of that and my experience". This is consistent with other research, such as that by Karmel and Woods (2006) who found in their research with older learners that "for men, it is more about a strategy for maintaining engagement with the labour market" (2006:146); here the influence of the gendered role of 'male breadwinner' is apparent (Stone, 2013).

However, career and employment were not unimportant to the women, who also had definite plans to use their qualifications to help them in the workforce. Susannah (43) for instance, expresses an explicit goal of improving her career prospects. "The more that I go on with it, the more value I see in it…. with a definite plan that in three years that means I've finished a degree and I'm actually going to enter the workforce as a graduate".

Summary of findings

Online education, particularly when combined with an open-entry pathway, is providing the opportunity to access higher education for cohorts of students for whom university has previously been very difficult to access (Knightley, 2007; Shah et al., 2014; Stone, 2012). International research suggests that students who do not have an immediate family member who has been to university are less likely attend university and also less likely to perform well academically once they are there (HEFCE, 2010; NCES, 2012). In analysing the experiences of this group of first-in-family students, studying open-entry undergraduate units online through OUA, there are a number of observations that can be made.

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, these students are almost exclusively mature-age, with the majority aged over 30. For various reasons, the opportunity to previously attend university in the traditional on-campus mode was either not available to this cohort in the past or this path was not chosen, whether due to family norms, distance, finances, poor entry scores or other circumstances. In being able to access online education, particularly open-entry, an opportunity has arisen for them to change their lives in significant ways. The desire to 'better their lives' and the lives of their children and partners has been a strong motivator for this particular group to take on the challenge of online studies. External events, life changes, financial and work pressures have all played a part in their decision, and many have been inspired by others to begin this journey. As has been described, other research indicates that these motivations and influences are similar to the motivations of mature-age students generally. However, the difference is that, without the opportunity to study online, many of these students indicate that they would not be studying at all – it is only due to the availability and flexibility of online study that they feel able to embark upon this journey.

Their initial lack of knowledge about university, combined with uncertainty about their abilities – "I have thought on occasions that I wasn't smart enough for study at a university level" (respondent #43, male, 30-40) – means that they particularly value support that reaches out to them, rather than expecting them to find it by themselves. A sense of gratitude for being at university comes across strongly in quotes such as:

> This is one of the greatest experiences of my life and I'm so grateful to be a student at University. It's been my dream for so many years and it's finally coming true every day. I love being able to study at home so I can be with my children and I'm so grateful that the government supports me to study so that I can support my children and myself for the rest of my life. (*Respondent #7, female, 30-40*)

Being 'grateful' may also inhibit students from being too demanding of support and assistance, which further highlights the importance of proactive support and assistance from both teaching and support staff.

These students are clearly appreciative of family support and interest where this is forthcoming, but sharing information or having full conversations about their experiences of university is often limited by the family's lack of experience and knowledge. There is increasing evidence of the importance of both family and other external encouragement and support for student persistence and retention (Park & Choi, 2007), particularly for first-in-family students (O'Shea et al., 2015). For online learners, Park and Choi (2007) advocate for the need for course administrators and teachers "to inform learners' family and organisation [workplace] of the advantages of the course in order to induce their supports" (2007:215).

What is interesting and very positive is the growth in confidence and self-esteem evident as the students progress through their studies. For respondent #40 (male, 30-40) his first unit "helped me prepare and develop my skills... It made me realise that I am smarter than I had always thought, helped settle the self-doubt about whether or not I was doing the right thing and was a great starting point for the rest of my studies".

Conclusion

First-in-family students represent a little over half of all higher education students across the Australian education sector (OECD, 2012:5). Online studies offer many of these students, particularly those who are older with responsibilities of family and work, the opportunity they need to be able to study towards a university degree. Institutions that also offer an online open-entry pathway provide additional

opportunities for those first-in-family students who do not otherwise meet entry requirements.

However, widening access is only one part of the story. The findings from this research have implications for the ways in which institutions acknowledge and support this student cohort. The list below is neither exclusive nor exhaustive, but perhaps more of a starting place from which to begin to turn the initial opportunity of online study into a truly successful and positive experience for many more students. So, to conclude, those involved in educating and supporting this cohort at higher education institutions can make a difference by:

1. Understanding that the online student population contains high numbers of first-in-family students who need support to build their confidence and to gain experience of the demands and requirements of university.

2. Recognising that this is a highly motivated cohort, seeking to 'better their lives' through study, who are willing to work hard to achieve their goals.

3. Being willing to try to accommodate the diverse and often complex needs of these students, including the multiple responsibilities and challenges that many have in their lives.

4. Providing appropriate and timely outreach and proactive support, to help them to stay and succeed.

5. Acknowledging that family members, friends and colleagues, play a crucial role in providing first-in-family students with inspiration, encouragement and ongoing support.

6. Seeking and developing strategies to better inform, educate and involve families and communities in the learning journeys of these students, and to ensure their role is sufficiently acknowledged and valued.

Undoubtedly further research is needed to progress these understandings and, in particular, to research ways that most effectively harness the positive contribution of families and communities, which

play such a significant role in supporting and encouraging first-in-family online learners.

References

ABS (2013) 'Hitting the books: Characteristics of higher education students', in *Australian Social Trends,* viewed 7 September 2015, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features20July+2013>

Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2014) *Completion Rates of Domestic Bachelor Students 2005-2013: a cohort analysis,* viewed 7 September 2015, <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/completion-rates-domestic-bachelor-students-2005-2013-cohort-analysis>

Beck, D. (2006) 'Together for a change: A partnership approach to individual and community learning' in J. Chapman, P. Cartwright & J. E. McGilp (Eds.), *Lifelong Learning, Participation and Equity*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Britton, C., & Baxter, A. (1999) 'Becoming a mature student: Gendered narratives of the self', *Gender and Education,* 11: 2, 179-193.

Coates, H. & Ransom, L. (2011)'Dropout DNA, and the genetics of effective support', *AUSSE Research Briefings*, 11, June, 1-26.

Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L. & McKay, J., (2012) 'Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: resources for Australian higher education. Final Report', *Australian Office for Learning and Teaching*, viewed 7 September 2015, <http://www.lowses.edu.au/assets/ALTC%20LSES%20Final%20Report%202012.pdf>

Edwards, R. (1993) *Mature women students: separating or connecting families*, London: Taylor and Francis.

Elliott, J. (2005) *Using narrative in social research*, London: Sage.

Ewick,P. & Silbey,S. (1995) 'Subversive stories and hegemonic tales: toward a sociology of narrative', *Law & Society Review*, 29: 2, 197-226.

HEFCE. (2010) 'Trends in young participation in higher education: core results for England', *Issues Paper*,10th March 2010.

Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000), *Doing Qualitative Research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method,* London: Sage.

Ilgaz, H. & Gülbahar, Y. (2015) 'A snapshot of online learners: e-readiness, e-satisfaction and expectations', *International Review in Research in Open and Distributed Learning,* 16: 2, 171-187.

James, R., Krause, K.-L. & Jennings, C. (2010) 'The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009', *Centre for the Study of Higher Education,* Melbourne.

Karmel, T. & Woods, D. (2006) 'Older learners and engagement with the labour market', in J. Chapman, P. Cartwright & J. E. McGilp (Eds.), *Lifelong Learning for All: The Challenge to Adults and Communities,* Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Knightley, W.M. (2007) 'Adult learners online: students' experiences of online learning', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 47:2, 264-288.

Lambrinidis, G. (2014) 'Supporting online, non-traditional students through the introduction of effective e-learning tools in a pre-university tertiary enabling programme', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 36:3, 257-267.

Michael, K. (2012) 'Virtual classroom: reflections of online learning', *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, 29: 3, 156-165.

McGivney, V. (2006) 'Attracting new groups into learning: lessons from research in England', in J. Chapman, P. Cartwright & J. E. McGilp (Eds.), *Lifelong learning, participation and equity*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 79-91.

Nelson, K., Quinn, C., Marrington, A. & Clarke, J. (2012) 'Good practice for enhancing the engagement and success of commencing students', *Higher Education,* 63, 83-96.

NCES (2012) *Digest of Education Statistics, 2011*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

OECD (2012) 'Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012 Australia', viewed 25 July 2015, <http://www.oecd.org/australia/EAG2012%20-%20 Country%20note%20-%20Australia.pdf>

O' Shea, S. (2014) 'Transitions and turning points: how first in family female students story their transition to university and student identity formation', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27: 2, 135-158.

O' Shea, S. & Stone, C. (2011) 'Transformations and self-discovery: mature age women's reflections on returning to university study', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33: 3, 273-289.

O'Shea, S., May, J. & Stone, C. (2015) 'Breaking the barriers: supporting and engaging first-in-family learners and their families', *Final Project Report,* viewed 25 July 2015, <http://firstinfamily.com.au/docs/Final%20OLT%20 Final%20report%20310315.pdf>

O'Shea, S., Stone, C. & Delahunty, J. (2015) '"I 'feel' like I am at university even though I am online." Exploring how students narrate their engagement with higher education institutions in an online learning environment', *Distance Education,* 36:1, 41-58.

OUA (2015) Enrolment Data report, June 2015.

Paasse, G. (1998) ' "You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube": the impact of higher education on mature age women students', *Australian Educational*

Researcher, 25:1, 91-109.

Park, J. & Choi, H. (2009) 'Factors influencing adult learners' decision to drop out or persist in online learning', *Educational Technology and Society,* 12: 4, 207-217.

Quinn, J. (2005) 'Belonging in a learning community: The re-imagined university and imagined social capital' *Studies in the Education of Adults,* 37: 1, 4-17.

Reay, D., Ball, S. & David, M. (2002) '"It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end": Mature students on access courses and higher education choice', *British Educational Research Journal,* 28 :1, 5-19.

Rendon, L. I. (1998) 'Helping non-traditional students be successful in college', *About Campus,* March-April, 2-3.

Riessman,C. K. (1993) *Narrative analysis*, Newbury Park: Sage Publications Inc.

Shah,M., Goode,E., West,S. & Clark,H. (2014) 'Widening student participation in higher education through online enabling education', *Widening participation and Lifelong Learning,*16 :3, 36-57.

Spiegler, T. & Bednarek, A. (2013) 'First-generation students: what we ask, what we know and what it means: an international review of the state of research', *International Studies in Sociology of Education,* 23 :4, 318-337.

Stone, C. (2008) 'Listening to individual voices and stories - the mature-age student experience', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48 :2, 263-290.

Stone, C. (2012) 'Engaging students across distance and place', *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association,* 39, 49-55.

Stone, C. & O'Shea,S. (2012) *Transformations and Self-Discovery: Stories of women returning to education,* Champagne, Illionois : Common Ground Publishing LLC.

Stone, C. & O'Shea, S. (2013) 'Time, money, leisure and guilt – the gendered challenges of higher education for mature-age students', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 53 :1, 95-116.

Tett, L. (2000) '"I'm working class and proud of it": Gendered experiences of non-traditional participants in higher education', *Gender and Education*, 12 :2, 183-194.

Tinto, V. (2009) 'Taking student retention seriously: rethinking the first year of university', presented at the *FYE curriculum design symposium 2009*, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Wolf-Wendel, L. & Ward, K. (2006) 'Academic life and motherhood: Variations by institutional type', *Higher Education,* 52, 487-521.

Wilcox, P., Winn, S. & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005) ' "It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people": the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 30 :6, 707-722.

Yoo, S.J. & Huang, D. (2013), 'Engaging online adult learners in higher education: motivational factors impacted by gender, age and prior experiences', *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 61, 151-164.

About the Authors

Dr Cathy Stone has many years' experience in developing and managing programs and strategies to improve student success and retention in the Australian higher education, in both on-campus and online settings. Previously employed by Open Universities Australia (OUA) as Director of Student Success, she continues to work with OUA as a consultant researcher and also holds a Conjoint Senior Lectureship in Social Work with the University of Newcastle. A key focus of her research is the experiences of mature-age and first-in-family students.

Dr Sarah O'Shea has worked in the higher education sector for nearly twenty years in both academic and student support roles. Her research focuses on student access and participation within the university sector, with particular reference to those students from identified equity groups. She favours qualitative methodologies and has largely drawn upon narrative inquiry in studies with students from low-SES backgrounds, indigenous students, those who have accessed university from alternative entry points as well as students who are the first in the family to come to university.

Associate Professor Josephine May is Deputy Director of the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre at the University of Newcastle, NSW. Jo is on the Editorial Board of History of Education Review, Associate Editor of the journal Historical Encounters and foundation Chair of the Editorial Board of the Dictionary of Educational History in Australia and New Zealand (DEHANZ). Her recent book is *Reel Schools: Schooling and the Nation in Australian Cinema* (Peter Lang, 2013). Jo's next co-authored book is *Portraying lives: Women headmistresses and professors 1880s – 1940s* (2015, IAP Publishing). As part of the First in Family research team, Jo is working on a book for Palgrave Macmillan on First in Family students in Higher Education (2016) based on research reported on the purpose-built website, www.firstinfamily.com.au.

Dr Janine Delahunty is on the Teaching Development Team in the University of Wollongong's Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Unit. Her core interest is in enhancing the teaching-learning experience in higher education. Her PhD study was concerned with the complexities of interaction in the online space and the effect on the learning experience. More recently her interests also encompass how to support academics support students from diverse backgrounds, including those who are first in their family to study at university. Her motivations stem from her own venture into university study, which began later in life, studying part-time for many years and doing the family-study-work balancing act.

Zoë Partington is currently studying her Masters of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, during which she undertook a student placement in 2014 at Open Universities Australia and became involved in researching first-in-family, mature-age online students. Zoë has postgraduate degrees in Psychology and Art History, and has had a ten-year career within the Arts and Entertainment industry, working firstly at Flinders University Art Museum developing relationships within the Australian and Indigenous Australian arts sectors, where she developed her strong interest in social justice and social policy.

Contact details

Cathy Stone
Conjoint Senior Lecturer
School of Humanities and Social Science (Social Work)
University of Newcastle
University Dr, Callaghan NSW 2308

Email: cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au

University Transition Challenges for First Year Domestic CALD Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Case Study from an Australian Regional University

Eric Kong
Sarah Harmsworth
Mohammad Mehdi Rajaeian
Geoffrey Parkes
Sue Bishop
Bassim AlMansouri
Jill Lawrence

University of Southern Queensland

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) is used broadly and inclusively to describe communities with diverse language, ethnic background, nationality, dress, traditions, food, societal structures, art and religion characteristics. Domestic CALD people are either refugees or voluntary migrants and have obtained permanent residency or citizenship. This paper identifies the key issues, challenges and needs of first year domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds at a multi-campus regional university in Queensland, Australia. The term refugee background is used in the paper as the students are no longer refugees having successfully transitioned from refugee status to being

permanent residents. Qualitative data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups with domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds, and from key informants including teaching, administrative, and senior management staff members. Other than language and differences in education styles, this cohort of students faced other challenges, particularly in a regional setting, including socio-cultural issues, technology issues, family and health challenges and limited staff awareness of refugee needs. The findings provide insights into how Australian regional university policy makers could develop effective strategies, practices, procedures and policies to support CALD students from refugee backgrounds and to improve their retention and progression.

Keywords: *Domestic culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students, refugees, Australian regional university, higher education, equity*

Culturally and linguistically diverse in Toowoomba, Queensland

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), are generally defined as those who are born overseas and who originate from non-English speaking countries other than those from English speaking countries such as Canada, Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the U.K. and U.S.A. (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV), 2012). CALD is often the preferred term for many government and community agencies as a contemporary descriptor for ethnic communities (ECCV, 2012). Most CALD people from refugee backgrounds have experienced protracted violence and hardship and thus may have suffered from a traumatic experience of migration (Copping et al., 2012).

Australia is home to a significant number of refugees. The total number of refugee-humanitarian entrants to Australia under the 2012-2013 Humanitarian Program was 20,019, a noticeable increase of 45% from the previous year (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Immigration programs currently encourage refugee-humanitarian entrants to resettle in regional and rural Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008 cited in Omeri & Raymond, 2009). Toowoomba, a city in the Darling

Downs region of Queensland, is representative of many regions in Australia where its population is diversifying as many migrants and refugees are encouraged to settle into the area by Federal and State Government policies. The Toowoomba region is now the third largest refugee settlement area in Queensland. It has almost twice the average per-capita population of Sub-Saharan migrants in Queensland and a population containing almost three times the state average of residents from North African and Middle Eastern backgrounds (Department of Infrastructure & Planning, 2007).

Most of the CALD refugee-background newcomers settling in Toowoomba are relatively young. For example, of those refugees settled in Toowoomba as part of the Humanitarian Settlement Services program in 2013-14, 67.3% were under the age of 26 and 91.7% were under the age of 45 (Multicultural Development Association, 2014). Many of these refugees are likely to be qualified to study in universities. As this population grows, many CALD students enrol at university with significant educational needs. It is believed that the demand for higher education from this group of students is to be consequentially increased. However, their language proficiency and unique cultural and social differences suggest their needs are different from those of their local counterparts (Sawir, 2005).

The literature highlights the challenges CALD students face in higher education (Jeong et al., 2011; Livock, 2010; Salamonson et al., 2012). However, the studies mainly examined the challenges that CALD students face from either the perspective of a sole faculty or an urban university. There is a paucity of research specifically focusing on first year domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds who are studying and living in regional cities in Australia. Sawrikar and Katz (2008) suggest that domestic students from CALD and refugee backgrounds often face more complex situations such as linguistic, educational and emotional issues when they study at regional universities. They argue that these students' experiences and challenges and their challenge of acculturation may be differentially related to area of residence (Sawrikar & Katz, 2008). Townsend (2006) states that Australian regional and rural communities have distinct localised cultures in themselves, often White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant and rooted

in the colonial history of a specific region. Being minorities in these communities, CALD newcomers are often expected to adjust to the mores and codes of local life (Townsend, 2006). Examples of these are the concept of gender equality both within and outside the family and laws against corporal punishment of children.

Sawrikar and Katz (2008) speculate that being a more conspicuous minority in regional Australia can exacerbate the extent to which racism and discrimination are perceived or experienced. CALD arrivals from refugee backgrounds are more likely to experience social exclusion and difficulty in developing localised, supportive social networks within regional communities. Clarke (2007) argues that CALD refugee-background students from urban areas are likely to receive more English support, in the form of second language (ESL) education support, than those who reside in regional areas. Similarly, urban-based students are more likely to have greater support and resources from extensive community networks than those living in regional Australia (Sawrikar & Katz, 2008).

If the education needs of domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds are not addressed, these students are likely to achieve significantly lower education participation rates, lower employment rates, and lower average wages when compared to non-CALD students (Macrine, 2010). The challenges that domestic CALD refugee-background students face make the concepts of equity, social justice and democracy even more important in tertiary education. Australian educators, particularly those from regional universities, need to be able to respond to this unique group's needs if they want to assist the group to succeed at university (Krause et al., 2005). Accordingly, this paper investigates the nature of transitional experiences of first year domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia (a regional university with its main campus based in Toowoomba).

USQ has been offering university pathways to students from refugee backgrounds since the mid-1990s when the first wave of refugees arrived in Toowoomba from South Sudan. Students from this background may have spent a long period of time in refugee camps and have no access to formal secondary school education. They enrolled in the Tertiary

Preparation Program, a six to twelve month preparatory program for people without university entry qualifications. However, this program was not targeted at students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Therefore when the second wave of refugees arrived from Francophone countries such as Congo and Rwanda, it was decided to encourage them to enrol in the English language pathway programs offered by USQ. English Language Intensive courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses have been offered to international students for many years at USQ (and many other universities). Unlike other universities, USQ accredited these courses for domestic students in addition to international students. It was able to offer them on a fee-free basis to students with permanent residency status. EAP is now offered on the same basis as Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP), including guaranteeing admission to USQ degree programs after successful completion. Students who do not pass these courses can repeat them a limited number of times or are counselled to enrol in TAFE or other vocational courses if they do not yet feel ready to enter the work force.

The third wave of refugees, from Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East (mainly from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, northern Sudan, and Eritrea), are also following the ELICOS/EAP pathway. There are therefore some hundred students in undergraduate degrees from refugee backgrounds who have enrolled after completion of pathways that are alternatives to completion of high school in Australia. These pathways have assisted students to develop their English language, academic and ICT skills and have even provided laptops through a USQ Social Justice grant. However, students still suffer from a lack of skills compared to non-CALD students, owing to the comparatively short time of six to twelve months they have had to develop those skills. There are also a number of refugee background students enrolling at USQ who have been through the high school system and entered USQ through the traditional pathways from completion of year 12.

The paper will report on a case study undertaken with this domestic cohort from CALD refugee backgrounds as well as with key informants including teaching, administrative and senior staff members from USQ. The case study aims to provide insights into this group of students' tertiary experiences and to make recommendations to regional

university policy makers that will help them to improve their first year study experience, retention and progression.

Methodology

Very limited research has been conducted to date examining first year domestic CALD refugee students who are studying and living in regional cities in Australia. To explore a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry like this one, a qualitative approach was used, incorporating semi-structured interviews and focus groups for CALD refugee students and key informants including teaching, administrative, and senior management staff members. Ethical issues which may impact on research participants as a result of the data collection process were carefully considered prior to data collection (Creswell, 2003). This consideration was consistent with ethics guidelines set by USQ's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

The CALD students from refugee backgrounds were identified based on available data from the University. After receiving an ethics approval, an email was sent to the students explaining the purpose of the project and inviting them to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for key informants such as Student Relationship Officers (SROs), academic staff, and university senior management staff members as the method provided 'a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can [allow] reliable, comparable qualitative data' to be revealed from the key informants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006: 1). Purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011) was used to recruit the key informants who had extensive experience working with CALD refugee-background students and who could thus provide insights regarding the cohort's learning at the university. In other words, the researchers deliberately chose specific people possessing knowledge about the research topic and who could provide crucial information which was not obtainable by other recruitment channels (Liamputtong, 2010). In addition, a snowball technique was also used to locate staff with experience working with CALD students and who had knowledge about the university services offered to students from different cultures. This technique enabled the researchers to locate people who were 'unknown' to the researchers via referrals from the first contacts (Atkinson & Flint, 2001: 3).

During data collection, refugee students were encouraged to talk about their learning experiences in Australia, especially in higher education, with open-ended questions. The interviewers posed the first question about their past learning level in order to help them to answer without difficulty and to encourage them to open up (Mathers et al., 1998). Similarly, academic and professional staff were encouraged to discuss their experiences when supporting and teaching CALD students at the university in a relaxed manner without intervening. In total, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 interviewees, along with four focus groups. Table 1 summarises the demographic details of the participants:

Table 1: *The participants' demographic details.*

Gender	Students	Staff		
		Academic staff	Professional staff	Senior managers
Male	5	1	0	2
Female	3	4	5	0
Total	8	5	5	2

To ensure the accuracy of data collection and subsequent interview transcription, audio recording was undertaken for all interviews and focus groups (Johnson, 2002). The qualitative data was analysed by using NVivo, adding to the reliability of the data analysis through the consistent identification of codes and themes.

Findings and discussion

Data analysis highlighted several factors that impact on the experiences of the students during their first year of university at USQ. Participants discussed challenges relating to a number of themes, including language, socio-cultural issues, understanding a new learning and teaching environment, technology, family and health matters and limited staff awareness.

Figure 1: *Themes emerging from the interview data.*
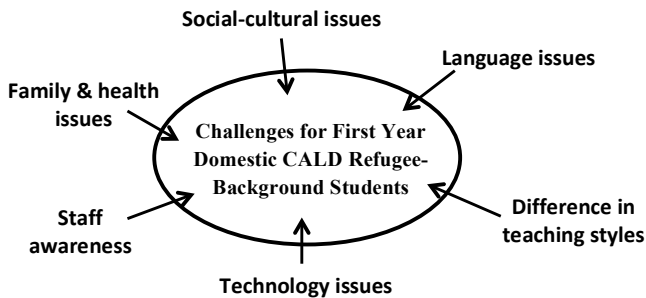
While the interview data revealed barriers facing CALD refugee students (e.g. inadequate English language proficiency and lack of understanding of plagiarism) which are common in both regional and metropolitan universities, the following discussion will focus on the findings of this particular cohort and their first year study journey in a regional setting. Of those, barriers associated with low English language proficiency levels were most notable.

Language

Many student participants commented on challenges they experienced due to English language proficiency. Whilst their language proficiency was deemed adequate for enrolment by the university, functioning at an academic level in a second or subsequent language was an on-going challenge. The language issues faced by CALD refugee-background students related broadly to general English language difficulties and specifically with issues of academic English. This distinction between general English and the demands of academic English was made clear by a student who had completed the required hours in a community English course but experienced significant difficulty in a degree program:

> English is very hard because … there are many times we are speaking English but we cannot cope [with] the kind of English … (African student D).

CALD Students from refugee backgrounds often had difficulty understanding local lecturers because they spoke too fast and with an Australian accent:

> English is all difficult because you need to use it to understand, to listen … and in Australia when [people] speak English they are speaking too fast. The teacher does the same … and I didn't have the habit to speak. It was very hard to … use it [and] to understand … (African student D).

Students who completed some of their high schooling in Australia also commented they still had problems with English comprehension. One student's limited English proficiency impacted directly on the time needed to complete course work:

> … someone who speaks English … as the first language if … [they] read [study materials] once then … [they] can understand but you need to read three or four times to understand … if the teacher says that … [students] need 106 hours to study, you have to put 250 hours to do this course (African student D).

Students were reluctant to speak in class in case they made mistakes and were more comfortable speaking with students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Their English levels also affected their abilities to make social connections. For instance, '… my language barrier would prevent me from being social … (African student G)', a common feature according to Joyce et al. (2010). In terms of suggestions, one student wanted staff to better understand some of the issues and difficulties CALD refugee-background students faced. It was also suggested that the university's cultural sensitivity and equity policies may prevent staff from understanding the unique needs of CALD refugee students:

> the university … are [sic] not considering that you are from Africa or from [the] Middle East. They are taking all equal, so that's the problem … (African student B).

Students revealed they needed help with academic writing, with one student suggesting a need for a staff member to provide targeted support in this area. It was also suggested that an academic writing class would be beneficial.

While the university provides resources to support students' academic writing, many of these are online. StudyDesk, the university's online learning management system, provides students with additional support

as they work through their courses. However, CALD refugee students have difficulty with this learning tool, which is:

> … confusing, maybe due to language, so students … on the forum … get confused … (African student C).

Staff too commented on problems CALD refugee-background students experience with both general English proficiency and academic English. They raised similar concerns, commenting that general English language programs were not preparing students for the rigors of academic study and questioned pathway programs:

> [These students] need a better English and better academic English knowledge both reading and writing … within the Toowoomba community they get their 500 hours [of general English training from AMEP program] which was just basic conversational, survival English … Then where do you go from there? … Straight from there to the [Tertiary Preparation Program], which is six months [and then] entering a degree … [its] not achievable, not sensible … (Senior professional manager A).

> … it is not really that they don't have the skills, thinking skills. It is just the language and is a huge obstacle and it is not very easy to really find the solution to it … (Academic staff E).

Whilst a student may gain entry into a degree program, fundamental academic English language deficits result in long-term progression and retention issues (Crawford & Candlin, 2013). One staff member suggested a problem with how students are admitted into degree programs, questioning university processes:

> I think it comes back to the way [in] which we admit students in terms of assessing skills; we saying yes, you've got the math, you've got this, you've got that, but English is not sort of on the criteria … (Senior academic manager A).

> … the scrutiny on the English language skills weren't there, now this student is getting by but is struggling … (Senior academic manager A).

Being overly culturally sensitive may also contribute to some of the challenges faced by CALD refugee-background students:

> We think we are being culturally ... sensitive and it is because we are native speakers. I think ... we are hesitant to say ... we are over culturally sensitive to those who have got a second language background [because] [we don't] say ... you don't write well enough [and you should] go and fix it up. (Academic staff C).

Socio-cultural

Other barriers also emerged which directly impacted on the CALD refugee students' learning journey. These related to the regional university setting. Participants described a number of concerns relating to socio-cultural issues, the social and cultural knowledge and skills needed to understand the university setting. The skills were needed to make connections with staff and fellow students. Connections help students to develop a socio-cultural understanding of the university setting but they proved difficult for CALD refugee students to establish and maintain.

CALD refugee students experienced issues relating to making connections with peers, heightened by the regional university setting. In smaller regional centres, many students have long established friendship and community networks stemming from childhood. In addition, the regional setting is less culturally diverse than larger urban settings (Townsend, 2008). For these reasons it can be difficult for CALD refugee students to make meaningful connections with local students who do not have a comprehensive understanding of their life journey. This can be problematic in the classroom for CALD refugee students:

> What ... they have learned from ... the countries where they have come from, they behave differently, so [this] can cause a lot of impact on the relationship ... [between students in] the classroom as well ... (Professional staff B).

This contributes to CALD students' apprehension when establishing themselves at the university in the first year. Formal and informal communication is an integral form of communication for university

students, an aspect that refugee background students have significant difficultly becoming proficient in:

> Sometimes it makes it harder when you feel shy to ask another student ... you might try to ask a colleague and they say how did you end up at university when you don't know how to do this? So ... you just block yourself to ask other people. So it was hard for the first year because we came from the war cultures where [there's no] ... formal writing ... (African student C).

> [Here] people send a lot of emails and they expect you to respond by email. Sometimes [I] ignore some emails. What am I going to do now? If I [reply] ... will they understand what I am saying? There are a lot of things in your brain ... (African student C).

Staff commented on issues such as academic misconduct, difficulty calling lecturers by their first names, and a lack of understanding of teacher and student roles in Australian higher education:

> ... you have to explain over and over ... I am the lecturer and this is your job as a student ... to take control of your learning ... this is the first step (Academic staff B).

CALD students from refugee backgrounds also have difficulties adjusting to the regional culture outside the classroom. They often came from dangerous and volatile conditions overseas before resettling in Australia (Oka, 2014). The conditions are in stark contrast to the quiet regional city and university life in Toowoomba. With the continued increase in CALD refugee-background students enrolling in programs of study, the regional university too is learning how to better cater for increasing cultural diversity in its student population. A number of programs have been launched to offer support to the students' transition to university, including Retention for Academic Completion Help, CALD to Success, Meet-up for refugees and ICT for refugees. However, university staff see areas where the university can continue to improve their support of CALD refugee-background students' retention and progression:

> ... with the Islamic faith ... the feasts and events which happen through a semester are very disrupting to their academic progress and we haven't properly tackled [this]. We haven't worked well

together as academic staff and students to help them or work with
them to manage this … (Academic staff C).

The data suggests that these socio-cultural issues accompanied by
differences in teaching styles create significant challenges for CALD
refugee-background students in a regional university setting.

Issues with new learning and teaching environment

Due to their refugee experience, student participants described
experiencing a variety of different teaching styles, educational settings
and interrupted schooling (Earnest et al., 2010). Students and staff
commented on a range of issues impacting CALD student adjustment to
new learning and teaching practices.

Many of the issues identified are typical of those experienced by refugee-
background students pursuing higher education in Australia (Joyce et
al., 2010), independent of location. However, it can be argued, in the
regional setting, that these adjustment issues contribute to the overall
challenges faced by CALD refugee students. As Livock (2010) claims, for
some individuals these challenges can become overwhelming, resulting
in issues with progression and retention. One significant issue CALD
refugee students face in the learning context is participating in group
work:

> … they are not accepted by Australian students, they don't relate
> easily to them, one student who was having a huge problem in
> group work was told by his lecturer 'just take them out for coffee
> and sort it out' and he said to me 'how can I take people out for
> coffee when they won't make eye contact' … Another student said
> the way he dealt with group work was that he always attached
> himself to a group of middle aged women, because they were
> great and he knew he would be okay … and that was his strategy.
> (Professional staff F).

Technology

Adjusting to new learning and teaching practices in higher education is challenging, as is the use of information technology. University education in Australia is heavily grounded in the use of technology for all aspects of learning and teaching. Thirty percent of student responses suggested the online materials supported their learning:

> … the best thing here is the study desk online … [it] is really helpful…because I can read the lecture online before I go (African student A).

> … we have recordings and we have lectures online so whenever you don't understand … we can check online for lectures, written materials. We can print out things if [we] want to understand … (African student E).

The remaining 70% of responses indicated that students experienced significant difficulty with information technology at USQ. Participants commented that use of technology presented substantial challenges during the first year of university.

The data suggests CALD refugee students have varying skills, knowledge and experience using all aspects of computing technology, as highlighted by the Multicultural Development Agency (2010). For many CALD refugee-background students, low computer literacy skills stem from very limited access to this form of technology in both their country of origin and while studying at a university in Australia. This makes them unprepared for studying in a blended or online learning environment.

Students discussed their experiences with technology in their country of origin. Those interviewed commented on their limited access and experience with computers:

> Well in Africa everything is just talking and talking, you don't really use computers. [But] here they do everything with computers and that becomes very hard for us (African student E).

Those students who spent time in refugee camps also had no access to information technology:

> … in the refugee camp there was no internet, so there was no

computing (African student C).

University staff said that refugee-background CALD students continued to have limited access to information technology once enrolled in their degrees. Students who live off campus experienced difficulty when relying on public transportation to access on campus computer labs after hours. In Toowoomba, the bus service is the only public transport available, operating just five routes across the city, with four routes taking passengers to the university. However, all services stop at approximately 6pm Monday to Saturday and do not run on Sundays. This limited access to computing facilities is a unique challenge. The difficulties students face accessing computing services can then become a financial barrier:

> … the financial side … you will be paying $80-120 per month for internet access [at home], not a lot of people can afford that, so if you have no choice but to be on the internet to do your course, you might only be able have an hour or two a day. Now how are you going to get through a course on an hour or two a day? (Professional staff D)

For those students who did have computing facilities at home, staff commented that access might still be restricted:

> … a lot of my students they work on a computer at the kitchen table, everybody uses it, you have high school kids using it for their assignments, people using it for their banking and then you have got normally the mum, she is trying to use it to do her assignments for her study … (Academic staff B).

Restricted access directly impacted on the development of digital literacy skills. One participant commented on specific skills which were difficult to perform:

> … so it gets harder to get a lot of materials from the computer, you need to type, you need to download you need to do some research to get some articles and do the references, there was a lot of confusion … (African student C).

Students also commented on their lack of conceptual knowledge and

understanding of using computers as a tool to conduct research:

> I don't know how to access the computer especially when doing research (African student B).

Staff were increasingly concerned about the impact of low digital literacy skills on the students' future progress. With a reputation for distance learning, USQ now offers their course materials exclusively online, without optional print materials. Whilst this is an innovative development for the university, staff predicted it would create additional problems students accessing their learning materials. This initiative could further disadvantage CALD refugee-background students who are already experiencing significant problems:

> ... if it is going to go online then we need to ensure that our equity groups have access to that, so we will have to be thinking of ways of providing them with laptops ... (Professional staff D).

Awareness of how this university-wide initiative impacts CALD refugee students could help staff to develop strategies to support these students:

> ... my point, is that things can be done a) to help people access but b) to also suggest ways in which ... online ... can be loosened a little bit so that there might be ways to make it easier to download online material for instance ... (Professional staff D).

However, a prevailing challenge in this setting is being able to meet the needs of students who value one-on-one personal contact and the opportunity to talk face-to-face. Staff experience shows that CALD students from refugee backgrounds have a strong preference for this style of interaction:

> ... a lot of them would come into me at my desk and ask me to go and sit with them and show them. They come and ask me where to find ... [a] book or how to print their cover sheets and need just that one to one assistance ... (Professional staff E).

Family and health issues

Many CALD refugee-background students have extensive family networks both here and in their home country. Their diverse values

and cultural obligations to family mean students experience a variety of pressures from these large networks (Joyce et al., 2010; Multicultural Development Association, 2010). Students often have to balance their parents' expectations in their home culture with the contemporary Australian culture experienced outside the home in their daily life:

> There are also parental expectations and lack of knowledge [about] what they should be doing. You just get parents ... who don't understand the culture, won't let them do what they would like to do because they have [different] ideas about something ... Australians are more likely to stand up to their parents, [CALD refugee students] don't, again it is collective. If my mother says ... I can't do [it but] I would really like to ... but my mother just won't let me, [as] a 25 year old. You can't argue [with the student] if you try and argue they will go [and] they won't come back (Professional staff F).

CALD refugee-background students are also often expected to financially support family members. They are pressured to balance long-term education goals with financially supporting their family's day-to-day needs:

> ... his family wanted him to work all the time ... he needed to drop out because he could not get enough time to study (Academic staff B).

With limited training or experience and low English proficiency, CALD refugee-background students have few opportunities for paid work. In a regional setting, demands are heightened by limited low-skilled job opportunities and the distance needed to travel to seasonal work (Department of Communities, 2008). Most low-skilled seasonal work is located in surrounding small towns such as Gatton and Laidley. Transportation to these jobs is costly and time consuming, adding to the challenges they experience.

Distance and very limited public transportation in a regional setting also contribute to the demands placed on CALD refugee-background students. Students with driving licences are often called upon to support family members within the local community:

> ... now my wife, that is the big problem because my wife is not
> driving, and I have to drop her to work and bring her back ...
> I think that is my responsibility to cope with this and ... try to
> manage my time and to study and to fulfil all my commitments at
> home ... (African student D).

Conversely, CALD refugee-background students without family in the
local community can experience isolation (Carrington & Marshall,
2008), compounded by smaller numbers of their ethnic community in a
regional setting:

> It was really hard for the first year; when I came here there was no
> family (African Student C).
>
> Without a strong family network behind you study is very, very
> difficult ... (Academic staff B).

In addition to isolation, many students have complex physical and
psychological health issues relating to the refugee experience. Very
often they feel guilty for leaving family members behind in their home
country.

> ... another problem that I face is when you remember your family
> in my home country as war country, there will be a problem when
> you see your brother or dad dying ... (African student A).

The feeling of guilt being away from family members who remain
overseas in dangerous and volatile conditions and depression can cause
physical and psychological health issues (Multicultural Development
Association, 2010). As Morris, et al. (2009) argue, accessing health care
services can be difficult to this cohort due to low English proficiency.
The students often have difficulty discussing their medical conditions in
English, which often delays them seeking medical advice and assistance.
Murray and Skull (2005) also identify a number of additional barriers
including low staff awareness of the health care needs of refugees, along
with the financial burden of accessing services. These limitations are
heightened by the added difficulty of accessing culturally appropriate
services (Department of Communities, 2008), and the shortage of
general practitioners accepting new patients in regional cities (Davies,
2013).

Limited staff awareness

To meet the needs of a student cohort, staff must first understand what those needs are. However, this proves challenging due to the changing profile of CALD students and student reluctance to seek help, often culminating in limited staff awareness of the experience in the regional university of students from a refugee background.

CALD student profiles at regional universities are possibly different from those of CALD students enrolled in urban universities. This is likely a direct result of Federal and State Government policy to settle many refugees in regional Australia (Townsend, 2009). The domestic refugee-background students have diverse and unique needs requiring a different level of support offered to international CALD students in urban universities:

> In urban areas … dominantly the NESB [Non English speaking background] were made up with [international] Asian students from often high-income families, with higher educational aspiration, strong supportive families. They had a completely different profile as people, in terms of their ethnicity in terms of SES [social and economic status] standing, in terms of their background, in terms of the amount of educational resources in their home … Our students [who] tended to be low SES in the sense that is defined by the department [of Communities], tended to come from poor backgrounds, trying to improve themselves often independently as young adults…we've gone through a period of having a high numbers of Saharan-African, Sudanese students predominantly refugee background students, coming in as young adults not predominantly but typically as often as young males. They had a particular profile in terms of their background … that necessitated particular strategies in order to deal with them. Now we've moved toward refugees from [Middle Eastern] backgrounds, often literate in first language, so again they will have a different profile. They will have a different performance profile. They will require different strategies and that's quite unusual in terms of equity, usually you can say we want strategies for lower SES … but with the [CALD students] you really need to profile every couple of years, and you need the ability to … change as the student body changes … (Senior professional manager A).

Staff are continually challenged by the changing profile of CALD students and express concern about inadequate cross-cultural training. They suggest inadequate training creates a barrier preventing them from addressing the specific needs of CALD refugee-background students, a notion supported in Jeong et al.'s (2011) findings. There is also some concern about not being able to accurately identify refugee-background students, which inhibits communication and student-staff engagement:

> … there are a lot of things … that we are not aware of that can impact on these students … as generalisation of the team, we would have no idea at all. We should be able to deal with them sensitively, we really need to know … [how] these students' backgrounds … might impact on … learning … (Professional staff B).

Both staff and students share this concern, with a staff member commenting:

> Understanding what their needs are, what I have at the moment is my anecdotal knowledge … (Academic staff D).

Similarly a mature student suggested:

> I think many staff are not aware of my background. Many of them … don't get it … It is good the young people finishing high school today they are okay, they are coming out with … iPhones, iPads … [and] texting but [in] my generation it's hard (African Student C).

The findings suggest that engaging this group of students is challenging for university staff. Staff aim to assist students to make a successful transition to university by enhancing their learning and teaching outcomes, supporting them to engage with regional university support services. Student reluctance to seek help makes it difficult for staff to understand and support their learning journey. Refugees often come from countries with no tradition or custom of seeking assistance from authorities or any concept of counsellors:

> … these kinds of students, do not come from individualistic cultures; they come from collective cultures, they also come … from very dangerous situations. Someone in an individualistic

culture ... they are used to having complaints procedures, appeals procedures, procedures whereby they can find their way through the maze, where they can bang on the table to be heard, where they can expect good service ... These are people who do not see themselves as having those individual rights, they are not used to finding their way through that kind of individualistic structure where there are complaints and procedures, individual rights, policies and keeping records of emails, following up discussions with emails. If they do complain, sometimes they don't do it quite appropriately or if they do, they just get intimidated and run away (Professional staff F).

Combined with language barriers, this makes it very difficult for these students to participate in established support and complaint systems, especially if they have concerns about academic or relationship issues that may impact on their study. These students are unwilling or unable to express themselves to academic staff and resist seeking help

Insights

The data analysis highlighted different factors that impact on domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds' learning experiences during their first year of university at USQ. Although barriers associated with low English language proficiency levels were most notable, other issues with socio-cultural, new learning and teaching environment, technology, family and health matters and limited staff awareness were also revealed from the data. The findings suggest that the issue is multifaceted and providing English training alone may not resolve the issues. This paper suggests that more long- and short-term strategies can be implemented in order to provide full support to this particular cohort during their university study. For instance, what can be done to enhance staff awareness (both academic and administrative staff) towards the students' needs? What support can be provided to assist with the students' family and health issues? What can be done to improve the students' social and cultural knowledge and skills so that they have a good understanding of the university setting? The findings from this paper provide insights into how Australian regional university policy makers can develop long- and short-term strategies, practices, procedures and policies to support CALD students from refugee

backgrounds and to improve their retention and progression.

Limitations

In this study the researchers were able to utilise suitable techniques to collect reliable data from domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds about their first year experience, key informants who were teaching, professional staff, and senior staff members. The recommendation section in the study showed important advice that could enhance domestic CALD refugee-background students' progression at the university. However, as with any study, there are limitations in this study. First, the sample size of the participants, particularly the students, was relatively small. Even though care has been taken with recommendations interpreting the findings, it is not possible to generalise the findings to the broader domestic CALD refugee-background students' tertiary transitional experiences in Australian regional areas. Nevertheless, the key informants had direct responsibilities to deal with CALD students. Thus, the findings provide some insights on the subject.

The second limitation of this research is that the study was conducted in one regional university in Australia. The literature indicates that there may be differences in support services offering to CALD communities in urban and regional areas (Multicultural Development Association 2010). It may be beneficial to educators, when future research is conducted, to investigate how areas of residence may impact on domestic CALD refugee-background students' study. Any future studies of a similar nature should consider these differences in demographic and cultural factors in regional settings (Laursen & Mahnke, 2001; Batt, 2002).

Future research

For future researchers, the current study is not the end of the journey, but rather it is a stepping-stone for exciting and valuable future studies to further explore the transitional experiences of CALD students from refugee backgrounds into the higher education. It would be useful to study the experiences of CALD refugee-background students by birth countries. This would allow future researchers to extrapolate the needs of these students by specific nationality rather than grouping all students from CALD backgrounds in one study. For instance, African

refugees originate from a variety of different countries on the continent, which might have different educational systems depending on the political and financial systems of the individual country which in turn impact on students' transition to higher education in Australia. This paper argues that the Australian higher education sector needs to be better prepared in order to meet the higher education needs of domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds in the years to come.

Conclusion

The results of this study found that domestic CALD refugee-background students had different previous learning and educational experiences which likely affected how they adapted to the Australian learning system. Prior to their commencement at the university, the students with refugee backgrounds possessed varying degrees of language proficiency levels, computer and technology literacy, and total amount of time spent in Australia. Although they had differences in their abilities, the study found that they had similarities in issues, including language difficulty, where almost all of them indicated they had problems making connections with their peers and understanding their lecturers. Furthermore, pre- and post- resettlement issues affected students' progression and retention at the university. Therefore, the study recommends that cross-cultural awareness training should be provided to teaching and administrative staff. With the likelihood that the higher education sectors in many developed countries may face more challenges due to an increase of refugee intakes in the coming years, the findings of the study can assist university policy makers to establish more support services that can reach the needs of domestic students from CALD and refugee backgrounds such as comprehensive preparatory computing courses and targeted orientation sessions. Despite the difficulties that the students experienced at their transition into the university, the current study found that the CALD refugee-background students felt welcomed by the university and they found it a safe place to achieve their success and be integrated into the society.

References

Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). 'Accessing Hidden and Hard-To-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies', in *Social Research Update,* 33, 1-4.

Batt, R. (2002). 'Managing Customer Services: Human Resource Practices, Quit Rates, and Sales Growth'. in *Academy of Management Journal,* 45:3, 587-597.

Carrington, K. & Marshall, N. (2008). 'Building Multicultural Social Capital in Regional Australia'. in *Rural Society,* 18:2, 117-130.

Clarke, J. (2007). 'Identifying Strategies For Improved Learning Performance of Undergraduate Students From Southern Sudan: Striving For Practical Holistic Approaches'. Paper Presented at the Second National Conference for "Enabling Educators: Enabling Education: What Works?" July 11-13 in Newcastle, NSW.

Cohen, D. & Crabtree, B. (2006). *Qualitative Research Guidelines Project. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation,* viewed 11 November 2015, <http://www.sswm.Info/Sites/Default/Files/Reference_Attachments/COHEN%20 2006%20Semistructured%20Interview.pdf>.

Commonwealth of Australia (2013). *Annual Report 2012-2013.* Belconnen, ACT: Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Copping, A., Shakespeare-Finch, J. & Paton, D. (2012). 'Towards a culturally appropriate mental health system: Sudanese-Australians' experiences with trauma', in *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology,* 4:1, 53-60.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W. & Plano-Clark, V.L. (2011). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Method Research.* 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Crawford, T. & Candlin, S. (2013). 'A Literature Review of The Language Needs of Nursing Students Who Have English as a Second/Other Language and the Effectiveness of English Language Support Programmes'. in *Nurse Education in Practice,* 13, 181-185.

Davies, A. (2013). *Toowoomba Doctor Shortage Reaches Crisis Point. The Chronicle,* viewed 11 November 2015, <http://www.thechronicle.om.au/>.

Department of Communities (2008). *New Futures: The Queensland Government's Engagement With African Refugees,* viewed 11 November 2015, <http://www.Datsima.Qld.Gov.Au/Resources/Datsima/ Culturaldiversity/Publications/Reports/New-Futures.pdf>.

Department of Infrastructure & Planning (2007). *Annual Report 2007–2008.* http://www.Dlg.Qld.Gov.Au/Resources/Publication/Annual-Report/Dip-Annual-Report-08-Complete.pdf

Earnest, J., & De Mori, G. (2008). 'Needs Analysis of Refugee Youth at a Western Australian University: A Case Study From Curtin University'. Australian Association for Research in Education Conference: Refereed Proceedings. Brisbane: Australia, viewed 11 November 2015, <http://www. Aare.Edu.Au/08pap/Ear08788.pdf>.

Earnest, J., Joyce, A., De Mori, G. & Silvagni, G. (2010). 'Are Universities Responding To The Needs of Students From Refugee Backgrounds?', in *Australian Journal of Education*. 54:2, 155-174.

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) (2012), Glossary of Terms, viewed 11 November 2015, <https://view.officeapps. live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Feccv.org. au%2Flibrary%2Ffile%2Fdocument%2FECCV_Glossary_of_Terms_23_ October.docx>

Jeong, S.Y., Hickey, N., Levett-Jones, T., Pitt, V. & Hoffman, K. (2011). 'Understanding and Enhancing The Learning Experiences of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Nursing Students in an Australian Bachelor of Nursing Program'. in *Nurse Education Today,* 31:3, 238-244.

Johnson, J.M. (2002). *In-Depth Interviewing*, in J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (eds.), *The Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*, Thousand Oaks: Sage: 103-119.

Joyce, A., Earnest, J., De Mori, G. & Silvagni, G. (2010). 'The Experiences of Students From Refugee Backgrounds at Universities in Australia: Reflections on the Social, Emotional and Practical Challenges'. in *Journal of Refugee Studies,* 23:1, 82-97.

Krause, K.-L., Hartley, R., James, R. & Mcinnis, C. (2005). *The First Year Experience in*

Australian Universities: Findings From a Decade Of National Studies, viewed 11 November 2015, <http://www.Griffith.Edu.Au/__Data/Assets/Pdf_ File/0006/37491/Fyereport05.pdf>.

Liamputtong, P. (2010). *Research Methods in Health: Foundations For Evidence-Based Practice*, Australia : Oxford University Press.

Livock, C.A. (2010). Life Raft Australia? *In Programme - Posters and Video Presentation, 2010 Joint World Conference On Social Work and Social Development: The Agenda*, Hong Kong, viewed 11 November 2015, <http:// Eprints.qut.edu.au/48736/>.

Laursen, K. & Mahnke, V. (2001). Knowledge Strategies, Firm Types, and Complementarity in Human Resource Practices. *Journal of Management and Governance,* 5:1, 1-27.

Macrine, S.L. (2010). 'Barriers to Inclusion of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students'. in *Peace Studies Journal,* 3:1, 76-90.

Mathers, N.J., Fox, N. & Hunn, A. (1998). *Using Interviews in a Research Project*, viewed 11 November 2015, <http://Web.Simmons.Edu/~Tang2/

Courses/Cuacourses/Lsc745/Sp06/Interviews.pdf>

Morris, M., Poppers, S., Rodwell, T., Brodine, S. & Brouwer, K. (2009). 'Healthcare Barriers of Refugees Post-Resettlement'. *Journal of Community Health,* 34:6, 529-538.

Multicultural Development Association. (2014). Demographic Information: Toowoomba Region [Powerpoint Slides], viewed 11 November 2015, <http://mdaltd.org.au/>.

Multicultural Development Association. (2010). Education Advocacy Position Paper, viewed 11 November 2015, <http://www.Mdainc.Org.Au/Sites/Default/Files/Education-Advocacy-Position-Paper-For-Website-Oct-2010.pdf>.

Murray, S., & Skull, S. (2005). 'Hurdles To Health: Immigrant and Refugee Health Care in Australia'. in *Australian Health Review,* 29:1, 25.

Oka, R. (2014). 'Coping With The Refugee Wait: The Role of Consumption, Normalcy & Dignity in Refugee Lives at Kakuma Refugee Camp Kenya'. in *American Anthropologist,* 116:1, 23-37.

Omeri, A. & Raymond, L. (2009). *Diversity in The Context of Multicultural Australia: Implications For Nursing Practice. Contexts of Nursing: An Introduction*, Churchill Livingstone, Australia: Elsevier.

Ramburuth, P. & Tani, M. (2009). The Impact of Culture on Learning: Exploring Student Perceptions. *Multicultural Education and Technology Journal,* 3:3, 182-195.

Rogan, F., San Miguel, C., Brown, D. & Kilstoff, K. (2006). 'You Find Yourself. Perceptions of Nursing Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds of The Effect of an Intensive Language Support Program on Their Oral Clinical Communication Skills'. in *Contemporary Nurse,* 23:1, 72-86.

Salamonson, Y., Ramjan, L., Fernandez, R. & Griffiths, R. (2012). 'Diversity and Demographic Heterogeneity of Australian Nursing Students: A Closer Look'. in *International Nursing Review,* 59:1, 59-65.

Sawir, E. (2005). 'Language Difficulties of International Students in Australia: The Effects of Prior Learning Experience'. in *International Education Journal,* 6:5, 567-580.

Sawrikar, P. & Katz, I. (2008). 'Enhancing Family and Relationship Service Accessibility and Delivery to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families in Australia'. in *Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, v*iewed 11 November 2015, <http://www.Aifs.Org.Au/Afrc/Pubs/Issues/Issues3/Issues3.pdf>.

Townsend, R. (2008). 'Adult Education, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity in Regional Communities'. in *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 48:1, 71-92.

About the Authors

Dr Eric Kong is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Management and Enterprise, University of Southern Queensland. He completed his Ph.D. at Monash University, Australia. Eric has over 70 publications, including refereed journal articles, conference papers, scholarly research book and book chapters.

Sarah Harmsworth worked as a research assistant for this paper based on a funded research project from Australian Federal Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme with a grant provided by USQ.

Mohammad Mehdi Rajaeian is a PhD candidate in Information Systems at the School of Management and Enterprise, USQ. He also works as research assistant for the USQ's experiential learning group. He has been a lecturer at Sadjad University of Technology, Iran for seven years.

Geoffrey Parkes is an Associate Lecturer in Academic English and Communications and is the leader of the special interest group for CALD students for the National Associate of Enabling Educators of Australia.

Sue Bishop is the Refugee Support and Student Inclusion Officer at USQ. She has taught English in Zimbabwe, the UK, Canberra and Sydney and, for the past 25 years, she has worked in administration and marketing at the Australian National University, Queensland TAFE and USQ.

Bassim AlMansouri is an Adjunct Lecturer at the School of Linguistics, Adult and Specialist Education at USQ. He worked as a research assistant for this paper.

Professor Jill Lawrence has responsibility for the Student Portfolio in the Faculty of Business, Law Education and Arts at USQ, which primarily involves collaborating across university divisions to support each other support the student experience. Her research interests center on the First Year Experience, educational and professional transitions, cultural competency and higher education governance.

Contact Details

Eric Kong
School of Management and Enterprise,
University of Southern Queensland
West Street
Toowoomba QLD 4350

Email: kongeric@usq.edu.au

OnTrack to university: understanding mechanisms of student retention in an Australian pre-university enabling program

Joanne G. Lisciandro
Gael Gibbs

Murdoch University

University-based enabling programs have become an important pathway to university for non-traditional students. There is increasing interest in understanding the mechanisms that facilitate retention and success of enabling pathway students, with the aim of developing effective strategies for maximising opportunities for university access and participation. The current study focuses on an Australian enabling program that has achieved and sustained high retention rates, with three-quarters of its 2115 students that enrolled during the last seven years (2008 – 2014) retained until the end of the program. Further, 90 per cent of retained students were successful in receiving an offer to university; and 94 per cent of students that received an offer subsequently enrolled in an undergraduate course. Multivariate regression analysis revealed that demographic and prior educational factors explained little about student retention in the program. The main reasons cited for withdrawal were medical or emotional issues, and family problems or responsibilities. Overall, this data suggests that

both pre-program conduct and in-program practices may enhance student retention outcomes. Specifically, practices that support the development of strong peer and tutor-student relationships, and that foster community connections, are thought to provide a significant and positive influence on student retention in enabling programs.

Keywords: *enabling programs, retention, attrition, success, non-traditional students*

Introduction

In an environment characterised by deregulation and widening participation agendas, university-based enabling programs have become an important pathway to university for non-traditional students. There is increasing interest from Higher Education (HE) institutions and funding bodies, in understanding the mechanisms which facilitate retention and success of students engaged in enabling programs; a common aim being the development of strategies for maximising opportunities for university access and participation.

The aim of the current study was to report on student retention for a large cohort of students engaged in a pre-university enabling program over an extended period of time (2008 – 2014), and to investigate factors (demographic and other) which have influenced retention in the program.

Context

Pre-university enabling programs, otherwise referred to as "bridging courses, university preparation courses, foundation courses and pathway courses" (Hodges et al., 2013) have become an increasingly popular pathway to university, particularly for non-traditional students. Many of these programs are funded by the Australian Government as a part of its 'widening participation' agenda that aims to increase enrolment of individuals from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and other under-represented groups for equity, economic and social justice reasons (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008).

Enabling programs have been shown to attract a high proportion of non-traditional students, and many of these students have successfully

progressed to Bachelor degree level (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014; Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011). Therefore, enabling pathways play an important role in social inclusion by boosting university participation for non-traditional students and providing a second chance to those whose "circumstances may have masked the extent of their academic capability" (Willis & Joschko, 2012:23). Currently available data suggests that following commencement of a first year undergraduate course, outcomes of enabling pathway students are comparable to those who enter university via traditional means (Bennett et al., 2013; Bourke, Cantwell, & Archer, 1998; Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Chesters & Watson, 2014; Cooper, Ellis, & Sawyer, 2000; Willis & Joschko, 2012). Moreover, the benefits of enabling programs may be more "profound" and "multi-layered" than previously anticipated: not only do enabling pathway students acquire academic skills, confidence and a sense of belonging, but they also bring to their degrees leadership qualities and intercultural understanding, "benefiting other students and the university, as well as potentially influencing their families, friends and communities" (Crawford, 2014:15).

In light of such findings, there is increasing interest in the nature and causes of student attrition in Australian enabling programs, and in devising appropriate interventions that will enhance completion rates and thereby resultant university enrolments. The Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) recently funded a multi-centre study examining outcomes in enabling programs delivered by five Australian HE institutions (Hodges et al., 2013). This study, consistent with other major studies (Bedford, 2009; Bennett et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2000; Muldoon, 2011), reported that retention rates in enabling programs vary, but are frequently in the order of 50 per cent and thus lower than described for undergraduate students. Furthermore, the processes that result in student attrition in enabling programs are likely different, more complex and not as well understood as undergraduate models of attrition (Bennett et al., 2013; Hodges et al., 2013). Therefore, it is "not possible simply to transfer learning concerning student retention from undergraduate to enabling programs" (Hodges et al., 2013:5). Additionally, some attrition from enabling programs is considered a desirable outcome because "the enabling program is playing the role of a filter" (Hodges et al., 2013:5), for example, by allowing people to experience university and to leave

having either achieved or altered their goals and without accruing a financial burden.

Understanding retention and attrition rates in enabling programs is complicated by the diversity of enabling program models used across and within different Australian institutions. Differences exist in modes of delivery, entry requirements and course length (Hodges et al., 2013). It is currently unclear how specific differences in the practices and/or means of delivery have influenced student outcomes. Consequently, the Review of the Demand Driven Funding System recently expressed some concerns about potential variation in enabling program quality (Kemp & Norton, 2014), and the Higher Education Base Funding Review suggested that the effectiveness of pathway enabling courses should be assessed (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011).

In contribution to this wider discussion, the current study uniquely employs a large dataset collected over an extended timeframe and a robust empirical methodology to better understand the mechanisms that have influenced student retention in one Australian enabling program. The featured enabling program models a combination of pre-program and in-program practices that have delivered high and sustained retention and progression-to-university rates over many years; thereby representing a successful, appropriate and cost-effective pathway to university for non-traditional students.

OnTrack pre-university enabling program

The *OnTrack* program, which commenced in 2008, operates on all of Murdoch University's domestic campuses, including one metropolitan and two regional campuses in Western Australia. It is a non-fee paying enabling program that is primarily supported by Commonwealth government funding and aims to provide a pathway for student groups that have not traditionally accessed university, to do so. In accordance with equity principles, *OnTrack* aims to enrol applicants from low SES backgrounds, those that have a disability or medical condition and those that have experienced reduced or no opportunity to access HE as a result of their personal or social circumstances. The program is offered bi-annually as a full-time, internal and semester-long (14 week) study option only.

OnTrack does not have strict academic pre-requisites for entry: an applicant need only demonstrate English proficiency either through secondary school results (school leavers) or a combination of work/life experience (mature aged applicants). In this way, a lack of previous academic achievement does not preclude an applicant from entering the program, particularly where there is evidence that other factors have negatively impacted their educational journey. Also noteworthy, the process of enrolment first requires compulsory attendance at a small-group information session where potential applicants visit the campus, personally meet and connect with *OnTrack* staff, and are explicitly informed of the expectations, commitment and time requirements of the program. Applicants therefore make informed decisions about whether or not to apply, and commencing students likely have reasonably realistic expectations about what *OnTrack* study will entail. Additionally, applicants gain some familiarity with the campus and staff.

OnTrack utilises a multi-disciplinary, fully integrated curriculum that fosters foundational academic literacies (e.g. essay writing, referencing etc.) and transitional skills (e.g. time management), as well as acculturation into the university environment. *OnTrack* is not offered as discrete units of study; instead students are allocated to a single tutorial group with the same tutor and peer group for the full duration of the program. Furthermore, tutors are employed on a fractioned fixed term basis, rather than on a casual basis, and are therefore available to provide additional support to their students between classes. Additionally, students identified as being from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) or native English speakers requiring assistance with their academic reading and writing skills are offered an additional day of dedicated classes each week.

Student withdrawal from the *OnTrack* course is recorded and reported by program staff. Every student absence (even for one day) is followed up with email communication as part of standard tutor operational procedures. Extended absence of more than a week is followed up by the unit coordinator by phone and/or email. Students that never attend or stop attending are therefore withdrawn within this timeframe, unless it is possible to assist the student to engage or re-engage. Although these procedures are labour intensive, they have frequently prompted engagement or re-engagement, and most importantly facilitate a

supportive culture where communication is strongly emphasised and encouraged.

Research Questions

The specific research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the student retention and success rates in the *OnTrack* program? What proportion of students progressed to undergraduate course enrolment at Murdoch University?
2. Which specific factors predict or influence student retention in the *OnTrack* program?

Methodology

Demographic information

Where information was available, demographic characteristics (according to definitions described in Appendix Table A1) were evaluated and reported for students that were enrolled in the *OnTrack* program over the period 2008 to 2014 (*n* = 2115). A chi-square analysis was used to test for differences in demographic characteristics of regional versus metropolitan student cohorts.

Analysis of retention, success and progression rates

De-identified data was used to evaluate the following outcomes for students that enrolled in *OnTrack* over the period 2008 to 2014: (1) student retention rate, defined as the proportion of students that remained enrolled until the end of the program; (2) student success rate, defined as the proportion of students that were retained and met the academic (overall grade ≥50%) and attendance (unexplained non-attendance ≤20%) requirements of the *OnTrack* program, and were therefore successful in receiving an offer to university; and (3) rate of student progression to undergraduate course enrolment at the university. Calculations were based on all student enrolments ("raw" rate) or the number of students still enrolled at the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) census date occurring at the end of Week Four of the program ("official" rate). The frequency of attrition (number of withdrawing students) by week in the program, and before and after changes to *OnTrack* enrolment procedures was also explored.

Analysis of influences on student retention in OnTrack

Demographic factors and other variables of interest were investigated as potential predictors of student retention in the *OnTrack* program. The independent variables studied were those for which information was available from university departmental databases and/or the university's student records. Other student data, such as psychological data, were not collected and therefore not considered here. For this part of the study, retention to the end of the program was used as the dependent (response) variable in the analysis.

Firstly, single associations between *student retention* and each independent variable of interest were explored via a chi-square analysis. However, multivariate analysis was deemed necessary as some independent variables of interest were correlated (Appendix Table A2). Single association variables with a conservative p-value of less than 0.20 were further investigated in the multivariate regression model. Multi-collinearity between independent variables was assessed and any issues addressed prior to progressing further. Plausible interactions were also investigated as part of the model.

The final multivariate regression model included the following predictor variables: gender, age group, NESB, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), Humanitarian Entrant Background (HEB), low SES and prior education level. As the dependent variable (retention) was dichotomous, a logistic regression analysis method was employed. For this analysis, categorical data were dummy coded into exhaustive and mutually exclusive variables, each with a designated reference group for comparison. As it is recommended that multivariate logistic regression models employ an *n* value of at least 10-15 per independent variable included in the model (Johnson & Wichern, 2007; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), the sample size for modelling was more than sufficient.

Analysis of withdrawal reasons

Students who never attended or that ceased attendance were contacted by program staff regarding the reason for non-attendance and to discuss re-engagement or withdrawal from the program. Where withdrawal was the outcome and the student was both contactable and willing to disclose, the primary reason for discontinuation was formally

recorded on individual student exit forms. Student exit forms were then thematically analysed and recorded reasons (where provided) broadly classified into the following exhaustive categories: (1) financial issues, (2) medical/emotional problems, (3) family issues or responsibilities, (4) inadequate skills, (5) lack of interest/engagement, (6) alternative opportunity or (7) the student deciding that university is not for them. Student exit forms have only been in use since 2011, therefore this analysis was limited to students who withdrew from the program between 2011-2014 and whose exit forms could be located in archives (n = 267); of these, the withdrawal reason was both communicated and recorded for 68% of the sample (n = 181).

Statistical analysis and ethics approval

Analyses were conducted using the statistical package SPSS, version 21. Associations were considered statistically significant if p-values were less than 0.05. Permission to undertake this study was granted by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 2014/112).

Results

Demographic information

Demographic characteristics for all students that enrolled in *OnTrack* between 2008 and 2014 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographic characteristics of OnTrack students enrolled at Murdoch University over the period 2008-2014*

Demographic characteristics		Metropolitan students[1]	Regional students[1]	Chi-square test for metropolitan versus regional differences			
				χ^2 statistic	df	N	p-value[2]
Gender	Female	714 (52%)	541 (74%)	102.162	1	2112	**<0.001**
	Male	670 (48%)	187 (26%)				
	Total *N*	1384	728				
Age	≤19 years	852 (62%)	335 (46%)	66.866	4	2113	**<0.001**
	20-29 years	364 (26%)	224 (31%)				
	30-39 years	79 (6%)	82 (11%)				
	40-49 years	55 (4%)	68 (9%)				
	≥50 years	35 (2.5%)	19 (3%)				
	Total *N*	1385	728				
ATSI		24 (2%)	11 (2%)	0.140	1	2110	0.708
	Total *N*	1384	726				
NESB		254 (18%)	25 (4%)	88.410	1	2087	**<0.001**
	Total *N*	1383	704				
Low SES		245 (18%)	409 (56%)	329.649	1	2110	**<0.001**
	Total *N*	1382	728				
HEB		30 (2%)	3 (0.4%)	9.568	1	2114	**0.001**
	Total *N*	1385	729				
FIF		429 (41%)	259 (55%)	28.132	1	1519	**<0.001**
	Total *N*	1052	467				
Rural or remote		59 (4%)	31 (4%)	0.000	1	2113	0.991
	Total *N*	1384	729				
Disability or medical condition		160 (19%)	77 (18%)	0.182	1	1277	0.669
	Total *N*	847	430				
Receiving Equity Service support		87 (6%)	45 (6%)	0.010	1	2114	0.922
	Total *N*	1385	729				
Time since last studied	<2 years	374 (67%)	150 (53%)	22.125	3	843	**<0.001**
	2-5 years	117 (21%)	69 (24%)				
	6-10 years	29 (5%)	30 (11%)				
	>10 years	38 (7%)	36 (13%)				
	Total *N*	558	285				
Highest level of past educational attainment	≤Year 10	155 (13%)	117 (19%)	45.124	4	1845	**<0.001**
	Year 11	179 (15%)	89 (14%)				
	Year 12	738 (60%)	302 (49%)				
	TAFE	125 (10%)	103 (17%)				
	Other post-secondary	34 (3%)	3 (0.5%)				
	Total *N*	1231	614				

[1] Counts and column percentages are shown. Total N indicates the sample size for which data was available.
[2] Boldface highlights two-sided p-values significant at the 5% level.

The *OnTrack* student cohort was characterised by a high proportion from low SES backgrounds (654/2110 or 31% overall), and that self-identified as first in their family (FIF) to study at university (688/1519 or 45% overall). These categories were not mutually exclusive; more than 50% of low SES students were also FIF (246/454). The proportions of low SES and FIF students were significantly higher for regional versus metropolitan cohorts (Table 1).

More females than males enrolled in *OnTrack* (1255/2112 or 59%)*,* with this effect significantly (p<0.001) more pronounced at the regional campuses (74% female) compared to the metropolitan campus (52% female; see Table 1). Furthermore, students were observed to come from a wide range of age groups, with 44% (926/2113) of students aged 20 years or above upon commencing *OnTrack*. Notably, students that enrolled at the regional campuses were more likely to be of an older demographic than those enrolled at the metropolitan campus: for example, 23% (169/728) of regional students were aged 30 years or older compared to only 12% (169/1385) of metropolitan students. Regional students were also less likely to have studied recently (Table 1).

The *OnTrack* student cohort was also characterised by a wide range of variation in prior educational attainment. Notably, regional students were less likely to have completed Year 12 study, and more likely to have achieved up to Year 10 only or a TAFE certificate. Meanwhile, the metropolitan campus enrolled more NESB and HEB students. Close to one-fifth of all *OnTrack* students declared a disability and/or medical condition during application (Table 1).

Retention, success and progression to undergraduate study

Enrolments in the *OnTrack* program have increased annually, with a cumulative total of 2115 enrolments during the investigation period (Table 2). The number of students still enrolled at the HECS census date is also indicated, as this is the date in which the university officially confirms a student's enrolment and the student's place is funded (therefore giving an indication of the real financial cost associated with attrition).

Table 2: *OnTrack student retention rate figures for the period 2008-2014*

Year	Number of students that enrolled in *OnTrack*	Number of students still enrolled at HECS census date	Number of students retained until end of program	Raw retention rate (%)	Official retention rate (%)
2008	76	49	45	59	91
2009	187	171	100	53	58
2010	214	194	133	62	69
2011	321	285	225	70	79
2012	354	333	301	85	90
2013	436	392	334	77	85
2014	527	502	435	83	87
Cumulative total	2115	1926	1573	74	82

Throughout the investigation period, 74% of all students that enrolled in *OnTrack* and 82% of all students 'officially' enrolled (i.e. enrolled at census date) were retained until program completion (Table 2). Weekly student attrition from the program was also studied in order to determine whether there were any peak withdrawal times during the semester (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *OnTrack student attrition by week of the program for the period 2008-2014 (n=542)*
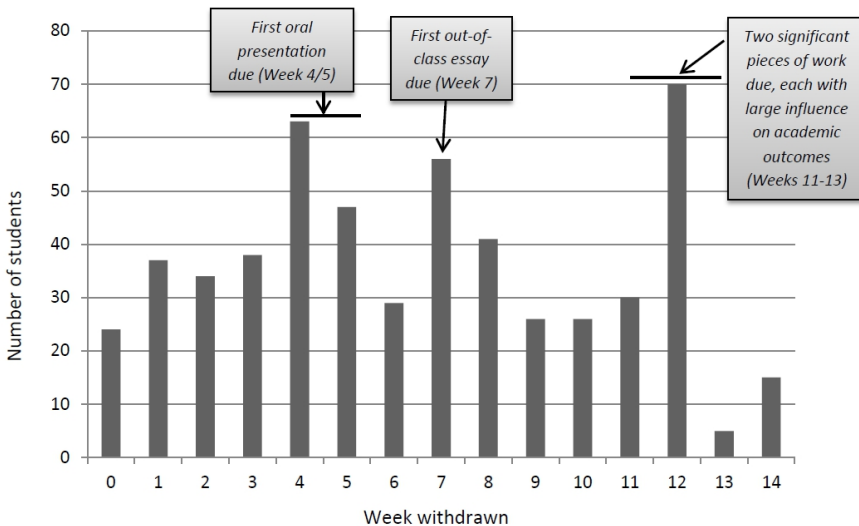
Attrition was found to be highest in Weeks 4-5, 7 and 12. The boxed information in Figure 1 shows details of the assessment tasks that were due during these periods.

Table 3 indicates rates of success and progression-to-university for *OnTrack* students over the investigation period.

Table 3: *OnTrack student success and progression-to-university rates for the period of 2008-2014*

Year	Number of successful completers	Raw success rate (%)	Official success rate (%)	Number of successful completers taking up university offer	Raw progression to university rate (%)	Official progression to university rate (%)
2008	45	59	92	39	51	80
2009	96	51	56	90	48	53
2010	133	62	69	127	59	65
2011	196	61	69	187	58	66
2012	272	77	82	255	72	77
2013	294	67	75	271	62	69
2014	376	71	75	353	67	70
Cumulative total	1412	67	73	1322	63	69

Ninety percent (1412/1573) of all retained students successfully completed the program (met academic and attendance requirements) and therefore received an offer to university. 94% (1322/1412) of students that received an offer went on to enrol in an undergraduate course at the university. Of all students that enrolled in the *OnTrack* program, 67% completed the program successfully and 63% went on to enrol in an undergraduate degree. Notably, 69% of 'official' (funded) enrolments in *OnTrack* translated into undergraduate enrolments at the university (Table 3).

Changes in *OnTrack* enrolment procedures over the period of this study were also explored for the possible impact on student retention. Previous to Semester 2, 2013, successful applicants were allocated a place and automatically enrolled prior to the start of the semester. In the lead up to Semester 2, 2013, new enrolment procedures were introduced in response to increasing unmet demand for *OnTrack* places. The changes meant that successful applicants were no longer automatically

allocated a place, but instead required to formally accept their offer within a set timeframe shortly before the start of the program. Offers not accepted were re-allocated via a second round of offers to other eligible applicants. Chi-square analysis indicated that this change has facilitated a significantly reduced attrition rate during the first four weeks of the *OnTrack* program and also after the HECS census date (Table 4).

Table 4: *OnTrack student retention before and after changes to OnTrack enrolment procedures*

		Enrolment procedures*	
		Before changes	After changes
Retention outcome	Not retained beyond HECS census date	157 (11.4%)	32 (4.4%)
	Retained beyond HECS census date, but withdrawn before end of program	252 (18.3%)	99 (13.5%)
	Retained until end of program	968 (70.3%)	603 (82.2%)
Total		1377	734

* Pearson Chi-square test statistic = 42.23, df = 2, $p<0.001$

Finding predictors of student retention

To predict student retention in the *OnTrack* program, single associations between independent variables of interest and the response variable (retention) were investigated (Table 5).

Table 5: *Relationship between student retention in the OnTrack program and student demographic or prior educational factors[1]*

Demographic and prior educational factors[2]		Retention		Chi-square analysis			
		No	Yes	χ^2 statistic	df	N	P-value
Gender	Male	246 (29%)	612 (71%)	7.138	1	2113	0.008
	Female	295 (24%)	960 (76%)				
Age group	≤19 years	252 (21%)	934 (79%)	33.063	4	2113	<0.001
	20-29 years	183 (31%)	406 (69%)				
	30-39 years	43 (27%)	118 (73%)				
	40-49 years	38 (31%)	85 (69%)				
	≥50 years	24 (44%)	30 (56%)				
ATSI	No	525 (25%)	1551 (75%)	7.534	1	2111	0.006
	Yes	16 (46%)	19 (54%)				
NESB	No	427 (24%)	1382 (76%)	10.525	1	2088	0.001
	Yes	91 (33%)	188 (67%)				
Low SES	No	360 (25%)	1097 (75%)	2.086	1	2111	0.149
	Yes	181 (28%)	473 (72%)				
HEB	No	540 (26%)	1542 (74%)	6.733	1	2115	0.009
	Yes	2 (6%)	31 (94%)				
FIF	No	235 (28%)	597 (72%)	0.425	1	1520	0.514
	Yes	184 (27%)	504 (73%)				
Rural or remote	No	523 (26%)	1501 (74%)	1.011	1	2114	0.315
	Yes	19 (21%)	71 (79%)				
Disability or medical condition	No	197 (19%)	844 (81%)	0.381	1	1278	0.537
	Yes	49 (21%)	188 (79%)				
Equity Service support	No	514 (26%)	1469 (74%)	1.439	1	2115	0.230
	Yes	28 (21%)	104 (79%)				
Campus of enrolment	Metropolitan	365 (26%)	1020 (74%)	1.078	1	2114	0.299
	Regional	177 (24%)	552 (76%)				
Time since last studied	<2 years	79 (15%)	445 (85%)	8.767	3	844	0.033
	2-5 years	44 (24%)	143 (76%)				
	6-10 years	14 (24%)	45 (76%)				
	>10 years	11 (15%)	63 (85%)				
Highest level of prior educational attainment	Did not complete Secondary School	177 (33%)	363 (67%)	60.528	3	1846	<0.001
	Completed Secondary School	175 (17%)	866 (83%)				
	TAFE certificate or Diploma	54 (24%)	174 (76%)				
	Other post-secondary education	16 (43%)	21 (57%)				

[1] Counts, row percentages and two-sided p-values from chi-square analyses are shown.
[2] Variables that met conservative single association criteria (p < 0.20) for inclusion in the multivariate logistic regression model are highlighted in boldface.

Female gender, HEB and having completed Secondary School or TAFE study was associated with a significantly enhanced retention rate. NESB, ATSI, increasing time since last studied and increasing age was associated with reduced retention rates. Variables not associated with student retention included: FIF, low SES, rural/remote postcode, disability or medical condition, Equity Services support and campus of enrolment (Table 5).

Importantly, a number of independent variables were found to correlate with each other, highlighting the need to investigate covariates in a multivariate model (Appendix Table A2). A particularly high association between *age* and *time since last studied* was observed, indicating a problematic degree of collinearity and redundancy between these variables. As highlighted elsewhere (Johnson & Wichern, 2007; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), variables that are too strongly correlated (i.e. correlation coefficient above 0.7) should not be studied together in multivariate regression analysis due to unstable modelling; instead only one of the related predictors can be included. In this instance, *age* was chosen for inclusion due to the larger and more robust dataset it provided for analysis (there is a significant portion of missing data on *time since last studied*). No other multicollinearity issues were detected. An interaction between prior education and age was considered plausible, however was not significant and therefore not considered further.

Table 6: *Multivariate Logistic Regression Model analysing the influence of demographic and other factors on student retention in the OnTrack program*

Independent variable[1]		Odds ratio	(95% CI)	P-value[3]
ATSI	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.617	(0.219 – 1.738)	0.360
Highest level of prior education	Did not complete Secondary Schooling[2]	1.000		
	Completed Secondary Schooling	2.362	(1.815 – 3.072)	**<0.001**
	Completed TAFE study	1.703	(1.173 – 2.473)	**0.005**
	Completed other post-secondary education	0.891	(0.349 - 2.271)	0.809
Gender	Male[2]	1.000		
	Female	1.359	(1.073 – 1.721)	**0.011**
NESB	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.485	(0.352 – 0.668)	**<0.001**
HEB	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	6.491	(1.482 – 28.433)	**0.013**
Low SES	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.923	(0.719 – 1.185)	0.529
Age group	≤19 years[2]	1.000		
	20-29 years	0.694	(0.532 – 0.905)	**0.007**
	30-39 years	0.761	(0.487 – 1.188)	0.230
	40-49 years	0.746	(0.459 – 1.214)	0.238
	≥50 years	0.502	(0.237 – 1.061)	0.071

[1] Model Chi-square = 100.040, df = 12, $p<0.001$; Nagelkerke R-squared = 0.082; $N=1817$ included in the analysis.
[2] Reference group
[3] P-values significant at the 5% level are highlighted in boldface.

After controlling for covariates by performing multivariate logistic regression, prior education, gender, age, NESB and HEB were found to be significantly related to retention (Table 6). The model suggests that students who completed Secondary School or TAFE had significantly higher odds of being retained than those that did not complete Secondary School. Females had slightly greater odds than males of being retained. Students aged 20-29 years old were found to have significantly lower odds of retention compared to those aged 19 years or less. NESB students were less likely to be retained than non-NESB students; but HEB students had more than six times greater odds of being retained. ATSI or low SES status was not found to predict retention after controlling for covariates. Importantly, the model's effect size, Nagelkerke R-squared was 0.082; indicating that only 8.2% of the variance in the dependent variable (retention) was explained by this model. Therefore, despite some of these variables reaching significance, demographic and prior educational factors collectively explained very little about student retention in the program.

Reasons for early exit from the program

The primary reasons for discontinuation cited by withdrawing students were broadly classified into the exhaustive categories shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *Reasons for exiting the OnTrack program prematurely, as analysed by frequency and percentage, where reasons were known and recorded over the period 2011 - 2014 (n=181)*

For students whose reasons for leaving were communicated and recorded, the most common barriers to persistence were found to be *medical or emotional problems*, and *family issues and/or responsibilities* (Figure 2).

Discussion

In the current study, the retention of students in the *OnTrack* program was assessed and potential predictors of retention investigated. The main findings of this study were that, firstly, student retention in the program was high, with 74% of all enrolled students being retained until the end of the program, and 69% of all funded enrolments translating into undergraduate degree enrolment at the university. This suggests that *OnTrack* is a cost-effective, successful and appropriate pathway to university for non-traditional students. Secondly, student demographic and prior educational factors collectively explained little about the observed variance in student retention, and personal circumstances like health or family issues were most commonly cited as reasons for exiting the program early.

The high retention rate in *OnTrack*, in comparison to that reported for other Australian enabling programs, may be partially explained by differences in mode of delivery. For example, in enabling programs delivered online, the raw retention rate has been reported at as low as 25% (Hodges et al., 2013; Whannell & Whannell, 2013); and for programs offered in both internal and external modes, the retention of external students is consistently lower than that of internal students (Hodges et al., 2013). Furthermore, it has already been highlighted elsewhere that "attrition rates within part-time enabling programmes are higher when compared to full-time study modes" (Bennett et al., 2013) and indeed programs delivered in part-time mode record retention rates at below 50% (Bennett et al., 2013; Muldoon, 2011). Programs delivered in both full-time and internal modes on the other hand, such as Open Foundation Intensive or Newstep at the University of Newcastle, report retention rates above 50% (Hodges et al., 2013). This is in line with our data which shows that three-quarters of all enrolling *OnTrack* students were retained. Therefore, the mode of delivery may influence retention rates. Notably, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) recently

commissioned a project to be completed in 2015 that will review and report on enabling program practices and/or means of delivery that have resulted in the most effective outcomes for disadvantaged students (HEPPP, 2014). Whilst some modes of delivery may be seen to be more effective than others, the importance of continuing to offer flexible study options should not be underestimated if we are to strive towards the goal of widening access opportunities for all, including those who do not have the means to study full-time and on-campus. Instead, identification and implementation of 'enablers' of retention, including for programs that use flexible delivery, is likely to yield more desirable outcomes.

The mechanism for high student retention in full-time, internally-based programs like *OnTrack* may be the enhanced opportunity for the development of learning communities. The formation of learning communities and a sense of belonging or connectedness is strongly associated with improved retention of first-year university students (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Krause, 2005; Tinto, 1997). For low SES and mature age students, these relationships appear to be particularly important (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012; Willans & Seary, 2011). Tinto (2003:1) asserted that "learning communities, in their most basic form, begin with a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together, rather than apart". The practice of delivering *OnTrack* not only in full-time, internal mode but also as a complete, fully integrated, multi-disciplinary course, rather than a series of units, means that students work with the same tutor and peers at the same pace for the entire program. The block-scheduling arrangements in *OnTrack* increase student interaction, engagement and support, and thus likely create an environment that is conducive to the development of learning communities. Consistent with this, enabling pathway students identified "encouragement from other students" and "camaraderie" as important influences on their decision to continue (Ellis, Cooper, & Sawyer, 2001:95). Cocks and Stokes (2013:27-28) also emphasised that a supportive culture is crucial in enabling programs so that students build networks and social relationships that "reduce feelings of vulnerability" and "motivate and maintain the development of learner identities". Thus, the formation of learning communities may play a significant role in supporting student retention in enabling programs, and if so, institutions should look for ways to foster academic and social connectedness, regardless of the mode of delivery. This idea

is starting to be explored as a retention strategy for external students in other Australian enabling programs (Lambrinidis, 2014; Whannell & Whannell, 2013).

Refinement of enrolment procedures and pre-program conduct may also have contributed to observed retention rates in the *OnTrack* program. For example, the introduction of a procedure that allowed for a second round of offers to be distributed has facilitated a drop in student attrition. The reduction in attrition throughout the course of the semester and not just in the first few weeks of the program suggests that refinement of these procedures not only prevented unnecessary uptake of places by those that no longer had the intention to attend, but also appears to facilitate better overall selection of suitable applicants. Additionally, the use of information sessions to explicitly inform prospective students of the time requirements and level of commitment needed likely also contributed to retention figures, by ensuring that students entered the program with more realistic expectations. Consistent with this, "inadequate pre-enrolment information" was cited as an important reason for early exit by approximately 14% and 33% of non-persisting students in enabling programs at The University of Newcastle and University of New England, respectively (Hodges et al., 2013). Moreover, personal interaction with staff and other potential applicants at these small group information sessions may also help prospective students to initiate relationships and connections, and develop some familiarity with the campus before commencing the program.

Another major finding of this study was that most of the attrition observed in the *OnTrack* program could not be explained by student demographic or prior educational factors. Firstly, low SES, FIF, having a disability/medical condition, studying at a regional campus, and living rurally/remotely were *not* related to retention. This suggests that students in government-targeted equity groups generally achieved retention outcomes commensurate with their non-targeted peers, as per previous findings (Hodges et al., 2013; Whannell, 2013a, 2013b). Secondly, although some of the other demographic and prior educational factors were associated with retention, multivariate regression modelling suggests that these collectively explained only 8% of the observed retention rate – that is, most of the attrition from

the *OnTrack* program remains unexplained by this model. Hodges et al. (2013:5) similarly concluded that "demographic factors do not have a significant impact on the likelihood of persistence of students in these programs". A significant limitation of our model was the lack of additional student information that may have better explained retention, such as a student's hours of paid employment, number of absences, reasons for enrolling in the program and academic performance at first assessment, all of which were related to student retention in other enabling programs (Hodges et al., 2013; Whannell, 2013b). Future studies should incorporate these factors, as well as other student psychological factors, as potential predictors of retention.

Finally, the main reasons for student attrition reported in *OnTrack* were personal circumstances relating to medical/emotional problems, or family issues and responsibilities. This is consistent with the findings of others and suggests that some attrition may be beyond the control of the institution (Bedford, 2009; Hodges et al., 2013; Whannell, Whannell, & Bedford, 2013). Hodges et al. (2013) and Muldoon and Wijeyewardene (2013) also reported that having insufficient time available for study is another major reason for discontinuation. Although we have not specifically looked at this issue here, it is likely that the changes in personal circumstances that trigger withdrawal do so by placing competing and unmanageable demands on time available for study. This may also explain, at least in part, why peak withdrawal times correlate with certain assessment tasks and yet, personal circumstances are mainly cited as the reasons for discontinuation. Notably, there is an assessment item due almost every week of the program, however some assessment pieces may be perceived as more stressful or difficult, causing students simultaneously experiencing adverse personal events to feel overwhelmed by competing time pressures and stress. Therefore, emotional distress may have been the reported reason for discontinuation, but may in fact be a secondary response to other factors (e.g. difficulty managing time). Despite this, experience in our program and in others indicates that a substantial number of withdrawn students return later to try again "often being successful on the second or even third try" (Bennett et al., 2013:153). In other cases, attrition may be a desirable outcome, as highlighted previously (Cooper et al., 2000; Hodges et al., 2013). For example, "where withdrawal signals an informed, adult decision that university is not for them, this should

be viewed as a form of success because the equity objective has been served" (Klinger & Murray, 2011:143). Cooper et al. (2000:4) also suggest that "employment is often a direct result of the new skills and confidence participants have gained from their period of bridging study". In *OnTrack*, 16% of withdrawals were attributed to the student taking up an alternative opportunity or discovering that university was not for them and therefore may be a positive attrition statistic. Additionally, the filtering of students unlikely to go on to succeed or engage at university, such as those that do not possess adequate skills or engagement/interest, may in many instances also be a positive outcome for both the student and the institution, particularly when a positive exit process is facilitated.

Conclusion and future directions

There is a focus on enhancing student retention in enabling programs in order to further boost their effectiveness as enablers of university access and participation for non-traditional students. In general, retention rates in enabling programs tend to be lower than undergraduate programs, variable and linked to the mode of delivery, with internal and full-time programs demonstrating higher comparative retention rates. Importantly however, "success in enabling education should not be measured solely by numbers" (Bennett et al., 2013) and we should be careful not to discount the role of enabling programs delivered in flexible modes, which support equity and social inclusion agendas by not excluding potential talent that do not have the means to study full-time and on-campus. Therefore, future development in enabling program pathways should focus on retaining flexibility whilst applying the principles that make internal, full-time based versions successful.

The findings from this study and others suggest that personal issues/life events, but not demographic factors are significant barriers to student retention. Anecdotally however, it seems that many *OnTrack* students experience personal challenges during the program, but are retained anyway. Therefore, it may be wise to concentrate future efforts on understanding why some students are retained despite their difficulties, as opposed to continuing to focus on why some students leave. This seems particularly relevant at a time when reasons for attrition appear to be well documented and often outside of the control of the institution.

We predict that opportunity for the development of strong peer and tutor-student relationships and community connections are a significant and positive influence on student retention. Therefore, the purposeful cultivation of learning communities in all enabling program models, including those delivered in flexible modes, may be the key to improving the progression of non-traditional students through the enabling program pathway and into undergraduate university studies.

Acknowledgements

References

Andrewartha, L., & Harvey, A. (2014) 'Willing and enabled: The academic outcomes of a tertiary enabling program in regional Australia'. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 54(1), 50.

Bedford, T. (2009) *Beyond our control?: Pre-tertiary bridging program students' perceptions of factors that affect their progress with study.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 3rd National Conference for Enabling Educators: Enabling Pathways, Toowoomba, Australia.

Bennett, A., Hodges, B., Kavanagh, K., Fagan, S., Hartley, J., & Schofield, N. (2013) ''Hard'and 'soft'aspects of learning as investment: Opening up the neo-liberal view of a programme with 'high' levels of attrition'. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 14(3), 141-156.

Bourke, S., Cantwell, R., & Archer, J. (1998) *Evaluation of an equity program for university entrance.* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), Auckland, New Zealand.

Cantwell, R., Archer, J., & Bourke, S. (2001) 'A comparison of the academic experiences and achievement of university students entering by traditional and non-traditional means'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* 26(3), 221-234.

Chesters, J., & Watson, L. (2014) *Diversity and student performance in higher education.* Paper presented at the The 17th International First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) Conference, Darwin, Australia.

Cocks, T., & Stokes, J. (2013) 'Policy into practice: a case study of widening participation in Australian higher education'. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 15(1), 22-38.

Cooper, N., Ellis, B., & Sawyer, J. (2000) *Expanded future opportunities provided by a bridging course at a regional university campus.* Paper presented at the First Year in Higher Education Conference: Creating Futures for a New Millennium, Brisbane.

Crawford, N. (2014) 'Practical and profound: multi-layered benefits of a university enabling program and implications for higher education'. *International Studies in Widening Participation,* 1(2), 15-30.

Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012) Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian Higher Education: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Ellis, B., Cooper, N., & Sawyer, J. (2001) *Bridging Studies: An Alternative Pathway to University for Rural Australians.* Paper presented at the 17th Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) National Conference, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, Australia.

HEPPP. (2014) *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) National Priorities Pool 2014: Enabling programmes for disadvantaged student groups.* Canberra, Australia: Australian Government.

Hodges, B., Bedford, T., Hartley, J., Klinger, C., Murray, N., O'Rourke, J., & Schofield, N. (2013) Enabling retention: processes and strategies for improving student retention in university-based enabling programs: Office for Learning and Teaching, Department of Education, Australian Government.

Johnson, R., & Wichern, D. (2007) *Applied Multivariate Statistical Analysis* (6 ed.). U.S.A: Pearson Prentice Hall.

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.

Klinger, C.M., & Murray, N.L. (2011) 'Access, aspiration and attainment: foundation studies at the University of South Australia'. *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research,* 6, 137-146.

Krause, K.-L. (2005) 'Serious thoughts about dropping out in first year: Trends, patterns and implications for higher education'. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development,* 2(3), 55-68.

Lambrinidis, G. (2014) 'Supporting online, non-traditional students through the introduction of effective e-learning tools in a pre-university tertiary enabling programme'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 36(3), 257-267.

Lomax-Smith, J., Watson, L., & Webster, B. (2011) 'Higher Education Base Funding Review'. *Final report. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.*

Muldoon, R. (2011) 'Tertiary Enabling Education: Removing barriers to higher education'. *Europes Future: Citizenship in a Changing World*, 288-297.

Muldoon, R., & Wijeyewardene, I. (2013) 'The barrier is down but the finishing line recedes for many: improving opportunities and outcomes in enabling education'. *Identities and citizenship education: Controversy, crisis and challenges. London: CiCe*, 302-314.

Tabachnick, B., & Fidell, L. (2007) *Using Multivariate Statistics* (5th ed.). U.S.A: Pearson Education Inc.

Tinto, V. (1997) 'Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence'. *Journal of Higher Education,* 68(6), 599-623.

Tinto, V. (2003) 'Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success'. *Higher Education Monograph Series,* 1(8).

Whannell, P., & Whannell, R. (2013) *Reducing the attrition of tertiary bridging students studying by distance: A practice report.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 1st Foundation and Bridging Educators New Zealand Conference (FABENZ 2012).

Whannell, R. (2013a) 'First-in-family students in a tertiary bridging program'. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 15(3), 6-21.

Whannell, R. (2013b) 'Predictors of Attrition and Achievement in a Tertiary Bridging Program'. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 53(2), 280-301.

Whannell, R., Whannell, P., & Bedford, T. (2013) *Early departure from a tertiary bridging program: What can the institution do?* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 1st Foundation and Bridging Educators New Zealand Conference (FABENZ 2012).

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2011) ''I Feel like I'm Being Hit from All Directions': Enduring the Bombardment as a Mature-age Learner Returning to Formal Learning'. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 51(1), 119.

Willis, S., & Joschko, L. (2012) 'A 'high quality, high access' university that aims to marry excellence and equity'. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 14(1), 8-26.

Appendices

Table A1: *Definitions of student characteristics under study*

Variables	Definition/description
Gender	Male or Female
Age	Student age (in years) at the date of commencing study in *OnTrack*
Low Socioeconomic Standing (SES)	"Low SES postcode measure is based on the students' postcode of permanent home residence upon commencing enrolment, with the SES value derived from the 2011 SEIFA Education and Occupation Index for postal areas, where postal areas in the bottom 25% of the population aged 15-64 being classified as Low SES" (Australian Government, 2013)[1]
First in Family (FIF)	Self-identification as being first in their family to study at university
Rural and remote	Residing postcode at application is categorised in accordance with the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Areas classification 2011 (ABS, 2013)[1]
Non-English Speaking Background (NESB)	"Those who were born overseas and arrived in Australia less than 10 years ago, and who speak a language other than English at home" (Martin, 1994)[1]
Humanitarian Entrant Background (HEB)	Students that hold a permanent Humanitarian visa and provide a copy of this to evidence their eligibility to the *OnTrack* program
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)	Self-identification as being of Indigenous decent
Declared a disability or medical condition	Any disability or medical condition that is reported at time of application to the *OnTrack* program, and supported with documentation
Equity Service support	Students that registered with Equity services at Murdoch University, and that choose to disclose this
Campus of enrolment	*Metropolitan campus:* the largest Murdoch University campus, located in the suburb of Murdoch within the Perth Metropolitan area *Regional campuses:* two campuses located South-West of Perth in the Peel region (Mandurah) and in Rockingham
Highest level of past educational attainment	Highest level of prior education attained by the student, as indicated by educational documents/records submitted by the student during application
Time since last studied	Time (in years) since the student last studied; calculated as the difference between the commencement date in the *OnTrack* program and the completion date of last formal study (according to educational records)

[1] Full reference details:

ABS. (2013) Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure. from Australian Bureau of Statistics http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure

Australian Government, D.o.E. (2013) *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2012 Student Data.* Retrieved from http://education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2012-student-data.

Martin, L. (1994) *Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education.* Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Table A2: *Single associations between independent variables*

Predictor variables	Correlation coefficients[1,2]							
	Prior education	Time since last studied	Gender (female)	Age	ATSI	NESB	HEB	Low SES
Prior education (did not complete secondary school)	N/A	0.305***	0.061**	0.095***	-0.042	-0.048*	-0.021	0.018
Prior education (completed secondary school)	N/A	-0.256***	-0.074**	-0.233***	0.098***	0.037	-0.017	-0.082***
Prior education (TAFE)	N/A	-0.071*	0.020	0.092***	-0.033	-0.041	0.018	0.078***
Prior education (other post-secondary)	N/A	0.067	-0.015	0.048*	0.576***	0.054*	0.070**	0.004
Time since last studied		X	0.099**	0.768***	0.016	-0.067	-0.010	0.038
Gender (female)			X	0.080***	0.002	-0.124***	-0.082***	0.118***
Age				X	0.036	-0.033	-0.007	0.098***
ATSI					X	-0.050*	-0.016	0.058**
NESB						X	0.221***	-0.059**
HEB							X	-0.010
Low SES								X

[1] Point-biserial correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the relationship between dichotomous and continuous variables; phi correlation coefficients for assessing the relationship of dichotomous with other dichotomous variables; and Spearman rho correlation coefficients for assessing the relationship of continuous with other continuous variables. Continuous variables included *age* and *time since last studied*; all other variables were expressed dichotomously.

[2] Significant associations at the 5% level are shaded in grey. P-values not corrected for multiple comparisons, thus exercise discretion in the interpretation of results. Association data not replicated on the bottom left of the table.

* indicates 2-sided p-value <0.05
** indicates 2-sided p-value <0.01
*** indicates 2-sided p-value <0.001

About the Authors

Dr Joanne G Lisciandro is currently employed as a Lecturer in the Centre for University Teaching and Learning, and is one of the coordinators of the *OnTrack* pre-university enabling program at Murdoch University in Western Australia. She has been involved with the program since completing her PhD studies in health science in 2012. Her current research interests focus on science education as part of the curriculum for enabling programs and in understanding the factors that contribute to student retention, success and achievement in enabling program pathways.

Gael Gibbs is currently the Manager of Access Programs at Murdoch University, and was previously employed as a Lecturer in the Centre for University Teaching and Learning and coordinator of the *OnTrack* program between 2011 and 2014. Gael has a long-standing interest in equity, access and social justice that she has pursued through research and both academic and professional appointments.

Contact details

Joanne G. Lisciandro
Gael Gibbs
Centre for University Teaching and Learning
Murdoch University
Perth, Western Australia 6150

Email: j.lisciandro@murdoch.edu.au
*   g.gibbs@murdoch.edu.au*

Staying Power: The effect of pathway into university on student achievement and attrition

Jenny Chesters
Louise Watson

University of Canberra

The expansion of the higher education sector in Australia opened up new pathways into university increasing the diversity of the student population. For non-traditional students, those who did not successfully complete secondary school, barriers to gaining entry into university have been dismantled, however, previous research suggests that non-traditional students are more likely than traditional students to drop out of higher education. This paper analyses administrative data for a cohort of first year undergraduate students attending an Australian university to examine the association between pathway to university and student retention and academic progression. Our findings show that after controlling for grade point average, students who completed an enabling course on campus prior to commencing their undergraduate program were less likely than students admitted on the basis of completing secondary school to discontinue their university studies. This suggests that enabling programs provided on campus may assist students who do not meet the minimum requirements for university entrance to complete a university degree.

Introduction

The expansion of the higher education sector opened up a variety of alternative entry pathways into university, therefore, university study is no longer restricted to young people who have completed secondary school. The availability of government loans to all domestic university students, regardless of their age, allows a relatively broad cross-section of the population to undertake higher education. Consequently, around one-quarter of domestic undergraduate students were aged over 24 years at the time of their enrolment. Although alternative entry pathways have removed many of the barriers to access to university, previous research shows that traditional students are more likely than non-traditional students to complete their degree program (Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006). In this paper, we analyse data from one Australian university to examine the association between pathways into university and achievement and retention. After providing an overview of the context and the results of previous research, we introduce the data before presenting the results of our analysis examining the association between pathway into university and level of academic achievement as measured by grade point average; and pathway into university and the likelihood of discontinuing study.

Higher education in Australia

The Australian higher education sector is dominated by public universities owned by the state governments and funded by the federal government. Domestic students make a contribution to the cost of their tuition via the Australian Government's Higher Education Loan Program (HELP). Currently, HELP loans are interest-free (although the outstanding balance is adjusted to account for inflation on an annual basis) and are repaid via the taxation system once the student's income reaches a designated threshold, which is roughly equivalent to the average graduate entry-level salary. Students from low socio-economic (SES) families and independent students with low incomes are able to access a means-tested scheme of income support. In 2012, around 170,000 undergraduate students were in receipt of this financial assistance (DSS 2013).

The completion of a higher education degree gives university graduates a competitive advantage in the rapidly changing global labour market (Ryan & Watson, 2003). As in most countries, the employment rates and incomes of Australian university graduates are higher than those of non-graduates (Machin & McNally, 2007). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2014, 59 per cent of degree holders were employed on a full-time basis and a further 19.5 per cent were employed on a part-time basis, with only 2.6 per cent unemployed and looking for work and 18.6 per cent not in the labour force. In contrast, of those with no post-school qualification, only 32.4 per cent were employed on a full-time basis, 21 per cent were employed part-time, 4.8 per cent were unemployed and 41.9 per cent were not in the labour force (ABS, 2014). Favorable employment conditions for graduates reflect structural changes in the Australian economy, with employment in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors declining and employment in the services sector expanding (DEEWR, 2012).

To remain competitive in the labour market, many Australian workers return to education to either up-skill or re-skill leading to more diversity in undergraduate student intakes (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Lomax-Smith, Watson & Webster, 2011). Around one quarter of university students are aged 25 years or older (DOE, 2014b) and less than half of all commencing domestic undergraduate students enter on the basis of their secondary school results (Watson, Hagel & Chesters, 2013). Despite this diversity, the financial returns to students who invest in higher education are similar regardless of age at graduation with there being no significant differences in regards to the employment status and earnings of graduates one year after graduation (Chesters & Watson, 2014). Furthermore, the financial benefits of a higher education degree remain relatively high in spite of an increase in the total number of domestic undergraduate students from around 200,000 in 1974 to 700,000 in 2013 (DEETYA, 1996; DOE, 2014b).

Pathways into an Australian university

The traditional pathway into university is the completion of secondary school with sufficiently high grades in qualifying subjects. Due to differences in secondary school systems across the Australian states and territories coupled with the lack of a national curriculum and national

testing at the end of secondary school, universities select students on the basis of their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The ATAR is calculated from an aggregate of a student's scaled marks in 10 units of ATAR eligible courses in senior secondary school (UAC, 2011).

To meet the needs of prospective students with low or no ATARs, most Australian universities offer enabling programs, also known as preparatory, foundation or bridging programs, for applicants deemed inadequately prepared for university studies (Palmer, Bexley & James, 2011). As Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Klinger, Murray, O'Rourke and Schofield (2013) point out, enabling programs provide a second chance for entry into higher education. An enabling program is 'a course of instruction provided to a person for the purpose of enabling the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award' (Australian Government, 2012 p. 26). The Federal Government provides funding for enabling programs via the Commonwealth Grants Scheme and students are not required to make any contribution to the cost of tuition, although they may have to purchase course materials and/or pay service fees (Hodges et al. 2013; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). Research conducted by Andrewartha and Harvey (2014) showed that La Trobe University's enabling program was successful in attracting under-represented groups with 86 per cent of students being mature-age and 80 per cent being first in family students. Indigenous people and refugees were also over-represented in the enabling program intake. Generally, enabling programs seek to provide students with opportunities to develop academic skills in discipline-focused subjects (Thomas, 2014). These skills include: 'critical thinking, academic writing, researching, referencing, paraphrasing and literacy skills' (Hodges et al., 2013, p. 16). Research shows that around 50 to 55 per cent of students graduate from these programs, thus qualifying for entry into university (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014; Hodges et al., 2013; Whannell, 2013). Whannell (2013) found that older participants were more likely than younger students to complete their program and that being first in family, prior level of schooling and gender had no effect.

Students may also gain entry into university on the basis of their post-school qualifications. Research conducted by Watson, Hagel and Chesters (2013) shows that almost one quarter of all commencing Australian undergraduates are admitted on the basis of a higher

education qualification and around 10 per cent are admitted on the basis of completing a vocational education and training (VET) award. VET awards are qualifications classified under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (AQFC, 2013) ranging from a Certificate I (AQF level 1) through to an Advanced Diploma (AQF level 6). The likelihood of a VET award holder commencing university studies increases with the level of VET qualification. For example, in the year following completion of a VET award, 16 per cent of Diploma/Advanced Diploma graduates were studying at university compared to eight per cent of Certificate IV graduates and five per cent of VET completers holding Certificates II and III (Watson et al., 2013).

Although previous research indicates that students admitted to university on the basis of VET awards are more likely to be low SES and/or be the first in their family to study at university (Cattarall, Munro & Fisher, 2014), they are not a homogeneous social group. They include older people who obtained their VET award some time ago, as well as younger people in their 20s who have completed trade qualifications at advanced levels. Students admitted on the basis of a VET award can also be recent Year 12 completers whose ATAR was not high enough for them to gain entry to the university program of their choice, and who then completed a one-year VET Diploma as a bridging course to gain admission to university. While some Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualifications are designed as bridging qualifications between the VET and higher education sectors, not all VET qualifications at this level serve this purpose. Typically, the focus of VET courses is work-readiness rather than building theoretical knowledge and abstract cognitive skills (Moodie &Wheelahan, 2009), therefore, many VET courses do not purposefully equip students with the skills to engage with higher education. Consequently, students may not have developed their 'reasoned student voice' and may struggle to transition into being 'critical learners' (Cattarall et al., 2014, p. 252).

Students may also be admitted on the basis of their age (over 21 years) or their professional qualifications or experience deemed relevant to university studies (mature age/other basis). Around one fifth (21%) of all commencing undergraduates are admitted via these pathways (Watson et al., 2013). The development of alternative pathways into university has widened participation and provided access to higher education to

a broader cross-section of the population. As Harrison and Hatt (2010, p. 69) note, 'widening participation is about extending the opportunity to enter higher education to those who have the potential'. However, supporting the participation of students from diverse backgrounds in higher education involves more than simply removing barriers to entry, it also involves changing institutional policies and practices so that individuals from a wider variety of social groups are supported to engage with university studies (Seller & Gale, 2011). Forms of social support and initiatives that give students a 'sense of belonging' are now recognized as important factors in student retention (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Wilcox, Wynn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Differences in student participation and retention

Although the Australian higher education system is one of the most inclusive in the world in terms of the age distribution of its student population (Ederer, Schuller & Willm, 2008), disparities in participation rates between social groups persist (Cardak & Ryan, 2009; DOE, 2014a). For example, only 17 per cent of undergraduate university students who entered university in 2013 were from the lowest socio-economic quartile (DOE, 2014b). Researchers have also found evidence of the under-representation of students from low SES families in the United Kingdom (Blanden & Machin, 2004; Harrison & Hatt, 2010; Simister, 2011), Europe (Breen, Muller, Luijkx and Pollak, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008) and the United States (Douglass & Thomson, 2011). Previous Australian research also shows that low SES students are less likely to graduate from university (Cardak & Ryan, 2009; Chesters & Watson, 2013; Edwards & McMillan, 2015). For example, Edwards and McMillan (2015, p. 13) found that of the students who commenced their studies in 2005, 69 per cent of students from low SES families completed their bachelor degree programs by 2013 compared to 78 per cent of students from high SES families.

As Thomas (2014) notes, students from low SES backgrounds have access to fewer resources, receive less encouragement from their families, have fewer positive educational experiences, have lower entrance scores and are more likely to experience alienation. Furthermore, they are more likely than their high-SES peers to be the first in their family to attend university and thus may experience some

difficulty adjusting to university culture and expectations (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Ellis, 2013; Kezar, 2011). In an effort to counteract some of these factors, the Australian Government introduced the Higher Education Participation Partnerships Program (HEPPP) in 2010 to fund the development of initiatives aimed at improving access for students from low SES backgrounds and the development of programs to improve their retention and completion rates (Hodges et al. 2013; Thomas, 2014).

Studies of student progression suggest that of the students who were admitted on the basis of an ATAR from their senior secondary school studies, those with high ATARs were more likely to complete a degree than those with a low ATARs (Dobson & Skuja 2005; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Lomax-Smith et al. 2011; Marks, 2007). Marks (2007) analysed data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) and concluded that ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Education Rank) scores, the predecessor of the ATAR, were the strongest predictor of whether or not students completed their degree program. Almost 95 per cent of students with scores above 90 completed compared to just 73 per cent of students with scores between 60 and 69 (Marks, 2007). Dobson and Skuja (2005) found that ENTER scores were a reliable predictor of attainment at university, particularly for students enrolled in engineering, agriculture or science degrees.

Previous research shows that undergraduate students admitted on a basis *other than* the completion of secondary school are more at risk of discontinuing their studies (Long et al., 2006). The Long et al. (2006) study shows that students with an apprenticeship, trade, vocational or other qualification were almost twice as likely (24.4 %) to drop out in their first year of studying for a bachelor degree than the average for all students (13.7 %). Other research shows that students admitted on the basis of a VET award were more likely to make a successful transition into higher education if their pathway was created and supported by providers in both sectors (Cram & Watson, 2008; Walls & Pardy, 2010). Levy and Murray (2005) argue that the provision of enabling programs can assist at risk students to become successful tertiary students. Lomax-Smith et al. (2011, p. 124) found that for students with a low ATAR (below 40), the completion of an enabling program concurrently with undergraduate studies was associated with a slightly higher retention rate

(86% compared to 82%). As O'Keefe, Lavan and Burgess (2011) argue, non-completion of a degree program may result from a variety of factors including there being a mismatch between the student's expectations and experiences. In many cases, students who did not gain admission into their first choice of degree program or who changed their career plans continued their studies in a different program or at a different university (see also Christie et al., 2004).

In this paper, we examine the association between pathways into university and subsequent retention and achievement for a cohort of students attending a small metropolitan university in Australia. Using institutional data, we categorise the commencing cohort into seven pathways reflecting the basis of their admission to university, two of which are enabling programs. In this university, prospective students who do not meet the minimum requirements for admission, including those with low ATARs, are offered places in the on-campus enabling program. The successful completion of this program then becomes the basis for admission to an undergraduate degree.

Methodology

This study draws on de-identified individual-level university administrative data for one cohort of domestic undergraduate students who commenced their first bachelor degree program in the first semester of 2007 (n=1738). Students beginning their honours year in 2007 or education students enrolled in graduate entry courses on the basis that they had previously completed a bachelor degree were excluded. All analyses are performed in Stata 12 (StataCorp, 2011). The key variables of interest are the student's pathway into university, academic achievement and progress. The control variables are: sex; birth cohort; socio-economic status (SES); and grade point average (GPA) at the end of 2008.

The pathway variable is derived from information on each student's basis of admission to university, their previous highest level of education and their previous educational institution. This variable has seven categories: completed Year 12 at secondary school; completed Year 12 at another institution such as a VET provider; completed a VET Certificate Levels I -IV; completed a higher education or VET diploma/advanced diploma; completed the university's on-campus enabling program;

completed an enabling program at another institution; and mature-age / other basis. In 2006, this university offered two types of on-campus enabling programs for students who did not meet the minimum requirements for admission to an undergraduate degree program: a 14 week course and a 22 week course. The 22 week course is an extended version of the 14 week course and is delivered at a slower pace for students with the lowest levels of educational attainment.

Sex is coded 0 for male and 1 for female and is included to control for the effects of the over-representation of females in the student population. The birth cohort variable has five categories based on the year of birth: before 1971; 1971-1975; 1976-1980; 1981-1985; and 1986-1990. Although traditional university students tend to commence their studies within two years of graduating from secondary school, non-traditional students return to education and undertake university studies at various stages of the life course. The socio-economic status variable is based on the Socio-Economic Index For Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage/Disadvantage for 2006 and is derived from the postcode of the student's home address at the time of enrolment. The SEIFA index is compiled by the ABS using information such as income, occupation and levels of education as markers of relative advantage/ disadvantage in a geographical area (ABS, 2006). Although this is not an ideal measure of individual socio-economic status, measures typically used to derive individual socio-economic status such as parents' educational attainment, occupational status and income are not available in these data. We recode the SEIFA values into three groups: low= deciles 1, 2 and 3; mid = deciles 4, 5, 6 and 7; and high = deciles 8, 9 and 10. The descriptive statistics are provided in Table A.1 in the Appendix

The GPA variable refers to the student's grade point average for all semesters in 2007 and 2008. Students receive a grade of between 0 and 7 for each unit completed. Zero indicates that the student did not submit any assessment items, 4 indicates that the student passed the unit and 7 indicates that the student received the highest grade possible. We calculate the GPA by adding the final grades received for each unit and dividing the total by the number of units completed.

We use a proxy measure of course attrition based on enrolment and unit completion data. If a student who commenced study in semester 1 in 2007 had not enrolled in semester 2 in 2008 and semester 1 in 2009

and had not completed 24 units, they were deemed to have discontinued their studies. Undergraduate students may enroll in units of study in different patterns, depending on their course of study, course load (ie. full-time or part-time) and individual preference. A full-time student load is four units per semester and most undergraduate units are equivalent to 3 credit points. For this cohort of students, the university offered some units in summer and winter terms in addition to the two standard semesters. Although there is no consistent point in time when students complete their undergraduate degree, the completion of 24 units usually signals the completion of a three year program, such as Arts, and the completion of 30 units signals the completion of a four year degree program, such as Education.

Characteristics of commencing students

The seven pathways for students in the 2007 commencing cohort are displayed in Table 1. Over half of the students entered via Year 12 pathways (51% at school and 4% at another institution), 18 per cent entered via VET pathways (7% with a diploma and 11% with a certificate) and six per cent entered via the mature age/ other pathway. Sixteen per cent of students entered after completing an enabling course offered by the university on campus and a further six per cent had completed an enabling course offered by other providers.

Table 1: *Percentage of commencing students entering by each pathway to university*

Pathway	n=1738	Per cent
Year 12 completion at school	879	51
Year 12 completion at non-school institution	63	4
VET certificate	126	7
VET diploma	189	11
Enabling program on Campus	281	16
Other Enabling program	104	6
Mature age/ Other	96	6

To examine the association between pathways and sex, birth cohort and SES, we recode the pathways into four broad groups: Year 12 school completers; VET award holders; students who completed an enabling

program on campus and students admitted on all other bases. The descriptive statistics presented in Table 2 show that female students were slightly more likely than male students to have entered university via a Year 12 pathway. Pathway into university varied substantially according to birth cohort with the older cohorts being more likely to take advantage of the non-traditional pathways than the traditional pathway. Just four per cent of those born before 1971 entered university after completing Year 12 at school whereas, almost three-quarters of students born after 1985 were admitted via this traditional pathway. Over 40 per cent of those born before 1971 entered via a VET pathway compared to just 14 per cent of those born after 1985. Almost 70 per cent of the 109 students from low SES backgrounds entered university after completing Year 12 compared to less than half of the 1134 students from high SES backgrounds.

Table 2: *Selected characteristics of commencing students by pathway into university [row percent]*

| Characteristic	n=1738	Year 12 school completers	VET	On-campus enabling program	Other
		%	%	%	%
Male	670	49	23	17	12
Female	1068	52	21	16	11
Birth Cohort					
<1971	120	4	43	15	38
1971-1975	58	12	34	28	26
1976-1980	102	14	28	25	33
1981-1985	420	23	32	27	18
1986-1990	1038	73	14	11	3
SES					
Low	109	69	16	5	11
Medium	485	61	19	10	9
High	1134	44	23	20	13
Missing	10	40	50	10	0

Note: the VET category includes Year 12 at a non-school institution/ VET certificate/ VET diploma; the 'Other' category includes: other enabling/ mature age/other

In the next section, we examine levels of academic achievement according to pathway into university, before examining attrition rates and the association between pathway and attrition.

Academic achievement

The distribution of GPA scores varied according to pathway into university. For example, almost one-third (31%) of students who entered university via the mature-age / other pathway recorded a GPA of 3 or less; one -third recorded a GPA of 4; 27 per cent recorded a GPA of 5; and less than 10 per cent recoded a GPA of 6 or more. Of those who entered via a Year 12 pathway, 18 per cent recorded a GPA of 3 or less; 44.5 per cent recorded a GPA of 4; 32 per cent recorded a GPA of 5; and 5.5 per cent recorded a GPA of 6 or more. The chart in Figure 1 compares the distribution of GPAs for each pathway into university.

Figure 1: *GPA band by pathway into university*
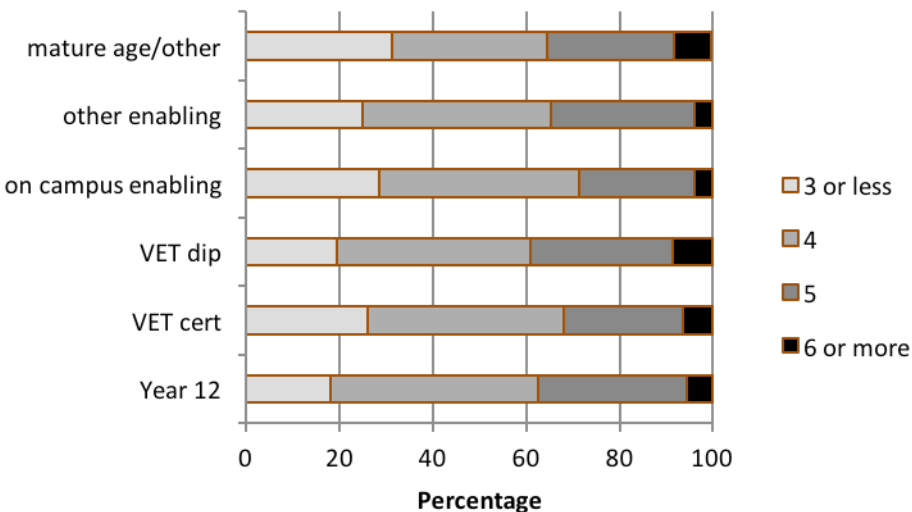
To examine the association between pathway into university and academic achievement, we conducted a simple linear regression selecting the Year 12 at school pathway as the reference category. The average GPA of students who entered university after completing Year 12 at school was 4.68. The coefficients for students who entered via the

VET pathway (-0.27), the on campus enabling pathway (-0.23) and the other enabling pathway (-0.21) are statistically significant indicating that, on average, the GPAs of these students were lower than that of the reference group (those who completed Year 12 at school). The average GPA for students who entered via the VET pathway was 4.41, the average GPA for students who entered via the on campus enabling pathway was 4.45 and the average GPA for students who entered via the other enabling pathway was 4.47.

Table 3: *Regression coefficients for GPA according to pathway into university*

Pathway	coefficient	Standard error
Year 12 at school (reference category)		
Year 12 at other institution	0.01	0.12
VET Certificate	-0.27**	0.09
VET Diploma	-0.04	0.08
On campus enabling program	-0.23***	0.06
Other enabling program	-0.21*	0.10
Mature age/other	-0.14	0.10
Constant	4.68***	0.03

***$p<0.001$; **$p<0.01$; *$p<0.05$

Students who discontinue their studies

Previous research shows that some groups of students are more likely than others to discontinue their studies (Cardak & Ryan, 2009; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; McMillan, 2005), therefore we next examine the characteristics of students who discontinued their studies. The descriptive statistics provided in Table 4 show that male and female students were equally as likely to discontinue their studies (23%). Older students were much more likely to discontinue their studies than younger students, with 40 per cent of those born before 1971; 28 per cent of those born between 1971 and 1975 and 30 per cent of those born between 1976 and 1980 discontinuing study compared to 19 per cent of those born between 1986 and 1990. High SES students (25%) were slightly more likely to discontinue their studies than low or mid SES students (23%). Students who entered via the on-campus enabling

program pathway were the least likely to discontinue their studies (19%) and students who entered via the mature-age/other pathways were the most likely to discontinue their studies (38%). Forty-five per cent of students with a GPA of 3 or less discontinued their studies compared to 18 per cent of those with a GPA of 4; 14 per cent of those with a GPA of 5 and 21 per cent of those with a GPA of 6 or more.

Table 4: *Percentages of students who discontinued their studies by selected characteristics*

	n=1738	**% discontinued**
Male	670	23
Female	1068	23
Birth cohort		
<1971	120	40
1971-1975	58	28
1976-1980	102	30
1981-1985	424	27
1986-1990	1038	19
SES		
High	1134	23
Mid	485	23
Low	109	25
Pathway		
Year12 at school	879	20
Year12 at other institution	63	25
VET Certificate	126	27
VET Diploma	189	28
On-campus enabling program	281	19
Other enabling program	104	32
Mature age/ Other	96	38
GPA		
3 or less	375	45
4	744	18
5	518	14
6 or more	102	21

To disentangle the effects of pathway, sex, birth cohort and GPA, we conduct logistic regression analyses to estimate the odds ratios for discontinuing study. Odds ratios represent the change in the likelihood of discontinuing study relative to continuing study. An increase in the likelihood of discontinuing study is indicated by an odds ratio of greater than 1 whereas a decrease in the likelihood of discontinuing study is indicated by an odds ratio of less than 1. In Model 1 we include pathway into university, sex and birth cohort to examine the effects of these variables on the likelihood of discontinuing study. We select the on-campus enabling program pathway as the reference category for pathway to examine whether students who complete the on-campus enabling program are more or less likely to discontinue their studies than traditional students or those entering via any of the other non-traditional pathways. The on-campus enabling program is designed to prepare students for direct entry into an undergraduate degree program. In Model 2, we add in GPA to examine whether GPA mediates the relationships between discontinuing study and pathway into university, sex and birth cohort. The second model explains nine per cent of the variation. Unfortunately, factors that may affect a student's decision to discontinue their studies such as marital status, number of dependent children, income, welfare dependency, employment status, usual weekly hours of paid employment, and satisfaction with the university are not available in this administrative data set, therefore, we are unable to improve the goodness of fit. The results of the two models are presented in Table 5.

The results of Model 1 indicate that Year 12 school completers, those who entered university via the VET diploma pathway or the mature-age/other pathway were more likely than students who entered university via the on-campus enabling program pathway to discontinue their studies, net of the effects of sex and birth cohort. Birth cohort has an independent effect with older students (except for those born between 1971 and 1975) being more likely to discontinue their studies than those born between 1986 and 1990. The results for Model 2 show that after controlling for GPA, students who entered via each of the other pathways, apart from the VET certificate pathway, were more likely than students who entered via the on-campus enabling program pathway to discontinue their studies, net of the effects of sex and birth cohort. Students admitted on the basis of Year 12 completion at school were 1.7

times more likely than students from the on-campus enabling program with the same GPA to discontinue their studies. As expected, as GPA increased, the likelihood of discontinuing study decreased. Students in the oldest cohort were more 2.6 times more likely than those in the youngest cohort to discontinue their studies, net of the effects of GPA, pathway and sex.

Table 5: *Estimated odds ratios for discontinuing study according to pathway, controlling for sex, birth cohort and GPA*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Odds ratios	Std err	Odds Ratios	Std err
Pathway				
On-campus enabling program (ref.)				
Yr12 at school	1.47*	0.28	1.73**	0.34
Yr12 other institution	1.92	0.64	2.40*	0.83
VET certificate	1.40	0.36	1.53	0.41
VET diploma	1.64*	0.37	1.98**	0.48
Other enabling	1.67	0.45	1.88*	0.53
Mature age/other	2.28**	0.61	2.48***	0.69
Female =1	1.02	0.12	1.21	0.15
Birth cohort				
1986-1990 (ref.)				
1981-1985	1.63**	0.26	1.61**	0.26
1976-1980	1.84*	0.46	1.63	0.43
1971-1975	1.63	0.53	1.54	0.51
<1971	2.71***	0.64	2.64***	0.65
GPA			0.24***	0.03
Constant	0.57***	0.08	0.35***	0.07
n=	1738		1738	
Pseudo R2	0.0258		0.0861	

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Discussion

In this paper, we examined the relationship between pathway into university and academic progress to understand the influence of widening participation on student performance. The availability of alternative pathways into university increased both the size and the diversity of student populations giving rise to concerns about the academic ability of students and the ability of the higher education system to maintain high standards (Christie et al., 2004; Hare, 2014; Mather, 2013), therefore, this examination of higher education access and outcomes is timely. Our study focused on whether the characteristics and outcomes of students who undertook an on-campus enabling program offered by a small metropolitan university differed from those of traditional students (that is, students who entered university on the basis of their ATAR).

At this particular university, 51 per cent of the students were admitted to their degree programs on the basis of their ATARs and 16 per cent were admitted after completing an on-campus enabling program. Female students were slightly more likely than male students to have completed Year 12 but there was almost no difference in the percentages of male and female students who completed an on-campus enabling program (17% and 16%, respectively). As expected, younger students were more likely than older students to enter university on their Year 12 results. Almost three-quarters of the students born between 1986 and 1990 were admitted on the basis of their Year 12 results whereas just four per cent of those born before 1971 were admitted on the basis of their Year 12 results.

The average GPA of students differed according to pathway into university with those admitted on the basis of completing Year 12 at school recording higher, on average, GPAs than students who entered university via each of the alternative pathways. Students who entered after completing a VET certificate recorded the lowest, on average, GPA. The average GPA (4.47) of the students who had completed an on-campus enabling program was 0.21 points lower than that of traditional students.

Descriptive analysis indicated that the likelihood of discontinuing study was associated with pathway, age and GPA. Just under one-quarter (23%) of the students discontinued their studies between the second semester of 2007 and the first semester of 2009. As predicted by previous research, we found that older students were more likely than younger students to

discontinue their studies. Previous researchers have also found higher rates of attrition for mature age students (Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Long et al., 2006). The likelihood of discontinuing study also varied according to pathway into university with almost 40 per cent of students who entered via the mature-age/other pathway discontinuing their studies compared to 19 per cent of those who completed an on-campus enabling program. Students who entered university via the VET certificate, VET diploma or other enabling programs were also more likely to discontinue their studies (27%, 28% and 32%, respectively). One explanation of the higher rates of attrition for students entering university via VET pathways may be related to differences in teaching styles and assessment procedures (Moodie & Wheelahan, 2009; Moodie et al., 2009; Watson et al., 2013). In the VET sector, students need to demonstrate competence whereas at university, students need to articulate their understanding of abstract concepts. Almost half of the students with a GPA of 3 or lower discontinued their studies compared to just 14 per cent of those with a GPA of 5. Due to data limitations, we were unable to examine the effects of other factors, such as family background, financial status, cultural differences, employment status, hours of paid work and family responsibilities that previous research indicates are associated with discontinuation of study (Christie et al., 2004; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; James, 2008; Marks, 2007; Wilcoxson, 2010)

Given that previous research shows that sex, age, pathway into university and GPA and graduation from university are correlated (Christie et al., 2004), we conducted logistic regression analysis to isolate the effects of each of these variables on the likelihood of discontinuing study. After controlling for the effects of age, sex, and GPA, traditional students (Year 12 school completers) were 1.7 times more likely to discontinue their studies than students who had completed the university's enabling course and students who entered university via the mature age/ other pathway were 2.5 times more likely than those who entered via the on-campus enabling program to discontinue their studies. Thomas (2014) found that enabling program graduates performed just as well as those who entered via the traditional pathway.

Our results suggest that on-campus enabling programs play a role in supporting the retention of students. As Habal (2012) argues, preparation programs increase self-efficacy, providing students with the confidence

and skills to persist even if they record low levels of achievement. The main reason that students undertake an enabling program at this particular university is because they do not qualify for entry to an undergraduate degree, either because their ATAR was too low or they did not have an ATAR. Typically, between 75 and 80 per cent of school leavers and 50 and 60 per cent of mature age students who enrol in the on-campus enabling programs at this university successfully complete and are admitted into an undergraduate degree program (London, 2014). Andrewartha and Harvey (2014) found that although the completion rate for enabling programs at La Trobe University was 65 per cent, only 55 per cent of students passed the four subjects required for admission into an undergraduate degree program. Although enabling programs are principally designed to prepare students for university study, they also allow students to sample the demands and expectations of university study before they commit to the costs associated with an undergraduate program (Hodges et al., 2013).

As reviews of existing literature show, feelings of alienation within the university environment are a key factor in decisions to discontinue study at university (Christie et al., 2004; Thomas, 2014; Wilcoxson, 2010). Therefore, it may be that by participating in the on-campus enabling program, students become very familiar with most aspects of university life and have opportunities to become socially engaged and committed to the university before they commence undergraduate studies (Wilcoxson, 2010).

Conclusion

Given that the completion of higher levels of education is an increasingly important prerequisite for lifetime employment in Australia's rapidly changing labour market, encouraging an increasing proportion of the population to undertake higher education has become an economic necessity. The expansion of the higher education sector and the development of alternative entry pathways have resulted in an increasingly diverse student population. Students who embark on university study as non-traditional students have the option to undertake a free enabling program to prepare them for their studies. The results presented here show that although entering university via the on-campus enabling program is associated with a lower GPA, it is nonetheless associated with increased staying power.

References

Andrewartha, L. & Harvey, A. (2014). Willing and enabled: The academic outcomes of a tertiary enabling program in regional Australia. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 54(1), 50-68.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2006). *Introduction to Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) Information Paper*. Retrieved from www.abs. gov.au

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2014). *Education and Work, Australia*. Cat. No. 6227.0. Retrieved from www.abs.gov.au

Australian Government. (2012). *Administrative Information for Higher Education Providers: Student Support*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC). (2013). *Australian Qualifications Framework Second edition*. Retrieved from *http://www.aqf. edu.au/Portals/0/Documents/2013%20docs/AQF%202nd%20Edition%20 January%202013.pdf*

Blanden, J. & Machin, S. (2004). Educational Inequality and the Expansion of UK Higher Education. *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 51(2), 230-249.

Bradley, D., Noonan P., Nugent, H. & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education. Final Report*. December. Retrieved from http://www. deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20 Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf

Breen, R., Muller, W., Luijkx, R. & Pollak, R. (2009). Non-Persistent Inequality in Educational Attainment: Evidence from Eight European Countries. *American Journal of Sociology* 114(5), 1475-1521.

Brooman, S. & Darwent, S. (2014). Measuring the beginning: a quantitative study of the transition to higher education. *Studies in Higher Education* 39(9), 1523-154.

Cardak, B. A., & Ryan, C. (2009). Participation in higher education in Australia: equity and access. *Economic Record* 85(4), 433-448.

Cattarall, J., Davis, J. &Yang, D.F. (2014). Facilitating the learning journey from vocational education and training to higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development* 33(2), 242-255.

Chesters, J. & Watson, L. (2013). Understanding the persistence of inequality in higher education: Evidence from Australia. *Journal of Education* 28(2), 198 – 215.

Chesters, J. & Watson L. (2014). Returns to education for those returning to education: evidence from Australia. *Studies in Higher Education* 39(9), 1634 -1648.

Christie, H., Munro, M. & Fisher, T. (2004). Leaving university early: exploring

the differences between continuing and non-continuing students. *Studies in Higher Education* 29(5), 617- 636.

Cram, B. & Watson, L. (2008). Managing credit transfer from TAFE to university: the case for cross-sectoral collaboration. Paper presented at the *Eleventh Australian VET Research Association Conference*, 3-5 April, Adelaide.

Department of Education (DOE). (2014a). *Table 2.6 Higher Education Statistics 2013 All students*. Retrieved from http://docs.education.gov.au/node/35961.

Department of Education (DOE). (2014b). Appendix 5.1: Equity - Access Rates for Table A and B Higher Education Providers, 2007 to 2013. Retrieved from http://docs.education.gov.au/documents/2013-appendix-5-equity-performance-data.

Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA). (1996). *Higher education students time series tables Australia.* October 1996. Canberra: Australian Government.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2012). *Australian Jobs 2012*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Department of Social Services (DSS) (2013). *Income Support Customers: A Statistical Overview 2012*. Statistical Paper No. 11. Retrieved from www.dss. gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2014/sp11_pdf_na.pdf.

Dobson, I.R. & Skuja, E. (2005). Secondary schooling, tertiary entrance ranks and university performance. *People and Place* 13(1), 53-62.

Douglass, J. & Thomson, G. (2011). Poor and Rich: Students Economic Stratification and Academic Performance in a Public Research University System. *Higher Education Quarterly* 66(1), 65-89.

Ederer, P., Schuller, P. & Willm, S. (2008). *University systems ranking: Citizens and society in the age of knowledge*. The Lisbon Council Policy Brief. Retrieved from http://www.lisboncouncil.net/publication/publication/38-university-systems-ranking-citizens-and-society-in-the-age-of-knowledge. html

Edwards, D. & McMillan, J. (2015). *Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?* Melbourne: ACER

Ellis, B.J. (2013). Older undergraduate students bringing years of experience to university studies: Highlights, challenges and contributions', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 53(3): 351- 374

Habal, C. (2012). 'I can do it, and how!' Student experience in access and equity pathways to higher education *Higher Education Research and Development,* 31(6): 811-825

Hare, J. (2014). Reform call as uni takes low achievers, *The Australian*. 18 January.

Harrison, N. & Hatt, S. (2010). 'Disadvantaged Learners': Who Are We

Targeting? Understanding the Targeting of Widening Participation Activity in the United Kingdom Using Geo-Demographic Data From Southwest England. *Higher Education Quarterly* 64(1), 65-88.

Hodges, B., Bedford, T., Hartley, J., Klinger, C., Murray, N., O'Rourke, J. and Schofield, N. (2013). *Enabling retention: processes and strategies for improving student retention in university-based enabling programs*. Sydney: Office for Learning and Teaching.

James, R. (2008). *Participation and Equity*. Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education

Kezar, A. (Ed.) (2011). *Recognising and serving low income students in higher education: An examination of institutional policies, practices and culture*. New York and London: Routledge.

Levy, S. & Murray, J. (2005). *Tertiary Entrance Scores Need Not Determine Academic Success: An Analysis of Student Performance in an Equity and Access Program*. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management 27(1), 129-141.

Lomax-Smith, J., Watson, L. & Webster, B. (2011). *Higher Education Base Funding Review. Final Report*. Retrieved from www.deewr.gov/BaseFundingReview

London, G. (2014). private correspondence from the CEO of University of Canberra College

Long, M., Ferrier, F. & Heagney, M. (2006). *Stay, play or give it away? Students continuing, changing or leaving university study in their first year*, Monash University: ACER. Retrieved from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/stay_play_giveaway.htm

Machin, S. & McNally, S. (2007). *Tertiary Education Systems and Labour Markets*. A paper commissioned by the Education and Training Policy Division, OECD. Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Marks, G. (2007). *Completing university: characteristics and outcomes of completing and noncompleting students*. LSAY Research Report No. 51. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research Retrieved from http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1054&context=lsay_research

Mather, J. (2013). Unis put on notice over accepting low-scoring students. *The Australian Financial Review,* 3 July.

Moodie, G. & Wheelahan, L. (2009). The significance of Australian Vocational Institutions in opening access to higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly* 63(4), 356-370.

Moodie, G. Wheelahan, L., Billett, S. and Kelly, A. (2009). 'Higher Education in TAFE: An issues paper'. NCVER URL http://www.ncver.edu.au/

O'Keefe, M., Laven, G. & Burgess, T. (2011). Student non-completion of an undergraduate degree: wrong program selection or part of a career plan? *Higher Education Research and Development,* 30(2), 165-177.

Palmer, N., Bexley, E. & James, R. (2011). *Selection and Participation in Higher Education. University selection in support of student success and diversity of participation.* Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne. Retrieved from https://go8.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/selection_and_participation_in_higher_education.pdf

Pfeffer, F.T. (2008). Persistent Inequality in Educational Attainment and its Institutional Context. *European Sociological Review* 24(5), 543-565.

Ryan, C. & Watson, L. (2003). *Skills at work: lifelong learning and changes in the labour market,* Evaluations and Investigations Program no. 03/14, Canberra: DEST. Retrieved from http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/101291.

Sellar, S., & Gale, T. (2011). Mobility, aspiration, voice: a new structure of feeling for student equity in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education* 52(2), 115-134.

Simister, J. (2011). Elitism and Meritocracy in UK Universities: The UK Needs Investment in its Labour Force. *Higher Education Quarterly* 65(2), 113-144.

StataCorp. (2011). Stata Statistical Software: Release 12. College Station, TX: StataCorp LP.

Thomas, G. (2014). Closing the policy-practice gap for low SES students in higher education: the pedagogical challenge. *Higher Education Research & Development* 33(4), 807-820.

Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) (2011). Retrieved from http://www.uac.edu.au/

Walls, S. & Pardy, J. (2010). *Crediting vocational education and training for learner mobility.* Adelaide: NCVER. Retrieved from www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2249.html

Watson, L., Hagel, P. & Chesters, J. (2013). *The half-open door- pathways for VET award-holders into Australian universities.* National Vocational Education and Training Research Programme Research Report, Adelaide: NCVER

Whannell, R. (2013). *Predictors of Attrition and achievement in a tertiary bridging program.* Australian Journal of Adult Learning 53(2), 281-300.

Wilcox, P., Winn, S. & Fyvie Gauld, M. (2005). It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people: The role of social support in the first year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education* 30(6), 707-722.

Wilcoxson, L. (2010). Factors affecting intention to leave in the first, second and third year of university studies: a semester-by-semester investigation. *Higher Education Research & Development* 29(6), 623-639.

Appendix

Table A.1: *Descriptive statistics*

	n=1738	Per cent
Pathway		
Year 12 at school	879	51
Year 12 other	63	4
VET cert	126	7
VET dip	189	11
On-campus enabling	281	16
Other enabling	104	6
Mature age/other	96	5
Sex		
Male	670	39
Female	1068	61
Birth cohort		
<1971	120	7
1971-1975	58	3
1976-1980	102	6
1981-1985	420	24
1986-1990	1038	60
SES		
Low	109	6
Medium	485	28
High	1134	66

About the Authors

Dr Jenny Chesters completed her PhD at the University of Queensland in 2009. She is currently employed as a Research Fellow at the University of Canberra. Her research interests include transitions between school and post-school study and / or employment; and the persistence of inequality in educational attainment.

Professor Louise Watson is an education policy researcher and the Director of the Education Institute, University of Canberra. Professor Watson undertakes research for state and federal education departments and Non-Government Organisations. She is a member of several public policy committees, including the expert panel that conducted the Base Funding for Higher Education Review (2011).

Contact details

Jenny Chesters
ESTeM Faculty,
University of Canberra
Canberra, ACT 2601

Email: jenny.chesters@canberra.edu.au

The juxtaposition of STEPS to the undergraduate arena: The lived experience of transitioning into undergraduate study

Trixie James

Central Queensland University

Australia wide, universities are offering tertiary education to the broader socio-economic cohort; however, alongside this educational reform, there is a concern that students who have been away from the formal education context for many years may not cope with the rigors of university. Consequently, prior to and conditional to admission to undergraduate studies, many universities have placed a greater emphasis on pre-skilling such students through pre-university programs known interchangeably as Enabling, Preparatory, Transition or Access programs. The research findings reported on in this article explore the lived experiences of eight first year undergraduate students, who upon the completion of an Enabling program, successfully articulated into and completed the first year of their university degree. Using a theoretical framework of social-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and the application of existential phenomenology, commonalities in these experiences of the participants emerged. Four key themes were: (i) a sense of preparedness, (ii) fear of the unknown, (iii) university as an anchor, and (iv) a sense of certainty and rightness. In combination, the degree of self-efficacy demonstrated

by each of the eight students can be said to have contributed to the successful completion of their first year of undergraduate studies.

Keywords: *Enabling programs; adult education; transitioning; university; self-efficacy; regional campus.*

Introduction

The Australian Government's vision of a stronger and fairer Australia is based on the premise that higher education is integral to achieving a more advanced knowledge society. This become more prominent as a result of the Bradley Review in 2008 (Bradley et.al., 2008) when it was revealed that the current university sector needed to re-evaluate its role within Australian society if it was to continue to be a leader in the world. This was prefaced by Brendan Nelson (2001., cited in Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2002, p. 18), former opposition leader, who stated "the kind of Australia in which the next generation will live, to a large extent will depend on Australia's institutions of higher learning – universities." The government set a target to reform the Australian higher education sector over a ten year period, and as part of its commitment to securing national long term economic prosperity, committed to skilling and educating Australia's workforce (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. x. In addition, they set targets for increased participation rates of low socio economic students (LSES) and groups previously under-represented (DEEWR, 2009, p. x. However, this introduced a range of issues to be identified and rectified in order for universities to be all-inclusive. In the past decade, Australia has experienced an increase in the number of mature age students to higher education consisting of both school leavers and increasing numbers of mature age students from diverse educational, cultural and work based backgrounds (Henderson, Noble & De George-Walker, 2009; Burton, Taylor, Dowling & Lawrence, 2009; Huntly & Donovan, 2009) Therefore, the massification of higher education in Australia has increased the diversity of the student cohort.

Research from Flinders University (2007), Hinton (2007) and Schrader & Brown (2008) have shown that one of the challenges of that increase has been identifying the students who may be under-prepared to meet

the academic and social challenges of tertiary study and there is a
conclusive link between under-preparedness and attrition within the
first year of study Currently this gap is being filled through student
participation in programs known as Enabling, Preparatory, Transition or
Access programs, such as the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory
Studies (STEPS) program offered by CQUniversity Australia. However,
research into students transitioning into undergraduate studies after
participating in enabling programs is currently quite limited, especially
research that listens to the students' voice about the experience of their
first year of study. The aim of the research reported on here explores
a sample of Enabling students as they transitioned into university
after completing the STEPS program. This research, undertaken on a
regional campus of CQUniversity utilised the analytical framework of
existential phenomenology through focussed interviews to explore the
lived experience of eight students who successfully completed their first
year of undergraduate study. This article reports on the key findings
of this research and identifies the four key themes that were evidenced
as common characteristics amongst the participants. Additionally,
it was found that these participants had a heightened sense of self-
efficacy, which proved integral to their success in their first year of
undergraduate study.

Background

Many regional universities, such as CQUniversity, are finding they
need to cater for a more diverse population of first year undergraduate
students. There is the reality that regional universities draw from
a larger pool of low socio-economic students, which in turn carries
the perception of a lower level of student ability (Marks, 2007). 2011
figures from CQUniversity's data repository show that 46 per cent
of the commencing student cohorts were from a low socio-economic
background and 65 per cent attended a regional campus (CQUniversity
Corporate Strategy and Planning Office, email communication, 24
August, 2011). Hinton's (2007) research into retention at CQUniversity
prefaced the fact that their enrolment predominately comprised of
learners who are middle aged, from low socio-economic backgrounds,
from rural or isolated areas and possibly the first in their family to
attempt university. This in turn precipitated a number of issues,
one being that many students were not adequately equipped with

the appropriate level of academic skilling to easily transition into undergraduate study. This notion is supported by Best (2002) who argues that students from working class backgrounds are less equipped to handle the academic rigours of an undergraduate degree.

Although literature supports the notion that the current enabling student cohort enter with widened perception, a broader range of learning preferences and more diverse cultural backgrounds and past experiences, they also enter with disparate expectations about their level of ability, have lower self-esteem and have possibly had past negative experiences of schooling (Burton, Taylor, Dowling & Lawrence, 2009; Maunder, Gingham & Rogers, 2010;Thomas, 2009). Nelson, Duncan and Clarke (2009) concur and believe that many commencing students enter university with ill-informed preconceptions about what they may encounter, not knowing or appreciating what it means to be an autonomous learner (Brownlee et al., 2009). In addition, Priest (2009) confers, claiming that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to find the standard involved with academic discourse to be unfamiliar, representing a barrier to their education.

Many scholars concur that the first year at university is crucial as it can lay the platform for academic success (Huntly & Donovan, 2009; Burton et al., 2009; Klinger & Wache, 2009; Krause, 2006). This first year is often phrased as the transition year as students progress through a period of transition and adjust to the challenges that the formal educational environment presents. In tandem with this are new social experiences and the learning of new knowledge. Klinger and Wache (2009) maintain that this can be a formidable experience for any student, let alone those who come from low socio-economic and diverse backgrounds and who have been away from formal learning contexts for prolonged periods.

Enabling programs

In the higher education context, pre-tertiary programs offer wider participation to the broader community. Interchangeably referred to as Enabling, Bridging, Transitional, Preparatory or Access education, they represent an alternative entry approach for the broader community to access university level programs. This paper will use the terminology of Enabling education. For many students who enter via this pathway,

this represents a 'second chance' to change their life direction (Klinger & Wache, 2009). Willans and Seary's research (2007; 2009) reveals that Enabling programs have a positive impact on many mature aged students who previously accepted that a future via a university degree was not for them. Klinger and Wache (2009) echo this claim as they believe that Enabling programs offer students hope that they can succeed in this new environment and equip them with the skills and tools to do so. Willans and Seary (2007) believe it vital that Enabling programs combine core skilling and self-skilling in order to set strong foundations for academic discourse. This is because once students enter undergraduate study, there is the expectation for them to engage with a vast body of knowledge and use higher order skills of analysing, synthesising and evaluating information.

The students from which the data reported on in this article, all completed the STEPS program at CQUniversity. The program is designed to equip future undergraduate students with the essential skills and knowledge and academic rigour to enable them to better transition into undergraduate study. STEPS offers an holistic program that enables students to acquire skills in mathematics, computing, academic writing, the sciences and an appreciation for the tertiary culture. A fundamental conviction of this program is born from the belief that in order to truly see change, the inner as well as the outer lives of adult learners must be catered for (Doyle, 2006). STEPS not only provides core skilling, but also uses a student-centred approach in a supportive learning environment to help expand the student's current worldview and promote personal success (McConachie, Seary & Simpson, 2008).

Participants

The participants reported on in this paper were students who had completed the STEPS program and successfully completed their first year of undergraduate study. Eight students elected to be involved in this research project. As shown in Table 1, all but one were over the age of 25, with one being over 60 years of age. There were five female participants and three males. All, but one, were born in Australia and were the first in their close family to attend university, also known as first generation students.

Table 1: *Demographics of Sample Population*

Participant	Age range	Gender	Australian born	Years since last studying	1st generation student
1	36-45	Female	Yes	16+	Yes
2	46-60+	Female	Yes	16+	Yes
3	36-45	Male	No	16+	Yes
4	36-45	Female	Yes	16+	Yes
5	26-35	Female	Yes	1-5	Yes
6	18-25	Male	Yes	6-15	No
7	60+	Female	Yes	16+	Yes
8	26-35	Male	Yes	6-15	Yes

Methodology

In order to gain access to and make sense of the lived experience of first year undergraduate students, the methodology of phenomenology was used. This is characterised by its unique inquiry method as it strives to portray the phenomena from personal and contextual perspectives of those who experience it (Kupers, 2009). As the main priority of this research was to 'hear' about the experience from the people who lived it, phenomenology offers a way of formalising an account of a conscious experience and its implications for the person experiencing it, in order to discover the true essence of that experience. Van Manen (1990, p. 31) describes phenomenology as a "project of someone: a real person. The aim of phenomenology is to transform a lived experience into a textual expression of its essence." Through this project, it was the voices of the participants living the experience of being an undergraduate student that was important. Phenomenology offered an interesting methodology that allowed me as the researcher to delve into their stories and look beyond the words into the sub-text in order to explicate the overall meaning and essence from within that phenomenon. The limitations of this particular methodology are that the scope of experiences is limited, and as van Manen (1990) states, it is only the view of one or a few; however, although their stories may differ, there are threads throughout the participant's responses that present similarities. It is those threads that create the commonality of the experience.

Data Instruments

Each participant was individually interviewed about their first year as an undergraduate student. The interviews were non-structured to allow the participant's personal story to evolve. Questions were guided by what the participants shared and the interview tapes were transcribed verbatim; nuances and non-verbal communication were noted. The transcripts were then analysed line by line and only the data that related to the phenomenon of the first year experience were taken aside as natural meaning units (NMU). To interpret the data, existential phenomenology as advocated by Giorgi (1985; Ehrich, 1999; De Castro, 2003) was used. As the NMUs were explicated, they were clustered and this resulted in the emergence of four key themes: 1. sense of preparedness; 2. fear of the unknown; 3. university as an anchor; and 4. sense of certainty and rightness. As these themes formed and evolved, and through the process of interpretation and deep analysis, a common essence began to form, revealing the emergence of self-efficacy. By way of understanding the intricacies of the lived experience, a sense of what it was like for the participants was made tangible. Their stories demonstrated that there was difference in sameness. Although the individual experiences differed, the aim was to capture the variance of different yet similar experiences to enable a greater understanding of the first year experience for these eight participants.

Theoretical Framework

The participants' experiences reveal what it was like to successfully transition to university post an Enabling program. As part of 'becoming' a new person with a new identity, the participants were living 'success' through transforming their identities and subjectivities. More importantly, what this research has discovered is that the *essence* (van Manen, 1990) that was revealed through the anecdotes was 'self efficacy' and in turn, the participants belief in 'self' has developed and strengthened. Bandura (1997) introduced the construct of self-efficacy and defines it as a belief "in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). He claims that a person's belief in their own efficacy can have diverse effects on many aspects that affect their performance and behaviour. It is evident in the tasks they choose, their level of exertion,

their perseverance and their overall performance (Bandura, 1997; Flammer, 2001; van Dither et al., 2011). Flammer (2001) believes that purposive actions alongside positive self esteem presuppose corresponding self efficacy beliefs. This aligns to social cognitive theory as it is a significant variable evident in the participant's ability to transition into the new environment and its capacity to affect both their motivation and aptitude to learning (van Dinther et al., 2011). Bandura (1994) maintains that according to social cognitive theory, a person's self-efficacy can be developed through four main sources of influence: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences (modelling), social persuasion and psychological states. The findings in this research indicate that these four sources were evident through the individual experiences and in turn had the power to influence the participant's actions and the personal beliefs in 'self' to demonstrate this.

Results

Sense of preparedness

As stated previously, four themes emerged from the data with the first being the '*sense of preparedness*'. Evident throughout the data was the participant's depth of gratitude for the Enabling program that each felt because of the sense of empowerment and preparedness they experienced upon entering university. There is a plethora of research that highlights the importance of teaching core skills to assist with the transition into university (Henderson, Noble & De George-Walker, 2009; Hinton, 2007; Huntly & Donovan, 2009; Klinger & Tranter, 2009; Klinger & Wache, 2009; Ramsay, 2007, Willans & Seary, 2007; Willans & Seary, 2009). This became evident as the participants reflected on their time during STEPS and the part it played in helping them to believe in themselves and gain confidence in their academic capability. As one participant said: *"I would never have come to university or thought I could do university if I hadn't achieved well in the STEPS program to give me the confidence to go on."* Data showed that for this student, self doubt due to failure at high school, compounded with negative mental chatter, had caused her to doubt her ability to cope with undergraduate studies. While her self-confidence was low prior to STEPS, her anecdotes express gratitude for the confidence gained during her time in the program. It was through

success in STEPS and mastery of the academic requirements that this student had gained confidence in her ability.

Another participant believed that success had a lot to do with personal mindset. *"You see it is about mindset......adopting a studious mentality. That is something that I didn't have or didn't know I had, because if I didn't do STEPS, I wouldn't be here now. I never would have considered university."* This student realised that although the gaining of core skills was necessary, it was even more beneficial to adopt the correct mindset and studious mentality. For him, having a studious mentality meant being in the right frame of mind for doing university study. Uncovering the studious person who has hidden under a plethora of doubt is an enlightening experience for the student. 'Peeling back' the covers of doubt can be a victorious feeling, a reawakening and rekindling of the desire to open oneself to the fulfilment of knowledge acquisition. Therefore, the sense of preparedness encapsulates not only the up-skilling of fundamental skills and the changing of mindsets, but also, through the achievement of success, students gain a sense of accomplishment, in-turn boosting their levels of self-efficacy. As one student states "e*very day it makes you feel like you've achieved something. It's not just whether you've passed a course or passed an exam; it is getting the gist of what every lecture is about and knowing that you can actually do this."*

The data reflected that the participants gained a sense of contentedness in their ability to tackle what was ahead. Through mastery of the core components of study and successfully achieving academic rigour, the students' levels of self-efficacy were elevated. The sense of contentedness came from knowing they were competent in their skills and comfortable with the expectations and rigour of university. This led to a sense of satisfaction and heightened levels of self-efficacy due to their ability to manage themselves, their work and study routine. They "put on" a studious mentality and more easily assimilated into the culture of university.

Fear of the unknown

Throughout the data analysis, an element of fear emerged in relation to the undergraduate study ahead of the participants. The second theme to emerge related to the feelings of uncertainty as new challenges

presented upon entry into this new arena of undergraduate study. One participant identified how the decision to consider entering university was huge, and then to complete the STEPS program and realise that they had potential to continue into an undergraduate program was an enlightening experience. This participant stated: *"I don't think that a lot of people really understand what it takes to do this sort of stuff... every single day, these people face their worst fear."* Fear was an emotion that she related to the unknown quotient of university. Many enabling students experience trepidation when beginning university, especially if they have had negative educational experiences or have been away from formal study for some time. This participant's early stages of undergraduate study were fraught with the fear of failing or the fear of having taken on something beyond her capability. Another participant stated: **"***For me, I look at university as the biggest challenge in my life... I have been under a lot of pressure and stress but nothing like at university. University has been very stressful for me."* In fact, pressure and stress are often cited when students express the desire to give up university study (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). The anecdote above reveals feelings of stress related to being at university. This participant mentioned that this feeling was different because it was a churning, a constant uncertainty of what lay ahead in his studies: a fear of the unknown. This particular student entered university with English as his second language; therefore, a language barrier had been created in the mindset of the student. For him, this barrier was an obstacle and something that plagued him throughout each of his undergraduate courses. However, he drew on support channels such as the Academic Learning Services, and other students to boost his confidence and morale as he strove forward. He was able to exert control over his own motivation, academic behaviours and the social environment to develop his sense of efficacy.

Each participant had their individual barriers that caused them stress about their study. While it was referred to commonly as 'stress', if we were to exchange the word 'fear' for stress, a greater sense of what the students were grappling with could be captured. Fear is often a negative emotion and fear of failure is elevated whether through a language barrier or other barriers. Fear manifests into stress and combined with a fear of failing, increases the pressure to succeed in each course. As one participant stated: *"I think I was so scared because it was all so*

different. I think it was just the nerves. I felt really overwhelmed and I kept thinking and questioning "Is this where I am meant to be?" I was not sure." The sense of feeling overwhelmed and out of her comfort zone was evident in this anecdote. Her fear was palpable and her mental chatter persistently questioned her decisions. This internal struggle compounded her fears and anxiety and resulted in crying and emotional nervous tension. Within each student's story there was mention of how the first few weeks of university were overwhelming. As they entered the new 'culture,' they each feared the unknown, with many battling internal fears of incompetency. Each participant's story reflected a sense of fear as they entered the first year of undergraduate study.

University: an anchor

However, although this sense of fear was evident, the participant's stories confirmed a new found anchor through the creation of a new identity. When investigating the first year experience, it is important to acknowledge the context of a person's personal life lived simultaneously as their university life. Although both are different entities, they cannot be separated, as one cannot exist without the other. However, the balance between personal life and student life can sometimes be skewed depending on life circumstances, but together these two spheres of personal life and academic study encapsulate the student journey.

Each participant shared different 'ordeals' that they experienced during their first year of study; however, their anecdotes indicate that university gave them an '*anchor*' to hold onto. This next anecdote reflects the emotional rollercoaster that a participant was experiencing as she began her undergraduate journey. "*I was having a lot of problems at the time, my family had broken down and my kids wanted to go and live with their dad... I was also diagnosed with cancer and that just totally floored me."* Her emotions were palpable as she firstly had to endure the loss of family stability then grave news about her health. Her future became an unknown quantity; her sense of self came under scrutiny and there was an underlying sense of uncertainty and instability as her routine was thrown into disarray. Through this time of confusion she was trying to hold on to some semblance of normality. Her life line came from the stability that university offered. "*...Actually what I did find was after getting chemo then coming to the uni and doing the course and*

seeing the same people each day, that actually gave me more optimism about university study and that actually helped me to keep on going. I could come here and talk to the other students and lecturers and that got me through it." Not only did she have structure and time lines as her parameters, she sought the companionship of her peers and lecturers and this form of social persuasion developed her personal sense of efficacy. She was able to maintain her self-image of being a university student. However, she did not feel able to share what was happening in her personal life with those at university and this was evident through her statement, *"I was just trying to hold it together so much myself that I didn't want to let it out because I felt that if I let it out and talked about it too much it would all come crashing down."* She did not want people to show pity or empathy about her predicament as she felt too close to an emotional breakdown. She found peace in the routine of university life, stability and an anchor to life. As her personal journey became increasingly difficult, she found that the routine university expected was in fact for her, 'a saving grace'. It was both physically and emotionally pleasant: *"I found that it benefited me because I had that continuity. It gave me a kind of schedule and routine and having that constant helped me through it as well."*

For another participant, the emotional toll was such that he became more dedicated to complete his university degree as his life experience caused him to re-evaluate what was important in his life. He had to endure a personal situation that was out of his control and which could have had the potential to severely impact his future. Underpinning this ordeal was the sense of helplessness at that point in his journey, yet university was his anchor: *"I came out of that and I have never felt so helpless in all my life. There is nothing that fazes me now and this uni is my goal and it is my life."* The ordeal this student had to endure challenged his preset beliefs, reversed his blasé nature and settled his resolve to complete university.

A Sense of Certainty and Rightness

Another element that emerged through the data was that each student felt a strong sense of certainty and rightness about being at university. As one student stated: *"I loved it, absolutely loved it. … I just felt like this is what I am supposed to do."* Another reflected: *"it feels like what I*

*was doing before was like a fill in until I worked out where I was meant
to be and now I'm here, it has all fallen into place. It was a huge light
bulb moment for me."* Such anecdotes reflect that these participants
felt they were in the right place in their life journey. For one student,
there was a deep significance in the knowledge that she had lived her
past life in a profoundly symbiotic way. Previously, she discussed how
her life had followed traditional gender norms, being *"just a mum"* and
the expectations placed on her as a woman in today's society. In her
anecdote, she encountered a profound sense of security that her life was
heading in the right direction. Her depiction of a 'light bulb moment'
reinforced the feeling of rightness in her decision to enter university.
She had a sense that there was more to the world than what she was
experiencing, and now has the opportunity to choose from a number of
pathways. She is in control of her future, with a sense of purpose, an aim
and direction, and resoluteness of the certainty of her future.

Another anecdote reflects this sense of purpose but also depicts how
freedom can be a painful experience as ties from their previous life
were broken. This participant found herself wanting to gain this degree
so badly, that she felt it like a physical hurt. "*I wanted it so badly,
desperately and sometimes if it all seems too much and too hard,
that pain seems too much to bare, I'd wonder why I was doing this
to myself. But yet, I amaze myself with what I have achieved in such
a short time. So yes, the first year in university was great, it was
freedom."* This anecdote reveals realisation and awakening, earnestly
wanting to be that 'other' person, even prepared to go beyond any
pain. Education has transformed this person's belief in 'self'. Prior to
entering university, her educational and life experiences had shaped
her identity: "*I was the first person in my family to go to university
and it was the first time that I felt smart and clever and not dumb.
I felt in control and I felt freedom."* Her transformational experience
came through succeeding in the enabling program and then continuing
into undergraduate studies. When put in context, this participant was
one who had overcome many barriers: "*Freedom....finally freedom....
to be what I want to be. Basically to find myself, yet it was as if it was
a gift to me."* This anecdote reflects intensity in her desire to complete
her study, revealing a strong sense of certainty about being on the right
pathway in life.

Degrees of self-efficacy are evident throughout the participant's data, either explicitly or implicitly. Using the self-efficacy framework when analysing the data enables the reader to glimpse how the seemingly unimportant aspects of a student's learning journey can be instrumental in developing a deeper sense of confidence and efficacy. As evidenced by one participant: "*You could all be doing the same subject and everybody brings something unique to the table and whether it is through the life experience for the older ones or the innocence of the younger one, it is absolutely amazing and everyone really benefits from it.*" Through rich, vicarious experiences and social interaction, the participants in this research revealed that the experience gained from successfully completing an Enabling program and transitioning into university was substantial in developing their sense of personal efficacy, positioning and equipping them with the confidence to continue their journey and embark on an undergraduate degree. As one participant shared: "*…basically to find myself… it was as if it was a gift to me. I felt in control and I felt freedom.*"

Conclusion

Evident throughout this research is the notion that self-efficacy is a vital aspect that enabled the participants to draw on their inner strength as they engaged in their first year undergraduate studies. This research identified four key themes that emerged through the analysis of the data: 1. sense of preparedness; 2. fear of the unknown; 3. university as an anchor; and 4. sense of certainty and rightness. The research findings indicates that there is a connection between the ability of the Enabling program STEPS to provide the students with a sense of preparedness. As they master the critical skills required to undertake an undergraduate program, many develop their inner strength as they confront challenges in order to keep their eye on their individual goals. Evidenced through each participant's story in this research, are high levels of resilience and determination to succeed in their first year of undergraduate study. Despite their reality being besieged with impediments and setbacks, each one demonstrated a robust sense of efficacy which sustained the effort needed to succeed. Threads of similarity within the data bound these participants to the phenomenon of the first year experience in higher education and showed that there can be sameness within difference.

References

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. (2002) *Positioning Australia's universities for 2020: An AVCC policy statement*, viewed 23 March 2015, <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/31526421/Principles-for-positioning-Australias-universities-for-the-21st>

Bandura, A. (1994) *Self efficacy*, viewed 18 August, 2013, <http://des.emory.edu/mfp/BanEncy.html>

Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.

Best, G. (2002) *First year university students and their parents: conjoint experiences of university*. Victoria University. viewed 10 November 2012, <http://vuir.vu.edu.au/2012/1/Gillian_Best.pdf>

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008) *Review of Australian higher education: final report*. viewed 10 November 2012, <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/ReviewofAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>

Brownlee, J., Walker, S., Lennox, S., Exley, B. & Pearce, S. (2009) 'The first year university experience: using personal epistemology to understand effective learning and teaching in higher education', in *Journal of Higher Education,* 58:599-618. <DOI 10.1007/s10734-009-9212-2>

Burton, L.J., Taylor J.A., Dowling, D.G. & Lawrence, J. (2009) 'Learning approaches, personality and concepts of knowledge of first-year students: Mature-age versus school leaver', *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development (SLEID),* 6: 1, 65-81.

De Castro, A. (2003) 'Introduction to Giorgi's existential phenomenological research method', *Psicologia desde el Caribe*, 11, 45-56. viewed 8 August 2012, <http://ciruelo.uninorte.edu.co/pdf/psicologia_caribe/11/3_Introduction%20to%20Giorges%20existential_Psicologia%20desde%20el%20Caribe.pdf>

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009) *Transforming Australia's higher education system*. viewed 10 November, 2012, <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Documents/PDF/Additional%20Report%20-%20Transforming%20Aus%20Higher%20ED_webaw.pdf>

Doyle, S. (2006) *Celebrating 20 years – 1986 – 2006.* Central Queensland University STEPS

Ehrich, L.C. (1999) 'Untangling the threads and coils of the web of phenomenology', *Education Research and Perspectives,* 26: 2, 19-44.

Flammer, A. (2001) 'Self efficacy', *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*. viewed 20 November 2012, <www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B0080430767024025>

Flinders University. (2007) *The new millennial university student,* viewed 19 February 2009, <http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/teaching/first/newstudent.php>

Giorgi, A. (1985) *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Henderson, R., Noble, K., & De George-Walker, L. (2009) 'Transitioning into university: 'Interrupted' first year students problem-solving their way into study', *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development (SLEID),* 6: 1, 51-64.

Hinton, L. (2007) 'Causes of attrition in first year students in science foundation courses and recommendations for intervention', *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development.* 42: 2, 13-26.

Huntly, H., & Donovan, J, (2009) 'Developing academic persistence in first year tertiary students: a case study', *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*, 6: 1, 1-14, viewed 9 November 2012, <http://sleid.cqu.edu.au/include/getdoc.php?id=804&article=242&mode=pdf>

Klinger, C.M., & Tranter, D. (2009) *Firm foundations for the future*. Paper presented at the 3rd National Conference of Enabling Educators: Enabling Education, Toowoomba, Australia.

Klinger, C.M., & Wache, D. (2009) *Two heads are better than one: Community building in the Foundation Studies program to promote student engagement in learning*. In Bedford, T. Huijser, H. and Muller, S. (Eds.), *Enabling Pathways: Proceedings of the 3rd National Conference for Enabling Education, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, 25-27 November 2009* (CD). Toowoomba: USQ.

Krause, K. (2006) *On being strategic about the first year*. Keynote paper presented at First Year Forum, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland.

Kupers, W.M. (2009) 'The status and relevance of phenomenology for integral research', *Integral Review,* 5: 1, 51-95.

Marks, G.N. (2007) *Completing university: characteristics and outcomes of completing and non-completing students*, LSAY Research Report 51., viewed 12 March 2012, <http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=0&article=1054&context=lsay_research&type>

Maunder, R.E., Gingham, J. & Rogers, J. (2010) *Transition in higher education: exploring the experiences of first and second year psychology undergraduate students*. Psychology of Education Review. 34: 1.

McConachie, J., Seary, K., & Simpson, J. (2008) Students' perceptions of a quality preparatory program at an Australian regional university: Success through changing worldviews. In J. McConachie, M. Singh, P.A. Danaher, F. Nouwens., & G. Danaher (Eds.), *Changing university learning and teaching: Engaging and mobilising leadership, quality and technology* (pp. 87-106) Teneriffe: Post Pressed.

Nelson, K., Duncan, M., & Clarke, J. (2009) 'Student success: The identification and support', *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development (SLEID),* 6: 1, 1-15.

Pillay, A.L., & Ngcobo, H.B. (2010) 'Sources of stress and support among rural-based first year university students: an exploratory study', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 40: 3, 234-240.

Priest, A. (2009) '"I have an understanding as well as you": Supporting the language and learning needs of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds', *Journal of Academic Language & Learning,* 3: 2, 70-76.

Ramsay, E. (2007) *Enabling education: A paradigm shift for the twenty-first century*. Paper presented at the 2nd National Conference of Enabling Educators: Enabling Education – What works?, Newcastle, Australia.

Schrader, P. G., & Brown, W. (2008) 'Evaluating the first year experience: Students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors', *Journal of Advanced Academics,* 19: 2, 310-343.

Thomas, L. (2009) *Developing a socially inclusive higher education system: learning from the English experience,* Paper presented at the 3rd National Conference of Enabling Educators, Toowoomba, Australia.

Van Dinther, M., Dochy, F. & Segers, M. (2011) 'Factors affecting students' self-efficacy in higher education', *Educational Research Review,* 6, 95-108.

Van Manen, M. (1990) *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London: State University of New York Press.

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2007) *"I'm not stupid after all"-Changing perceptions of self as a tool for transformation*. Paper presented at the 2nd National Conference of Enabling Educators: Enabling Education – What works? Newcastle, Australia.

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2009) *"I feel like I'm being hit from all directions": Enduring the bombardment as a mature age learner returning to formal learning*. Paper presented at the 3rd National Conference of Enabling Educators: Enabling Education. Toowoomba, Australia.

About the Author

Trixie James lectures within the STEPS program at Central Queensland University. Her most recent study saw her complete the Masters of Learning Management in Executive Leadership with a minor thesis that investigated enabling students' successful transition into undergraduate studies. Trixie's research interests centre on the support and engagement of under-represented adults in the tertiary sector. Her research has been shared in the Netherlands and at various conferences within Australia.

Contact Details

Trixie James
Central Queensland University
Bundaberg QLD 4670

Email: t.james@cqu.edu.au

Transformative learning challenges in a context of trauma and fear:
an educator's story

Vaughn M. John

University of KwaZulu-Natal

After more than three decades of development, transformative learning theory is currently a major theory of adult learning. It has also attracted substantial critique, leading to further development, application and differentiation. Recent contributions to this vast scholarship show a quest for a more unified theory.

This article examines transformative learning theory via a case study of an adult education project in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Drawing on life and pedagogical experiences of an educator, it focusses on aspects of the theory subjected to critique and raises questions about attempts to foster transformative learning in oppressive contexts involving trauma and fear. The article calls for greater attention to the life and experiences of the educator in the learning process while responding to calls for theoretical examination in more diverse contexts. It thus illustrates how more varied, situated accounts of transformative learning attempts may challenge and improve our understandings of adult learning encounters.

Keywords: *Transformative learning theory, educator life experiences, adult education, KwaZulu-Natal.*

Introduction

Transformative learning theory, first articulated by the American adult education theorist Jack Mezirow in 1978, has received substantial attention from both practitioners and researchers in adult education. A series of influential studies by Taylor (1997, 2001, 2007, 2008) typifies and elaborates the interest in transformative learning theory from a research perspective. The recent article by Christie, Carey, Robertson and Grainger (2015), in this journal, reviewed some of this literature and highlighted key aspects of critique of the theory. Their interest of forging tighter links between the theory and practice, as displayed in the work of Cranton (1994; 1996) and Apte (2009), is also at the heart of this article.

Today, transformative learning theory rests on over three decades of development and scholarship in adult education, and stands as a major theory of adult learning with considerable support in the empirical literature (Christie et. al, 2015; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Apte, 2009; Taylor, 1997, 2007). The theory has also attracted much critique (Newman, 2014, Taylor, 2007; Inglis, 1997; Newman, 1994) some of which has evoked responses from Mezirow himself (Mezirow,1997; Mezirow, 1998). Recent development of this vast scholarship shows a quest for a more unified theory (Cranton and Taylor, 2012). While substantial, most of this literature has emerged from Western contexts, prompting calls for explorations of the theory in more diverse contexts (Taylor, 1997; Nsteane, 2011; Ntseane, 2012). This article responds to such calls by exploring the challenges of attempting transformative learning in an oppressive South African context marked by fear and trauma.

This article examines transformative learning theory in the light of findings from a case study of the Human Rights, Democracy and Development (HRDD) project, an adult education project in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This province has a deep and painful history of political violence and civil war. The trauma and fear from such experiences continue to strongly frame learners' and educators'

classroom interactions. Drawing on life and pedagogical experiences of an educator (called Cosmos) in the HRDD project, the article focusses on aspects of the theory which have been the subject of critique and raises questions about attempts to foster transformative learning in a context of trauma and fear. In particular, it draws attention to the manner in which such contexts shape the frames of reference of educators and questions what levels of transformation are possible when educators themselves are constrained by fear and trauma. While based primarily on the story of Cosmos, data from other educators and a learner are briefly included to convey the levels of fear, trauma and oppression generally experienced by educators and learners in this context. The article first reviews relevant literature on transformative learning theory and provides introductions to the HRDD project and its context.

Transformative learning theory

Transformative learning theory deals with a learning process in which adults examine their meaning perspectives, via a process of critical reflection (premise reflection), resulting in transformation of such perspectives. When perspectives are transformed, emancipatory learning is said to have occurred, paving the way for personal transformation. Mezirow (1998:72) explains that transformative learning theory "deals with how individuals may be empowered to learn to free themselves from unexamined ways of thinking that impede effective judgement and action". Understanding how a context of fear and trauma may impede pedagogical action and limit freedom to examine ways of thinking, are important considerations in the ongoing development of this theory.

Transformative learning theory according to Mezirow is where "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Taylor, 2007:173) . Mezirow (1975; 1991) argued that adults develop over the course of their lives frames of reference or meaning perspectives. These structures shape their thinking, beliefs and actions. Meaning perspectives act as powerful filters or mediators when interpreting new experiences. Despite a large body of literature on transformative learning, little is known about how

the frames of reference of learners, and importantly those of educators as well, are shaped by conditions of fear and trauma. A key purpose of this article is to contribute to this gap in the literature by exploring the challenges faced by an educator when attempting transformative learning in a post-conflict context which remained oppressive. The article draws attention to the manner in which a post-conflict context shapes the frames of reference of educators and questions what levels of transformation are possible when educators themselves are constrained by fear and trauma.

Mezirow argued that when confronted with new experiences, adults need to integrate such experiences with their prior learning. Often, such integration will occur smoothly. However, when integration is not smooth, but presents a disorienting dilemma or contradiction for the person, the person has to find a way of resolving the tension. When the person reflects on and revises their meaning perspective, transformative learning is said to have occurred (Mezirow 1975; Mezirow, 1991).

On the basis of his early research, Mezirow (1991:168) described a ten-phase process of perspective transformation which began with the experience of a disorienting dilemma. While studies have confirmed the general model of perspective transformation, several have found the process to be recursive rather than linear and that the change could be either dramatic or gradual. Mezirow subsequently acknowledged that the process may not follow the exact 10-phase sequence (Taylor, 1997). A brief review of some of the studies which have applied transformative learning theory is now offered in relation to the study reported here. More comprehensive reviews are provided by Taylor (1997, 2007) and Taylor and Snyder (2012).

Applications of transformative learning theory in research

Transformative learning theory has been employed in a number of empirical studies and theoretical essays in adult education and other areas of education. Taylor's reviews (1997, 2007) and update of emerging conceptions (Taylor, 2008) attest to such widespread engagement with transformative learning theory in studies of social and community transformation, participation in group experiences, personal illness, intercultural learning and lifestyle and career changes, amongst others.

In a study which was largely supportive of the theory, Bennetts (2003) found that individuals within a fellowship scheme involving supportive and trusting relationships, enjoyed significant transformations in motivation, career aspirations, relationships and quality of life. This pro-transformational role of supportive and trusting relationships has also been identified as a key feature in the Afrocentric perspective advanced by Nsteane (2011, 2012). Ntseane (2012) attributes these features to the concept of ubuntu which has shaped an African worldview centred on belonging and connectedness. The present study, through the story of Cosmos, reveals the constraints on transformative learning in a post-conflict context lacking support and trust.

A study which specifically explores transformative learning during a post-conflict phase of a group of adults' lives is offered by Magro and Polyzoi (2009). Interviews with refugees in Greece and Canada, many of whom had experienced severe trauma and loss similar to that of participants reported on in this article, showed that for refugees "who came from zones of conflict and war, the ability to think critically and be open to new learning is [negatively] influenced by trauma and stress" (Magro & Polyzoi, 2009:104) While Magro and Polyzoi's study explores the effects of these experiences on the learner, the present study discusses similar effects on the educator.

While studies generally indicate support for the theory, some have also been a rich source of critique and an impetus to further development of transformative learning theory. The final section of this article engages with some of this critique within the gaze of an educator's (named Cosmos) story. For the purposes of this article it is more appropriate to engage with this aspect of the literature in discussion of the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and Cosmos' practices. In particular, critique of the theory relating to the role of intense emotions and prior stressful life events (Taylor, 1997) and contexts of systemic oppression (Newman, 1994) are discussed.

While transformative learning theory has a substantial and growing literature, the development, application and critique of the learning theory, however, has a strong Western frame developed primarily from studies of formal learning contexts. There is a need for examination of the theory in more diverse contexts including more non-formal

education contexts as called for by Taylor, Duveskog & Friis-Hansen (2012). The present study of the HRDD project affords such opportunity to explore transformative learning in a non-formal educational context in Africa.

The Human Rights, Democracy and Development (HRDD) project

The HRDD project was an adult education and development intervention in rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. Initiated in 1999 as a partnership between a non-governmental organization, a university adult education department, a foreign donor agency and seven communities in rural KwaZulu-Natal namely, Tugela Ferry, Stoffelton, Muden, Dalton, Trust Feed, Qanda and Estcourt. The project operated for almost ten years during which adult learners from these communities were offered participation in a combination of adult basic education and livelihood projects. These communities have high levels of unemployment and poverty, and low levels of education and development, contributing to their ongoing deprivation and social exclusion (Statistics South Africa, 2003). Most had also experienced a period of devastating political violence and continuing gender-based violence within a patriarchal culture. The project aimed to create a literate, informed and active citizenry who could participate in development in their communities. Educators for the literacy classes were recruited from within these rural communities and constituted a new cadre of community-based adult educators who have been trained and supported by the NGO and university partners. The learners and educators who participated in the project were predominantly women.

In the context of the transition from Apartheid to democratic rule, a central rationale for the project was to establish literacy classes and income-generating projects within marginalised communities as spaces for people to learn and practice democracy in a micro context, as preparation for application and civic action in wider contexts. Strong emphasis on the themes of human rights, democracy and development in the literacy curriculum reflects the project's name. An important goal of this intervention was to facilitate critical reflection and dialogue amongst participants with regard to their life circumstances and their futures with a view to fostering transformative learning.

Case study methodology in exploring the HRDD project

In 2009, the author who was employed by the university partner of the project, conducted an in-depth, qualitative study of the HRDD project study covering the first seven years of its existence, from 1999 until 2005 (John, 2009). Using case study methodology within a critical paradigm, the study sought to critically document, analyse and theorise the practices, learning and identity development within the HRDD project. The entire HRDD project served as the unit of analysis for the case study. Rule and John (2011:4) describe case study as "a systematic and in-depth investigation of a particular instance in its context in order to generate knowledge". A major determinant of methodological choice was that a case study is able to locate and understand action most suitably within its historical, social and political contexts. Catching the complexity and situatedness of pedagogical action is a focus of this article.

Data collection for the entire case study included twenty eight in-depth interviews with learners, educators and project partners, observations and analysis of more than one hundred project documents. The process of in-depth interviewing, which generated the data which this article is based on, was guided by Seidman (1998). An initial interview focussed on the educator and his/her life history while a second interview, a week later, focussed on the educator's understanding and experience of the HRDD project. In both interviews educators were encouraged to construct their own stories in a self-directed and open-ended fashion. Interviews were conducted in the mother-tongue of the participants (isiZulu), translated into English and then transcribed and verified.

Generating a substantial part of the data for this study in the form of narratives was underpinned by the epistemological goal of seeing the project through the eyes of different actors and to understand and theorise the project in terms of these actors' understandings and lives. This strategy is endorsed by Rossiter and Clark (2007:3) who advise that we "make sense of our experience, day by day and across the lifespan, by putting it into story form". Data analysis was primarily about making sense of the project through the narratives and perspectives of key participants. Content analysis of themes rather than language form was the main form of analysis, due to transformations of language form in

the translation process. The analytic process involved repeated careful readings of the data, deductive and inductive identification of themes, categorisation of themes, leading to identification of patterns between categories. The identification of themes and thematic categories in one narrative were constantly compared with such identification in other narratives.

This article focusses on findings related to the life and practices of an educator in the project, who chose the pseudonym Cosmos for the purpose of this research. The story of Cosmos was purposively selected for this article because it so ably illustrates the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educator practice in an attempt at transformative learning. Complex gender relations become visible when viewed from the perspective of a young male educator teaching women in a patriarchal and politically divided context. The story of Cosmos reveals the constraints on transformative learning in a post-conflict context and the vulnerabilities such educators are exposed to. While this article is based primarily on the story of Cosmos, data from three other educators in the project, namely, Khosi, Welcome and Nokthula, as well as that of a learner called Zinhle, are used to vividly portray the levels of fear, trauma and oppression generally experienced by educators and learners in this context. A brief discussion of this context is necessary for an understanding of Cosmos' story.

KwaZulu-Natal: a context of violence

The province of KwaZulu-Natal, situated on the east coast of South Africa, experienced deep political division and violent power struggles during the 1980s and early 1990s. This contestation, ostensibly between the Inkatha movement (supported by the apartheid state) and the United Democratic Front which advanced the struggle of the then-banned African National Congress (ANC), manifested in some of the worst political violence in pre-democratic South Africa. According to Aitchison (2003a:47) this was a period when "thousands of people had lost their lives and homes and a deep bitterness had infected the life of the province". Dubbed the "Natal War" this period of violence claimed the lives of approximately 7500 people and left a wake of destruction and trauma (Jeffery, 1997; Aitchison, 2003a, 2003b).

This history of violence in KwaZulu-Natal and its present day effects featured significantly in the narratives of all seven educators in the study's sample, and have thus been identified by these educators as a significant frame for viewing the HRDD project. Most of the educators in the study were directly affected by the political violence either through attacks on members of their family and their homes or through threats to their own lives. Some lost family members, their homes and other possessions in the violence. A number of them had to flee their homes and take refuge in other communities, sometimes repeatedly. A young educator who chose to be called Welcome spoke of the tragic loss of four relatives which caused his family to seek refuge in another area. When violence began in their new community they decided to return to their original community, where he subsequently worked as an HRDD educator. On their return they found that their home had been taken over by another family and they were allocated a building site which was less suitable in comparison to their original one. He says:

> Violence, hey, it was really very bad ...yes, it was very bad really, because four members of my family died ... my uncles and cousins. That disturbed us a lot, as we even relocated from (community 1). At (community 2) then, I also nearly died. Another organization spotted me having not attended a meeting. The following day when I was walking from school, they stopped me and asked me, "Why did you not go to that meeting?" ... I said, "I did go". They said, "Do not lie". They took out ... guns. They said, "You are fooling us, why are you lying?"... Then they asked, "What party are you"? I said, "I am not yet in parties"... Then they said, "No, go home and think carefully what you are then come back and tell us". On that very day I left, because I could see my life was, my days are over. People were being slaughtered there, just like goats. I don't really know how I escaped.

The experiences of loss and displacement have been traumatic for these educators and their relatives. These are life experiences which educators have in common with their learners. The political violence was brutal and traumatic, scarring many. The ongoing effects of the violence are visible in how people relate to each other and negotiate daily activities within development projects and other forms of community life. An element of fear often shapes such interactions. For many, the violence

is remembered and narrated as a critical event in their lives, shaping much of who they are and what they do or cannot do in the development arena. Violence generates particular frames of reference which are brought into the classroom by learners and their educators.

While the political violence has largely ended and Apartheid was defeated, the struggle for political freedom has not translated into socio-economic freedom nor into social justice. Too many of South Africa's new citizens remain in poverty and continue to struggle to meet basic needs such as food, water, health care and education (Human Sciences Research Council & Education Projects Unit, 2005). A large proportion of these people live in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, which has some of the most severe concentrations of unemployment, illiteracy, rural marginalisation and HIV infection in South Africa (Human Sciences Research Council, 2014). South Africa also has extremely high levels of gender-based violence. A woman is killed by an intimate partner every 8 hours in South Africa (Abrahams et al. 2012).

A further significant feature identified by educators in the HRDD project was that of growing up and living in a strong patriarchy. Both the history of violence and patriarchal power were presented as key features of the KwaZulu-Natal context, mediating the transformative learning potential of the HRDD project in an oppressive context marked by trauma and fear. The story of Cosmos, a young, African, male educator in the HRDD project, illustrates this mediating effect.

Dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educator practice – the story of Cosmos

This section of the article provides an in-depth analysis of how one educator, Cosmos, negotiates the relational space of the project at the level of pedagogy. Such a focus reveals the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educators' practices. It also reveals how Cosmos' practice is shaped (structured) and negotiated (enacted). The example of how Cosmos makes meaning of his role as an educator illustrates the value of a deeper understanding of educators' lives, particularly experiences of trauma and fear, when considering educator development and practices. It furthermore points to the importance of seeing educator development and practices as socially situated and context-bound.

The context of educators' lives and the critical events in their life histories are not just background features. They continue to shape educators' lives, beliefs and practices. At a theoretical level, such shaping could fruitfully be explored in terms of Mezirow's discussion of "frames of reference" (Mezirow, 1991) and Freire's discussion of "worldviews" and "limit situations" (Freire, 1970). Cosmos' story, a story which was not untypical of the educators who participated in the study, demonstrates how his early life experiences and his context frames his HRDD practice and how he makes meaning of his practice.

Cosmos is a single 26 year old man who lives with his mother and sister in a deeply rural part of KwaZulu-Natal. He has a child whom he supports financially but who does not live with him. Cosmos sees himself as exceptionally bright and above his fellow schoolmates in educational terms. He passed his school-leaving examination with good results and wanted to become an accountant. This dream had been frustrated by his family's poor financial circumstances. His mother is a farmworker who is illiterate and who earns a small income. On the basis of his results, his school principal suggested that he consider becoming a teacher but he says that he did not want to become a school teacher. He prefers teaching adults because, "they know why they are learning". Cosmos said that the HRDD work brings "small money" and some recognition in the community.

The first of two interviews with Cosmos was strongly framed by the painful experience of his early life (pre-HRDD) and the consequences of his parents' divorce and his father's polygamy. This led to his rejection by his father and is seen as the reason for his inability to study further and the lack of resources in his home. Cosmos spent a considerable part of the interview talking about his parents' divorce and his sense of abandonment and how much this affected him in the past and continues to affect him in psychological and material terms (see John, 2009).

Based on his own extensive narrative, Cosmos's reflections on the critical events of his father divorcing his mother, rejecting him as a child and supporting only his first wife, reveals that these life events constituted a significant trauma for Cosmos. These events have influenced Cosmos' perspectives on divorce, polygamy and women's rights, which present some ambiguity and contradictions when lined up

against project goals. On women's rights and gender equality, Cosmos believes that teaching women to assert their equal status in the home could lead to domestic problems and divorce. He believes that rural men will not accept this. He has therefore resolved this tension by teaching women to believe that they are equal but to keep this to themselves. He explains:

> … we teach our learners about human rights … even in the books they say people are all equal. But people here, especially the men, don't accept that. They [men] say, "I can't be equal to you, because you left your home to live with me and I paid a lobola [bride price] for you. So you are not equal to me". So that is something they don't accept. So we have … now advised our learners not to use that right, because it causes a split between them in their marriage

What Cosmos appears to be attempting with his learners is information sharing and a muted form of personal transformation which neither allows for action nor contributes to social transformation. From his own experience as a child, Cosmos has learnt that divorce is not a good thing. He does not want his learners to face the prospect of divorce because of what he has to teach them. This is a tension between the text and context of the HRDD curriculum. What Cosmos' experience of his parents' divorce adds to the curriculum equation is a subtext which causes him to believe that educating women about their rights should not lead to divorce. Such subtext features, the ways in which educators mediate the text and context with their own life-world understandings is often invisible in educational projects and not available to the planning processes.

The above example also illustrates the importance of "communal forms of living" and the "relational realities" identified in the Afrocentric perspective of learning set out by Ntseane (2012:275). Such a perspective stands in contrast to a Western perspective which values autonomy and independence. Mezirow (cited by Merriam and Nsteane, 2008:185) indicates this latter perspective when stating that the "cardinal goal of adult education" is to enable adults to make "more autonomous and informed choices". However, Cosmos' adult education goal is governed by a collective rather than an individual sense of

responsibility. Merriam and Ntseane (2008) identify this sense of responsibility as a feature of African value systems and learning.

Some of the subtexts align with project goals and values, others jar with them. There is a further example of a strong subtext feature which Cosmos brings to his class, which jars with project goals. As discussed earlier, the community context in which Cosmos teaches has a recent history of deep political divisions which manifested in deadly violence over a number of years. Intolerance and fear prevail. Political identities are strong in this context, perhaps stronger than identities of educator and learner. The learning environment and curriculum faces challenges and doubts regarding its political character and motives. To reduce the overt politicization of the classroom, Cosmos has requested that his learners not wear the T-shirts of their political organizations when attending class. He explains:

> So people who support (party A) here, they think we are preaching to our learners to join (party B). So now we have realised that there is a need for us as teachers to tell our learners that they must not wear (party) t-shirts in our classes, or even in the street because people think we, we teach them to wear those things they are wearing ... So, we are very, very committed to teach. We are advising them not to wear t-shirts in our classes, even in the street, unless they are going to meet their comrades in rallies or in meetings.

The history of violence and current political power struggles make it difficult for educators to forge relationships which facilitate their HRDD work. A female educator, Khosi, also explained how the political divide and suspicion affects her HRDD work:

> Since I am under another Inkosi [traditional leader] there are people of this area who do not understand what I am doing here ... Some people have a tendency of thinking that I work for political parties.

In a project which aims to foster tolerance, respect for diversity, rights to freedom of association and speech, Cosmos' actions could be seen to be counter-productive and not serving the democratic and transformative goals of the project. However, in a context where an educator has

personal experience of people being killed because of their political affiliation and where his own political identity is under scrutiny, it can be expected that he would not want to take many risks, irrespective of the importance of these within the curriculum text. Cosmos has to find a way of giving expression to a curriculum promoting freedom and transformation within a context of fear. This is clearly no easy task.

Cosmos' story highlights the importance of focussing not just on education practice and its reifications such as the "official HRDD curriculum" but also on the actors in the practice. In doing so we are able to better understand Cosmos and his practice, and we may consider the tension in the multiple identities he holds. Kilgore and Bloom (2002:123) also note that in contexts of crisis, the "fragmented self is a more appropriate organizing structure". Cosmos has a pre-HRDD identity of a young man disowned by his father in a polygamous and fractured family system, as well as an HRDD educator identity with enactments of attempting transformative learning about rights and gender equality. Such identities are difficult to blend into a unified sense of self. Through Cosmos' in-depth narrative we can observe multiple identities and more importantly, we can observe how life history and context can blunt the transformative edge of the HRDD project!

A socio-political milieu of fear and trauma

Cosmos' story reveals the enormous challenges encountered when attempting transformative learning in a socio-political milieu of fear and trauma. South African society is characterised by a well-entrenched system of patriarchy and gender inequality. Women face substantial discrimination, domination and abuse in this system. Rural KwaZulu-Natal presents some of the clearest evidence of this system in all arenas of life, particularly in family and community relations, but also within the educational arena (Human Sciences Research Council & Education Projects Unit, 2005; John, 2009).

The majority of learners in the HRDD project were women who experienced multiple forms of discrimination and oppression. Consider for example the case of the learner Zinhle, who offered a poignant and critical assessment regarding the termination of her primary education:

> My father was primitive; he believed that girls should not be sent to school ... I left school in [my] second year, I didn't even finish it. I thought I would not continue because my father said he cannot spend his money educating me for someone else [reference to a future husband].

Nokthula, an educator in the project also experienced disruption to her schooling as a result of fear and trauma:

> We stayed in our shack ... behind the Stadium... violence erupted. Where I was staying....whenever I went to school there were these boys who were always asking me why I was not coming to them when they were calling me. They accused me of being anti-ANC... One day they decided to necklace [burning a person to death] me with a car tyre ...fortunately there was a person who was my mother's friend...that person saw me....the painful part is that eventually they killed that person. My mother decided that we should leave ... since she was about to lose me too. We came here ...in 1992. It was difficult for me at school. I think my mind was disturbed because I did not pass. I repeated ... Eventually I passed standard 9 until I found myself passing standard ten.

Most of the educators in the project were women, like Nokthula. They were employed and trained to facilitate learning and change with learners such as Zinhle. They were expected to tackle gender-based discrimination and to foster conscientisation, critical reflection and empowerment (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1975), in order that learners could take action to address different forms of oppression they faced as women. The human rights, democracy and development focus in the HRDD project foregrounded the rights of women. However, most of the educators had themselves experienced and continued to experience quite severe forms of gender-based discrimination and violence. It is quite likely that many educators had not been able to fully overcome their own oppression as women and yet were attempting to foster change in the lives of their learners through education. How effective can educators be in facilitating transformative learning when they themselves have not been able to shed gender-based frames of reference which limit women? This study highlights the challenges of using community-based educators who themselves have experienced

and are experiencing violence and oppression as change agents for transformative learning. Educators, as indicated in the case of Cosmos, are struggling to reconcile their own trauma and personal histories of struggle with project goals and discourses. More attention should be given to this dynamic in educator development work and in programmes inspired by transformative learning theory.

With a sense of the powerful interplay between context, life experience and educator practice, the article now engages with some of the earlier-mentioned critique of transformative learning theory in the light of Cosmos' story.

Engaging the critique of transformative learning theory via Cosmos' story

While Taylor's (1997, 2007) reviews show that a number of studies confirmed Mezirow's model of perspective transformation, he does however indicate that there were additional aspects not considered by the model. Some of the studies reviewed signalled the need for considerations of the role of intense emotions and prior stressful life events, of readiness factors for change, of non-rational ways of knowing such as intuition, empathy and spirituality, and of the centrality of positive relationships in transformative learning. Taylor (1997:55) also identified the need for transformative learning,

> ... to be explored at a more in-depth level, providing greater understanding of the varying nature of the catalyst of the learning process (disorienting dilemma), the significant influence of context (personal and social factors), the minimization of the role of critical reflection and increased role of other ways of knowing.

All of these findings from Taylor's (1997, 2007) critical reviews pointed to the need for a more holistic and contextually grounded view of transformative learning with greater attention paid to affect and emotional engagement and to barriers in the socio-political milieu of learning. These dimensions of learning are vividly illustrated in the story of Cosmos. More importantly, while the learner is the focus in Taylor's review when arguing for the need for further development of the theory, the findings of the study of the HRDD project draw attention to the educator and how in-depth understanding of the educator's

emotions, stressful life events and readiness for change may influence the transformative learning process. As much as transformative learning is premised on an autonomous learner, it also tends to be premised on an autonomous and transformed educator who can act as an agent of change. In oppressive contexts, marked by fear and trauma, this is not a given. Furthermore, transformative learning can be highly risky work and vulnerable educators, not organisations, are the ones who must face the brunt of such risk.

Newman (1994) asserted that transformative learning theory had not provided answers for how transformative learning could occur in the context of systemic oppression and for how it could contribute to political struggle. Newman's disappointment stems largely from the neglect of social action, particularly collective social action, in transformative learning theory. He drew attention to Mezirow's acknowledgement that adult educators could only help facilitate emancipatory education which led to personal transformation. In a response entitled, "Transformation theory out of context", Mezirow (1997) contended that personal transformation triggered by a disorienting dilemma occurred through a three part process: critical reflection of assumptions (meaning perspectives), reflective discourse to validate insight, and action. Mezirow's (1997) view is that in conditions of oppression, the individual and/or collective action taken by the learner should be under the learner's own direction and terms. He also argued that collective social action was a special competence for which adult educators needed training. This study shows that training on its own may not be sufficient. Cosmos and his fellow educators received considerable training during the life of the project. Furthermore, negotiating the tricky political terrain of a post-conflict context is onerous for young educators.

Taking an in-depth look at an educator's practice via Cosmos' narratives provided significant insights into the severe barriers to collective action. Fear and traumatic life history feature in this case as necessary dimensions to understanding educator practices. We see how Cosmos negotiates the learning-action dimensions of his practice. His account, of a central human rights issue about gender equality involved reflection (including painful self-reflection) and some dialogue but it did not lead to action. In fact, Cosmos' practice purposely discourages and disables

transformative social action. Was Cosmos' inability to effect collective social action a consequence of insufficient training?

Taylor (1997, 2007) has presented transformative learning theory as a theory still in development. Importantly, Taylor also noted that few studies have considered the influence of cultural background on transformative learning, leaving key determinants such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation and marginalization largely unexplored. This conclusion heightens the contribution which the case study of the HRDD project offers to the literature on transformative learning theory.

Conclusion

Transformative learning theory enjoys considerable support in adult education practice and research. However, studies of transformative learning theory appear to be based largely on Western contexts with middle class samples and, on occasion, working class samples. The so-called underclass, the poor, marginalised and oppressed sectors of society, rarely feature in studies of transformative learning. In other words, transformative learning theory has not been adequately interrogated in contexts of ongoing deprivation, violence and oppression. Examination of the theory in such contexts, where trauma and fear are prevalent, could contribute to the ongoing development of transformative learning theory and practice. The study of the HRDD project highlights the value of more situated explorations of transformative learning involving more diverse contexts and samples.

Furthermore, while Taylor (2008:12) has correctly advised that "it is important to appreciate the role of life experience among learners", it is clearly also important to pay attention to the life experiences and identities of the educator in the transformative learning process, as these factors are powerful shapers of pedagogical practices. The use of community-based educators in post-conflict contexts draws attention to the needs of educators in terms of their personal healing, programme training and ongoing support in their work. Clearly, part of such preparation requires supporting educators to become more aware of the influence of their own experiences, frames of reference and the power of their own biases. The story of Cosmos shows that the transformative potential of a curriculum is a product of the dynamic interactions between context, life experiences and educator practice. This has

implications for how one plans educational interventions which have transformatory agendas.

References

Abrahams, N., Mathews, S., Jewkes R., Martin, L.J. & Lombard, C. (2012) 'Every Eight Hours: Intimate femicide in South Africa 10 years later!', South African Medical Research Council, Research Brief, August 2012, Viewed 30 September 2014, <http://www.mrc.ac.za/policybriefs/everyeighthours.pdf>

Aitchison, J. (2003a) 'The origins of the Midlands war: the Natal conflict from 1975 to 1989' in R. Greenstein (ed.) *The Role of Political Violence in South Africa's Democratization*, Johannesburg: CASE, 47–72.

Aitchison, J. (2003b) 'KwaZulu-Natal: the pre-election wars of the 1990s''inR. Greenstein (ed.) *The Role of Political Violence in South Africa's Democratization,* Johannesburg: CASE, 72–94.

Apte, J. (2009) 'Facilitating transformative learning: a framework for practice', in *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 49: 1, 169-189.

Bennetts, C. (2003) 'The Impact of Transformational Learning on Individuals, Families and Communities', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 22:5, 457-480.

Cranton, P. (1994) *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Cranton, P. (1996) *Professional Development as Transformative Learning: New Perspectives for Teachers of Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cranton, P. & Taylor, E.W. (2012) 'Transformative Learning Theory: seeking a more unified theory' in E.W. Taylor, P. Cranton and Associates (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice,* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 3-20.

Christie, M., Carey, M., Robertson, A. & Grainger, P. (2015) 'Putting transformative learning theory into practice', in *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 55:1*, 9-30.

Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Middlesex: Penguin.

Human Sciences Research Council. (2014) *South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey, 2012*. Cape Town: HRSC Press.

Human Sciences Research Council & Education Projects Unit. (2005) *Emerging Voices: A Report on Education in South African Rural Communities*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Inglis, T. (1997) 'Empowerment and Emancipation', in *Adult Education Quarterly, 48:1*, 3-18.

Jeffery, A. (1997) *The Natal Story: Sixteen Years of Conflict*. Johannesburg:

South African Institute of Race Relations.

John, V. M. (2009) "Communities of Learning and Action?": A Case Study of the Human Rights, Democracy and Development Project, 1999 – 2005. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

Kilgore, D. & Bloom, L.R. (2002) '"When I'm Down, it Takes Me a While": Rethinking Transformational Education Through Narratives of Women in Crisis', in *Adult Basic Education,* 12:3, 123-133.

Magro, K. and Polyzoi, E. (2009) 'Geographical and psychological terrains of adults from war-affected backgrounds', in *Journal of Transformative Education*, 7:1, 85-106.

Memela, B. & Land, S. (2006) 'Isicathamiya saseStoffelton: Reflections on an Education for Democracy Project', in *Journal of Education*, 39, 47-62.

Merriam, S.B. & Ntseane, G. (2008) 'Transformational Learning in Botswana: How Culture Shapes the Process', in *Adult Education Quarterly,* 58:3, 183-197.

Mezirow, J. (1997) 'Transformation Theory Out of Context', in *Adult Education Quarterly,* 48, 60-62.

Mezirow, J. (1998) 'Transformative Learning and Social Action: A Response to Inglis', in *Adult Education Quarterly,* 49:1, 70-72.

Mezirow, J. (1975) *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-entry Programs in Community Colleges*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Magro, K. and Polyzoi, E. (2009) 'Geographical and psychological terrains of adults from war-affected backgrounds', in *Journal of Transformative Education*, 7:1, 85-106.

Newman, M. (1994) *Defining the Enemy*: *Adult Education in Social Action*. Sydney: Stewart Victor.

Newman, M. (2014) 'Calling Transformative Learning Into Question: Some Mutinous Thoughts', in *Adult Education Quarterly,* 62:,1 36-55.

Ntseane, G.P. (2011) 'Culturally sensitive transformational learning: incorporating the Afrocentric paradigm and African Feminism', in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 61:4, 307-323.

Ntseane, G.P. (2012) 'Transformative learning theory: a persepctive from Africa' in E.W. Taylor, P. Cranton and Associates (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice,* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 274-288.

Rossiter, M. & Clark, M.C. (2007) *Narrative and the practice of adult education*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.

Rule, P. & John, V. (2011) *Your guide to case study research*. Pretoria: van Schaik.

Statistics South Africa. (2003) *Census 2001. Census in brief. Second edition.* Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Seidman, I. (1998) *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. (2nd ed.) New York: Teachers College Press.

Stake, R. (1995) *The Art of Case Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Taylor, E. W. (1997) 'Building Upon the Theoretical Debate: A Critical Review of the Empirical Studies of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory', in *Adult Education Quarterly,* 48:1, 34-59.

Taylor, E. W. (2001) 'Transformative Learning Theory: A Neurobiological Perspective of the Role of Emotions and Unconscious Ways of Knowing', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 20:3, 218-236.

Taylor, E.W. (2007) 'An Update of Transformative Learning Theory: A Critical Review of the Empirical Research (1999-2005)', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 26:2, 173-191.

Taylor, E.W. (2008) 'Transformative Learning Theory', in *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 119, 5-15.

Taylor, E.W., Duveskog, D. & Friis-Hansen, E. (2012) 'Fostering transformative learning in non-formal settings: farmer-Field Schools in East Africa', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 31:6, 725-742.

Taylor, E.W. & Snyder, M.J. (2012) 'A Critical Review of Research on Transformative Learning Theory, 2006-2010' in E.W. Taylor, P. Cranton and Associates (eds.) *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice,* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 37-55.

About the Author

Dr Vaughn M. John is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. His teaching and research interests are in Adult Learning, Peace Education, HIV & AIDS and Education, and Research Methodology.

Contact details

*Vaughn M. John
School of Education,
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa 3201*

Email: johnv@ukzn.ac.za

Book Review

Popular Culture as Pedagogy:
Research in the field of adult education

Kaela Jubas, Nancy Taber and Tony Brown (Eds.) (2015)
Rotterdam: Sense Publishers
ISBN978-94-6300-272-1 paperback, ($32.00), vii+160 pages, index

Reviewed by
Chris Speldewinde,
Deakin University

Danesi (2015: p.3) writes that popular culture is atypical. It lacks, rejects and ignores ties to folk or artistic traditions. Herein lies the appeal of popular culture as it sets new trends and morphs into new versions of itself. Popular culture, with its high focus on commoditisation, acts as means for recreation, making it short lived and specific to its own era. This new volume edited by Kaela Jubas, Nancy Taber and Tony Brown, takes examples of popular culture from television programs and movies and applies them to pedagogy in the field of adult education. In their first collaboration, Jubas, Associate Professor in Adult Learning at the University of Calgary, Taber, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University and Brown, Associate Professor in Adult, Community & Higher Education at the University of Canberra, bring together the work of numerous authors who draw upon fictional characters in programs such as *Doctor Who, The Lego Movie*, assorted

Disney movies, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to articulate perceptions on how popular culture can be employed with adult learning.

Nine chapters, including the Introduction, form this uniquely comprehensive addition to the literature, with topics including storytelling, community building, representations of teachers, and narratives of illness and gender representations. The volume has a distinct flavour of the United States, although one chapter provides an insight into black South Africa. Each chapter is structured in a similar fashion with background to each movie or television program provided then analysis. There are no graphics such as photographs or diagrams provided in the book.

The book commences with the editors' Introduction which sums up the remaining eight chapters. In chapter two, Wright and Wright consider textual analysis of media and use the long running *Doctor Who* series as the example to support this discussion. This analysis extends to a consideration of how the actors who play Doctor Who, of which there have been twelve, impact upon the characterisation and underlying message of the program. The textual analysis itself is used here to aid adult educators understand how moments experienced by *Doctor Who* are translatable into a classroom setting. This provides educators the opportunity to discuss issues of social action and citizenship like those drawn from the fictional world of *Doctor Who*. Chapter three by Odgren extends Wright's and Wright's consideration of how community building occurs. Using *The Lego Movie* as its premise, Odgren draws on similar themes of citizenship, non-conformism and social action as avenues for the transformation of community and hierarchy. Here Odgren (p. 46) informs the reader that processes associated with learning involve 'continuous deconstruction of knowledge' and draws parallels with Lego blocks which are 'designed to inspire creativity and encourage imagination.'

While continuing on the theme of film, chapter four by Brown considers how teachers and schools are represented on film and the creation of public pedagogy through film's production of story and narrative. This is a broad consideration of what Brown (p. 51) views as the 'filmmakers fascination with teachers and schooling' which began slowly in the early 20th century, increased in the 1950s and 1960s, then accelerated in the

1980s onwards. Chapters five by Timanson and Schindel, six by Jubas and seven by Treffry-Goatley could be loosely treated as a section of the book as they deal with matters pertaining to health. Timanson and Schindel use the hospital setting, in particular an emergency room, to undertake an analysis of how workplace learning occurs. Here the television program *Nurse Jackie* is the example. Workplace learning is epitomised here as knowledge is reciprocated to develop practices of documentation in 'notebooks, blogs, patient charts, and reports which is then validated through conversations with patients and colleagues. The authors view the reciprocal practices observable here as being translatable into the adult education setting. Jubas continues the health theme by devoting chapter six to considering how the doctor/nurse relationship is represented on television programs such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scrubs*. She questions the validity of the portrayal in popular culture of roles. Fiction is exactly that and pop culture cannot be relied upon to replicate actuality. The final chapter of this quasi section uses the AIDS epidemic in South Africa and how the spread of this disease has been captured on film in South African productions. In this chapter seven, a review of films that deal with AIDS and how it is experienced by the individual and broader community is provided. The public pedagogy of cinema opens up the avenues for a better understanding of the impact of HIV as it raises awareness to a wide audience.

The final two chapters could also be loosely collected together as gender becomes the focal point. Chapter eight by Taber is an examination of Disney movies, fairy tales and the television series *Once Upon a Time*. Likewise, Jarvis in chapter nine, uses two examples from popular fiction, the characters Bella from the Twilight Saga series and Buffy the Vampire Slayer from the series of the same name to consider 'How to be a woman'. In both chapters, the authors consider how women are portrayed in these television series and the role of popular culture in transforming how gender relations is understood in society. Jarvis concludes her chapter by expressing the view that these texts have two implications for educators. Firstly, there is complexity when teaching about 'adulthood, maturation and gender outside educational institutions'(p.148). She ponders how adult education differs from inside and outside the classroom. Secondly, how adult educators can use these forms of texts working with young adults to interrogate the text itself and evaluate their merit.

Overall, this is a worthwhile text which I thoroughly enjoyed reading. As an anthropologist fascinated by popular culture, I see worth for this book in my own discipline as well as education, gender studies, sociology and other studies of culture. The book is structured so that in could be read either in its entirety or as a contributor of standalone chapters. It would be of use to an audience of education researchers and adult educators seeking to use examples that students can relate to. As an anthropologist who uses comparison as a key methodology of research, I am though left perplexed by the lack of consideration of material from outside the Western context. I believe only focussing on Western examples has left this book with an omission. I would have appreciated for example a chapter on representations in Bollywood or how television programs with Japanese or Chinese fairy tales can be applied here. The editors attempt to address this issue in their introduction, believing that a concentration of media production and the spread of popular culture is indicative of contemporary globalisation (p.5). I'm not convinced of this notion and if this is to be truly called an international collection about public pedagogy, could not the issue of contributors dealing predominantly with United States produced texts been easily overcome by seeking a wider authorship? A more minor issue here is that, prior to reading this text, I was aware of most of the examples, so could make an easy connection. Yet, there is a lack of photographs or graphic representations that may have made for a better understanding of concepts and ideas for those readers of the text who were not aware of the examples. Despite some rich description, I am left to ponder if someone who was not cognisant of *Doctor Who, The Lego Movie* or Disney Movies would be able to effectively connect to the examples without supporting visual aids. As stated at the outset, with popular culture being short lived and specific to its own era, this book may become quickly dated and historical as the popular culture moves into its next phase. Thus the difficulty whenever dealing with popular culture is that the connection to the audience has the potential to be quickly lost. What this new book has done extremely well is to provide an engaging use of recent American television and movies to tie together education with globalisation, identity and heath and wellbeing.

References

Danesi, M. (2015) *Popular Culture: introductory perspectives (third edition)*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham. USA

Chris Speldewinde teaches in the Master of Applied Learning & Teaching at Deakin University.

NOTES FOR INTENDING CONTRIBUTORS

1. AJAL publishes papers in two main sections – blind peer-reviewed articles that draw on research, historical examination and/or theoretical insights and contributions; and a non-refereed section which aims to help practitioners reflect on their fields of practice, policy, improve teaching and learning and so on. These articles tend to be shorter and developmental. Articles that are more appropriate for the refereed section will not be considered for the non-refereed section. Authors should indicate in which section they want their paper to appear. In addition the Journal publishes book reviews, and from time to time special sections devoted to a theme or historical event.

2. Refereed papers should generally not exceed 6,000 words in length and have any author-identifying comments or references removed.

3. Please adhere to the style outlined on the AJAL website, prior to submitting your article as this will save time for editorial staff, reviewers and authors. Preferred style is defined for:
    a. Footnotes/Endnotes
    b. Spelling (Australian-English)
    c. Numbers in text
    d. In text references
    e. References

4. Papers are submitted online via the AJAL submission area on the AJAL website www.ajal.net.au. Submission requires completion of an online form, and separate attachment of the paper.

5. The online submission form requires the following information:
    a. Article title, author(s) name(s) and author institutional affiliation(s);
    b. Up to 6 Keywords
    c. An abstract of between 150-200 words;
    d. A five-line biographical note
    e. Complete contact details, including postal and email addresses, and telephone numbers
    f. Indication of whether you want your paper to be refereed (that is, blind peer reviewed by at least two specialist reviewers from Australia and/or overseas)

6. Papers are accepted on the understanding that they are not being considered for publication elsewhere.

7. Brief research reports and book reviews (of approximately 800 words) relating to adult and community education are welcomed.

8. Some issues of the Journal are thematic. While papers published in a particular issue are not restricted to the theme, intending contributors are encouraged to submit papers on themes announced from time to time.

Further information about possible articles can be addressed to the Editor,

Dr Tony Brown,
Faculty of Education, Science, Maths & Technology,
University of Canberra,
BRUCE ACT 2617,
Australia.
Email: tony.brown@canberra.edu.au.

Volume 56, Number 2, July 2016