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Reaching the finishing line: some outcomes and results of online enabling education

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Abstract

Tertiary enabling education aims to make the benefits of higher education accessible to people from disadvantaged groups, especially those from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The University of New England (UNE)'s fully online Pathways Enabling Program (PEP) was designed for those who do not otherwise have the necessary skills and credentials to enter university education (Muldoon, 2011). This paper builds on previous research by reporting study patterns, results, achievements and views of 531 students who have completed the PEP and subsequently enrolled in degrees at UNE since 2009. The attrition rate of these students is exactly half the attrition rate of PEP students and pass rates are very high. Furthermore, grade point averages are impressive. However, it appears that the vast majority of enrolled PEP students are deliberately progressing at the minimum possible rate, i.e. taking the maximum allowable time to complete their degrees. Additionally, they are largely continuing to study online rather than on-campus. Understanding lifestyle factors experienced by PEP students and making adjustments to the program to accommodate them has been critical to the success of the PEP (Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2013). It would seem that, similarly, lifestyle factors play a crucial role in subsequent mode of study choices and progression rates. It appears that traditional university experiences are not compatible with the lives of those who have in the past been marginalised socially, educationally and economically. Nevertheless, when previous barriers to education are removed and students are enabled to proceed in a manner and pace that does not conflict with the many other demands on their time and limited resources, the finishing line is clearly attainable, very often with flying colours.

Keywords: *enabling education, disadvantaged groups, online education*

Introduction

The purpose of tertiary enabling education programs is to allow a second chance for tertiary education for students who, for a variety of reasons, have not followed the more traditional pathway from secondary schooling directly into higher education. Such programs received a massive boost in Australia when funding was provided to assist universities to meet government targets aimed at increasing the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups engaged in higher education. These targets, announced in 2008, include raising the proportion of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds participating in higher education to 20% by 2020 with an overall aim of 40% of all 25-34 year olds holding a qualification at bachelor level and above by 2025 (Bradley, 2008).

The University of New England (UNE) launched its fully online Pathways Enabling Program (PEP) in 2008. The Program consists of two foundation skills units and two elective units of study. The electives are drawn from a select group of first year offerings which comprise 24 disciplinary introductory units (Muldoon, 2011). The foundation skills units cover academic writing, information literacy, critical thinking and reflective writing within a framework of practical techniques for successful independent study thereby providing an effective integrated program as recommended in the literature (East, 2009; Yucel, 2009).

Foundation skills assessment is continuous and formative rather than summative and feedback is friendly, responsive and non-threatening, an important aspect of enabling education (Anderson, 2007). At the same time, students are undergoing university assessment tasks in their faculty-based electives which are marked and graded according to university policy which requires both formative and summative assessment. This mix of assessment approaches means that students are nurtured in their skills development whilst also, within that supportive environment, preparing for the reality of summative assessment (Muldoon, 2011; Muldoon et al, 2009).

Since the inception of the program, student feedback, research and reflection have led to adjustments to the program made in the light of the lifestyles and needs of its participants (Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2013).

Successful PEP students

Successful completion of the PEP requires completion of all the tasks in the foundation units and the usual pass grade or above in the electives. Students are able to count the electives towards a future degree thereby commencing their studies with a head-start.

Outcomes in the first five years of the Program (2008-2012) have shown that despite high attrition rates, the program has successfully removed previous constraints and disadvantages for many (Muldoon, 2011; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2013).

But what happens next for successful enabling education candidates? This paper builds on previous research (Muldoon, 2011; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2013) by reporting on the study patterns, results and achievements of 531 people who have completed the PEP since 2008 and subsequently enrolled in degrees at UNE from 2009 to 2013. At the time of the study, of the 531 students, 41 had completed their degrees, 296 were actively enrolled, 96 had officially withdrawn and 98 were inactive i.e. taking a break from their studies. The study sought the views of those (296) who are currently actively enrolled in degree studies in Trimester 1, 2014 via an online survey.

The ethics-approved survey consisted of eleven questions requiring categorical answers or open-ended answers, or a combination of both. The participants were contacted via email and provided with an overview of the research project and its aims and objectives plus the relevant ethics information. They were advised that participation was voluntary and anonymous. This email was followed two days later with another linking to the online survey via SurveyMonkey. Two email reminders were sent out prior to the survey

being closed after two weeks. A total of 73 students returned the questionnaire, a response rate of 25%.

The categorical responses were simply analysed according to frequency of responses. The open-ended responses were analysed using QSR NVivo software. Nodes were named according to emerging ideas and then refined to themes against which the data was entered and managed.

Reasons for undertaking the PEP

The PEP is marketed as an entry pathway to degree study and also for those who do not require the pathway to enrolment but feel as if they do need to develop or revise their academic skills prior to commencing their studies. The majority of the survey respondents (69 or 95%) indicated that they did indeed enroll in the PEP to qualify for university entry. Of these, 18 (25%) indicated that they also sought to develop the skills they would need to succeed at university. One respondent added that he/she had not studied for more than thirty years and another said that he/she was unable to attend senior high school for medical reasons and the online PEP was able to be undertaken during the illness and afforded the ability to keep pace with school peers in terms of commencement of university study. Just 5% indicated that they enrolled only to develop their academic skills. Two respondents also specified an additional reason for enrolling. One wished to increase his/her confidence before enrolling and the other wanted to ensure that he/she was 'good enough' to be successful at university prior to enrolling.

Occupation

Nearly a third of respondents (22 or 30%) are engaged in full-time work. A similar number (20 or 27%) are engaged in part-time work. A further 18 (25%) are stay-at-home parents/carers and 13 (18%) are unemployed aside from study.

Destination degrees

By far the most popular destination profession amongst this group was teaching with 220 (41%) choosing teaching degrees. Within this subgroup, the most popular degree was The Bachelor of Education (Primary) with 147 (67% of aspiring teachers). The two next most popular teaching degrees were the combined degree Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching (chosen by 20 or 9% of aspiring teachers) and another combined degree, the Bachelor of Special Education/ (Primary)/Bachelor of Disability Studies (chosen by 16 or 7% of aspiring teachers).

The second most popular choice of study discipline was the humanities, with 113 (21%) choosing degrees in this area with the Bachelor of Arts being the most popular with 77 enrolments (68% of humanities group). The two next most popular humanities degrees were the Bachelor of Social Science (chosen by 11 or 10% of humanities students) and

the combined degree Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Business (chosen by 6 or 5% of humanities students).

The third most popular choice of study discipline was the sciences, chosen by 79 (15%). Within the sciences, the Bachelor of Science and the Bachelor of Zoology were equally the most popular with 14 (18%) choosing each.

The remaining PEP students (119 or 23%) chose degrees in the discipline areas of psychology, commerce/business, law/criminology and health. Overall the three most popular degrees were the Bachelor of Education (Primary) with 28%; the Bachelor of Arts with 15%; and the Bachelor of Psychology with 6%.

Mode of study

Additionally, these students are largely studying online rather than on-campus. Of the survey respondents, 68 (93%) are off campus students studying primarily online.

Pass rates

In the five year period of the study (2009-2013), the 531 students who are the subjects of this research enrolled in a total of 5,975 units of study in their various degrees. 72% (4,300) of these units were passed satisfactorily. Slightly more than 7% (466) of the units were failed. For slightly less than 1% (39) of the units, results were unknown at the time of data collection. Students withdrew from 20% (1,170).

This is very similar to the pass rates of the entire undergraduate cohorts in the last two years. In 2012, 71% of all units were passed; 10% of all units were failed; and students withdrew from 19% of all units. In 2013, 69% of all units were passed; 10% of all units were failed; and students withdrew from 21% of all units. Indeed, more units were passed by PEP students and fewer units were failed by PEP students.

Grades

Furthermore, the grades achieved by PEP students are impressive. Of the 4,300 units of study that were completed satisfactorily, there were 359 High Distinctions (85+%); 1,204 Distinctions (75-84%); 1,479 Credits (65-74%) and 1,258 Passes (50-64%).

Again these results are very similar to the entire undergraduate cohorts in the last two years. In 2012 and 2013, approximately 8% of each undergraduate cohort achieved High Distinctions compared to 6% of the PEP cohort; approximately 19% of each undergraduate cohort (2012 and 2013) achieved Distinctions compared to 20% of the PEP cohort; approximately 21% of the each undergraduate cohort (2012 and 2013) achieved Credits compared to 25% of the PEP cohort; and 20% of each undergraduate cohort (2012 and 2013) achieved Passes compared to 21% of the PEP cohort.

Attrition

The attrition rate of the 531 students during the period of the study was 18%. This is based on the number of students (96) who deliberately discontinued their studies by officially withdrawing from their studies. This is fairly similar to the average attrition rate for commencing undergraduate students in Australia overall which is approximately 16% (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011; Danahera, 2008; Willcoxson, 2010).

However, this attrition rate is exactly half the 36% attrition rate of the PEP (Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2013). High attrition rates are common in enabling education. Indeed, an important purpose of enabling programs is to allow individuals who may have a desire to undertake university study to discover not only if they are capable of studying at that level but also if that is actually what they want to do. Withdrawal from the enabling program, if it is for the right reasons, may be a positive result for some students and also for the higher education sector generally as the costs of attrition at this level are so much less for both the student and the institution (Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Klinger, Murray, O'Rourke & Schofield, 2014).

The fact that the attrition rate of the PEP students who have gone on to enroll in degrees is half of the attrition rate of the PEP is a further measure of the worth of the PEP in that many of those that were not truly destined for further study have dropped out prior to becoming an undergraduate attrition statistic.

Progression rates

It appears that a clear majority of enrolled PEP students are deliberately progressing at the minimum allowable rate i.e. taking the maximum allowable time to complete their degrees. At UNE, it is usual for full-time students to complete the requirements of their degrees in three or four years but it is possible to take as long as ten years when studying part-time. Just 41 of the 531 students have completed their degrees within the period of the study. Of these just nine completed their degrees in the minimum time by studying full-time. The remainder of the 41 allowed themselves additional time to compete, taking up to five years. With 96 students having discontinued their studies altogether, the remainder (394) appear to be progressing even more slowly with many also taking time out for whole semester/trimester periods from time to time.

Interestingly, UNE's change from a semester system to a trimester system in 2012 received a glowing endorsement from the majority of the survey respondents (49 or 67%) because it has enabled them to complete their degrees sooner whilst continuing to study at the same rate i.e. one or two units of study per term. For example:

I like having the three trimesters. They allow me flexibility and the ability to arrange units around my home life. I can pick up extra units over the Christmas break if I choose to. I like this option; I have been able to complete my degree quicker. At times when things were getting tough, I was able to drop one unit

without it affecting my date of completion for my degree; it has helped as I can increase the number of units I do each year as I complete my course part time while also allowing greater flexibility in achieving a balance of family and work commitments with study.

Whilst many commented on the increased annual workload and decreased study breaks, for most the ability to move towards completion more swiftly outweighed any disadvantages. Seventeen respondents (23%) felt that the increased workload outweighed the advantage of timelier completion. Seven respondents (10%) had no opinion, did not feel strongly either way or did not respond to this question.

Of the survey respondents, the majority (56 or 77%) are studying part-time and they are mostly (65 or 89%) happy with their progress and university experience. Just 8 (11%) said that they were unhappy and unsurprisingly the reasons for this were largely related to the difficulties of combining work and family duties particularly parenting, with the demands of study, despite the ability to choose to progress slowly.

Views of students

The survey asked students in what ways the PEP prepared them for their degree studies in an open-ended question. By far the most common response was about how the PEP prepared students in academic writing and referencing (39). This was followed by study skills generally including how to study online (22), increased confidence (13), critical thinking skills (5), understanding the expectations of university lecturers (3), time management (3) and exam preparation (1). Three students specified the value of the head-start in their degree studies afforded by the recognition of their PEP electives within their degrees. Many of the responses about the PEP helping to increase students' confidence reflected previous educational disadvantage and lack of opportunity. For example:

In many ways. I lacked confidence in gaining entry into university. It was something I had wanted to do for more than ten years. The PEP is the only reason why I am studying as it gave me the necessary skills to complete my degree successfully (it had been 15 years since I studied). Studying part-time through the PEP gave me a fabulous insight into the world of studying; I was able to prove to myself that I am capable; Taught me to learn to have faith in my own ability; It gave me confidence in my ability to succeed at university. I have always lacked confidence in my ability to complete a degree, until I decided that if I wasted any more time I would never do it.

In another open-ended question the survey asked students about how they managed to ensure that they were able to devote the required time to all aspects of their life, including study. There were 31 responses about the importance of establishing regular study times with the support of family members. For example:

I have set times that I allow for study, for example, I work three days a week. The other two days are devoted to my study. On these days I try to do

assignments. When my children go to bed at night, I sit at my laptop and do weekly readings and lectures. My husband is a great support and if I have assignments that are due, he will sometimes take the children somewhere on the weekend so I can complete set tasks. I find organisation is the key, and doing small amounts everyday.

There were 28 responses about the value of the discipline achieved through diarising all demands on time and careful planning. For example:

Whiteboard planner with UNE and family commitments, goal setting; Prioritising my tasks/study within my time constraints; Organisation and structure with meal preparation and kids' routines.

Three responses were about rewarding self for achieving goals. For example:

I use my favourite TV shows as incentive i.e. I set rules like 'I can't watch this episode until xx is done'.

Ten respondents said they applied no real strategies. A recurring theme through all responses was the pressure of family commitments as encapsulated in the following:

During my children's HSC years, particularly Year 12, and during times of aging parents' needs, I reduced my workload to a more manageable level. That is, withdraw from units before census date. I've gained weight and lost fitness level from sitting at the computer as I liked to submit the best possible assignments that I am capable of. My housework gets neglected particularly towards the end of a trimester. When several assignments are due together, meals are fish and chip type meals; and I am extremely well organised but in saying that, it is extremely hard balancing my family, work and study life. It was okay for the first few years but I really want my life back now that I'm so close to my degree. I'm not complaining though... as distance education and the PEP is the only reason why I will graduate this year (I could never have studied on campus with my four young children).

Other feedback garnered through the survey emphasised the importance of effective online teaching technology and positive interaction with university staff. The prior disadvantage experienced by many of the respondents and the second chance afforded to the students were pervasive themes in the feedback.

The respondents clearly appreciate the fact that as distance education students they have access to much the same experience as on-campus students through effective, flexible teaching technologies. For example:

In my opinion, UNE provides great units for external students, and over the years it has progressed with technology. Through (the online learning management systems) I feel as an external student I don't miss out on anything. Lectures are recorded in an mp4 format allowing for external students to see the lecture slides as the lecturer is talking about them; I think having the lectures

videoed is important, also external web chats with lecturers being recorded is very helpful; and I have had a really positive university experience thanks to UNE's flexible and comprehensive online learning system.

They also value the ease with which they are able to interact with university staff. For example:

I have found my uni experience mostly positive with most lecturers making themselves available to external students above and beyond my expectations. Interaction through (the online learning management systems) has been a vital tool to the success of my studies; and I find the resources available to distance students are exceptional. I have found lecturers and subject contacts extremely approachable. I appreciate the effort UNE obviously makes to provide a quality education to distance students.

Additionally, the opportunity provided by enabling education to overcome previous disadvantage, particularly educational disadvantage, appears to be widely and highly appreciated by the respondents. For example:

PEP was vital for me to follow my dream to study at University, as a Forgotten Australian I missed out on this as a young man and I'm sure there are others for what ever reason were unable to follow their dreams that now can because of PEP; I really appreciated the opportunity to gain entrance to Uni this way and also for the gentle easing into increased study load; My feedback about the PEP is all positive - the fact that I could gain confidence in my ability to complete two uni units along with guidance from the foundation units with no financial sacrifice was important for me; As a general introduction I felt it was wonderful. I certainly learned a lot, but more importantly, I gained the confidence to continue with my studies in an undergraduate course.

In response to the first email sent out about this study, the following unsolicited response was received:

I am a former PEP student and would like to participate in your study. I found the program an excellent pathway and provided core essential skills, it supported increases in my academic self-efficacy, and a deeper understanding of what would be required throughout my university studies. I shall complete my Honours in Psychology this year.

Discussion

The 531 subjects of this study are very different to the average undergraduate student in that they did not enter higher education via the traditional pathway based on high school matriculation. They entered via enabling education, the objective of which is to provide not just an alternative entry pathway but the skills required for successful university study.

These students are also extremely busy with 82% employed outside the home or engaged in care-giving duties. They are mostly studying via online distance education and despite the fact that most are progressing deliberately slowly because of their various other commitments, they appear to be keen to move forward, hence their appreciation of UNE's move from semesters to trimesters. The flexibility afforded by studying online is a very important aspect of their university experience. As well, the university preparation embedded in their enabling course has been a critical ingredient in their university outcomes. The most popular destination degrees amongst these students are teacher education, the humanities and the sciences.

The most important academic skills acquired by these students during their enabling course were academic writing including referencing; study skills; critical thinking skills; and time management. The students also highly valued the opportunity to better understand university assessment regimes and the expectations of lecturers. Increased confidence as a result of these components of the course and the opportunity to test themselves in real units of study through the PEP electives was frequently expressed. This is also very possibly a reflection of the past educational disadvantage experienced by these students.

However, despite significantly different lives and backgrounds to traditional students, the subjects of this study are remarkably similar to all other students in terms of their pass rates, grades achieved and attrition. Once effectively prepared for university study, given the ability to enroll and the opportunity to study in ways that suit their lifestyle, including the ability to dip in and out of their studies, these students do just as well as all other students. This is a significant outcome in the current push in Australia to increase the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups engaged in higher education, especially those from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

Conclusion

If universities are serious about removing barriers to participation in higher education and the acquisition of related social capital by people previously affected by educational and social disadvantage, not only must enabling education be designed to accommodate the lifestyle of participants but also degree studies need to be flexible in both mode of study and length of candidacy. Traditional university experiences are not compatible with the lives of those who have been previously marginalised socially, educationally and economically. Most do not have the time or resources to study full-time, nor do they have the ability to relocate to be near university campuses. However, when previous barriers to education are removed, obstacles are cleared from the way ahead and students are enabled to proceed at a pace that does not conflict with the many other demands on their time and limited resources, the finishing line is clearly attainable, very often with flying colours.

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