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## **Tertiary Enabling Education: Removing barriers to higher education**

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### **Abstract**

*Tertiary enabling education is set to expand in Australia following an extensive review of higher education in 2008 which called for a significant increase in the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups engaged in higher education. The University of New England became involved in enabling education with the launch of the Pathways Enabling Program (PEP) in 2008. The PEP is designed to make the benefits of higher education accessible to people who do not otherwise have the necessary skills and credentials. Typical PEP students are people who have not completed high school and/or have had unsuccessful prior educational experiences.*

*This reflection paper describes the context and key features of the course. It examines the PEP student experience gathered through student reflection activities, informal feedback and standard unit evaluations instruments. It reports on student retention, success and progression rates and compares them with those of students who have entered the university through traditional university entry based on high school performance. Results show that with appropriate nurturing and supportive induction to university expectations, norms and conventions, including meaningful, contextualised tertiary literacy development, many PEP students have a similar propensity for success in higher education as traditional entry students. On the other hand, attrition rates are high and there appear to be causes of attrition which are distinctive to enabling education participants. Understanding this and developing appropriate intervention is critical to further improving the outcomes of the PEP and other similar programs aimed at removing barriers to higher education participation for people previously affected by educational and social disadvantage.*

**Keywords:** *Enabling education, educational and social disadvantage, alternate pathways, tertiary literacy*

### **Introduction**

Since an extensive review of higher education in Australia in 2008 which called for a significant increase in the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups engaged in higher education, the Australian government has set targets which 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, Noonan et al. 2008). Consequently Australian universities are busily implementing a variety of strategies,

including alternative pathways to higher education, to increase and retain enrolments to meet these targets. One outcome of this is renewed interest in enabling education.

### **Context**

The University of New England (UNE), Australia, is situated in a small city in regional New South Wales. UNE has long been committed to a flexible, open access policy which encourages students from diverse backgrounds to access higher education through alternate pathways. As a result, a higher than the national average number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds enroll at UNE (University of New England 2010, 24) with the University already meeting the target of 20 percent of undergraduate enrolments from low socio-economic backgrounds by 2020. Membership of this group is often an indicator of disadvantaged educational background resulting from isolation or lack of resources or opportunity (Arnison 2000, 180; Trotter and Roberts 2006).

A recent initiative at UNE aimed at further removing barriers to participation in higher education is the UNE Pathways Enabling Program (PEP), launched in 2008.

### **The Pathways Enabling Program (PEP)**

The Pathways Enabling Program is designed to make the benefits of higher education accessible to people who do not otherwise have the necessary skills and credentials. This is a common goal of enabling educators (Anderson 2007; Ramsey 2007). The UNE Pathways Enabling Program aims to do this by offering tertiary literacy development within the context of real university study. This is supported by a student-centred approach responsive to participants' non-cognitive needs and the impact of negative personal histories, accepted key principles of effective teaching in developmental education (Smittle 2003 cited in Anderson 2007; Cantwell 2007). The one year part-time study is fee exempt. Students who complete the course are eligible for entry to most UNE undergraduate courses. It is fully online so students do not need to leave their homes or livelihoods to take part in the program, provided they have computer and internet access.

### **Key features of the Program**

The Pathways Enabling Course comprises four units of study taken over two semesters. In each semester students are required to enroll in two units: one core foundation skills unit, Foundation Skills for University Learning 1 (FNDN 101) and Foundation Skills for University Learning 2 (FNDN 102) and one faculty-based elective from UNE's core curriculum. The core foundations skill units are sequential and each is studied concurrently with an elective. The electives are drawn from a select group of first year offerings which comprises 24 disciplinary introductory units.

### ***Foundation Skills units***

The aim of the foundation skills units is to guide students through these first steps in their apprenticeship in academic conventions (Muldoon, O' Brien et al. 2009). Students are inducted into the learning support programs and resources very early on which ensures that they are not only aware of what is available for all UNE students throughout their time at UNE but also able to effectively utilise support materials and services to maximise their skills development and learning outcomes. In addition students are supported and mentored by their teachers in the foundation skills units.

This approach is consistent with the growing literature on effective student learning support which is co-produced with teaching staff (Briguglio 2007; Shaw, Moore et al. 2007; Yucel 2009). It is embedded, contextualised. It requires an in-depth understanding of the wide range of barriers to success experienced by students (Prentice, Collins et al. 2009), the ways that students from diverse backgrounds learn (Briguglio 2007) and their patterns of engagement (De George- Walker and Keefe 2010).

The foundation skills units cover academic writing, information literacy, computer 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).

### ***Academic writing***

The two foundation skills units step students through the process of academic writing and the textual features of the main written genres that students are likely to encounter during their time at university. FNDN 101 takes a 'top-down' approach to academic literacy, focusing on holistic features of written academic texts, the different genres in use in academic contexts, and how to move from descriptive to more analytical writing. Students also develop some initial competencies in identifying their problem areas in writing skills.

FNDN 102 adopts a 'bottom-up' approach to text production, by focusing on grammatical and stylistic features of academic writing that have been identified in the holistic tasks in FNDN 101. Students are assessed on these skills through a series of online quizzes that give them immediate feedback and opportunities to resubmit.

The rationale behind the 'top down' approach of FNDN 101 preceding the 'bottom up' approach of FNDN 102 in relation to writing skills is that concurrently with FNDN 101, students are undertaking a 'real' faculty-based unit of study. The majority of the faculty-based study units require students to produce a fully formed piece of academic writing in the first assessment task which usually occurs within the first 6 weeks of semester, so students are applying their skills as they are learning with the support and guidance of their lecturers.

### ***Information literacy***

The information literacy module of the Foundation Skills units covers the research process and academic integrity. As information literacy skills are an integral part of the research and writing process, this module and the academic writing module are combined.

### ***Computer literacy***

Students learn their computer literacy skills incidentally as they are exposed to a wide variety of internet technologies and end user applications. Also, students develop strong competencies and confidence with using the UNE virtual learning environment, such as its inline learning management system, e-submission system and authenticity checking software.

### ***Critical thinking and reflective writing***

A key focus of Foundation 101 is the critical thinking task in which students are introduced to the concept and process of critical thinking and its importance for academic study. This task comprises several smaller tasks involving reading, critical analysis and discussion postings with fellow students. The first component of this task has students reading articles about critical thinking and posting their comments on what they understand the process of critical thinking involves. The following tasks then require the students to put into practice those skills in a discussion task. Students are given a recent article on climate change and must look at features of the article such as the language used and the effect of this on the readers, the evidence used or ignored, the connections between the information and ideas in the main article and other articles on the same topics. In this way, students are given a comprehensive introduction into the process of critical thinking: distinguishing fact from opinion, basing an argument on evidence, evaluating sources and being aware of how language can be used to engage and persuade readers.

The second Foundation unit, FNDN102, includes a component in which students are asked to reflect on their learning experiences in discussions with other students in the unit. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to make the essential connections between the topics covered in both foundation skills units and their faculty-based electives.

This exercise highlights the disciplinary conventions in all the units being studied. By sharing their reflections with others, students also come to recognise that there may be significant differences between disciplines in the way that they understand and deal with knowledge. At the same time it makes clear that for any learning experience, students need to draw on their own knowledge and understandings. Moreover, as the students are

composing texts for their reflections, there is also a secondary opportunity for lecturers to interact with students in regard to incidental literacy issues that arise.

### ***Assessment***

Foundation skills assessment is continuous and formative rather than summative. Successful completion of the core foundations skills units requires completion of tasks only, irrespective of grades. Students are able to re-submit assignments after feedback from lecturers. While they are encouraged and supported to push their own boundaries, they are not compelled to do so. This ensures that the assessment is non-threatening and the atmosphere friendly and responsive, 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.

### **Students**

PEP students typically fall into two broad categories. The first group comprises students who have recently completed high school but who did not gain the entry requirements for university. The other group includes mature-aged students who left school a number of years ago, have spent those years since in the workforce or raising children, and who are now pursuing a career that requires higher education. Many members of both these groups have had unsuccessful prior educational experiences. Indeed a survey of commencing PEP students in 2011 with 50 respondents found that 36% had not completed secondary school and 42% had not done any formal study at all in the previous 10 years. These students often lack the confidence required to undertake university study and they may have little understanding of the processes and practices of academic culture. They often also have personal circumstances that make study challenging. In the same survey, 66% of respondents were in paid employment and 78% had family responsibilities.

### **Outcomes**

There were 1,096 new enrolments in the PEP's first five intakes (Semester 1, 2008-Semester 1, 2010). Of those, 43% passed their first core unit and 30% successfully completed the PEP and went on to enroll in a degree at UNE. However, 57% did not complete the first core unit with 29% officially withdrawing and 28% simply dropping out.

### ***Student progression***

An analysis of the results of 96 successful PEP students who enrolled in degree programs at UNE in 2009 showed that success rates (the measure of the number of units passed versus the number of units attempted) and grade point averages (GPA) were closely comparable with a control group of non-PEP students in the same degrees as set out in Table 1 below.

Student group	Success rate		Grade point average	
	Students with valid attempt (enrolled beyond government census date)	% Success	Students with a result	GPA
PEP cohort	96	78%	94	3.95
Control group (non-PEP students in same courses)	1,818	77%	1,758	4.08

**Table 1: Student progression data**

### *Student feedback*

For the 30% of students who successfully completed PEP, the program was clearly beneficial and resulted in significant levels of student satisfaction. The core foundations skills units have consistently rated extremely well in the institutional unit evaluation process. Both units have consistently achieved well above average in student satisfaction metrics, scoring between 4.2 and 4.9 out of 5. Following are typical student comments in the open feedback section of the unit evaluation questionnaire.

In answer to the question ‘What were the best aspects of this unit?’ respondents said:

- Everything from the learning materials to assessments was very clearly outlined and easy to understand.
- The presentation of the unit information and the weekly study guide made working through this unit logical and easy to follow.
- The unit allowed me to reconnect with the basic learning tools needed in university study.
- I really love the way everything is set out ... it is stimulating but at the same time easy to understand.
- This was an invaluable course to me.

Similar feedback has also been expressed in student reflections on their learning, for example:

- Without the essay writing skills... in the two FNDN units, I have no doubt that I would be struggling a lot this semester, possibly even failing. (Student reflection FNDN 102, Semester 2, 2010).
- The work I undertook during FNDN 101 and 102 has made my transition into tertiary study a lot smoother (Student reflection FNDN 102, Semester 1, 2010).
- FNDN 101 & 102 has made me aware of all the learning techniques and tools available to assist my learning. (Student reflection FNDN 102, Semester 2, 2008).
- One of the many things FNDN101 and 102 have taught me is not only how to help myself but to access valuable resources in order to be able to do this successfully (Student reflection FNDN 102, Semester 2, 2008).
- Studying FNDN 101 and 102 gave me so much more confidence (Student reflection FNDN 102, Semester 2, 2008).
- On reflection FNDN 101 AND 102 have both been fundamental to my studies. They have raised my understanding of academic skills to level that has allowed me to finish this course and pave the way to start my degree next year (Student reflection FNDN 102, Semester 2, 2010).

Student responses in the standard unit evaluation questionnaire about assessment and feedback has also been very positive, for example:

- The lecturers were extremely helpful and patient, which was appreciated. I enjoyed the (assessments) as I found them to be challenging, without being impossible.
- We got a lot of feedback for the work we completed in this unit and it was always given in time for the next task. The access to the tutors was very good as well..
- I think the way the assignments were constructed was a great way to help develop the skills needed.
- I think that the interaction between fellow students and their tutors was invaluable. The tutors encouraged us to help each other and ... stepped in if clarification was needed.

It is certainly evident that PEP students highly value the reflective component of the core foundations skills units in relation to their application of their learning in the foundations skills units to their 'real world' elective units. For example:

- It has been interesting to review my (elective) unit and consider the skills required, as well as how these skills differed from my previous (elective) unit. Initially, I found my (elective) unit to be quite difficult. There are many different theories ...and the language was quite technical. As a result, in the beginning of the semester, I was struggling with the weekly reading. In this regard, this unit is very different from my first (elective) unit, which ... used a less technical style of English that I found easier to understand. The work from FNDN 101 & 102 has been invaluable in relation to both units. For someone like myself, who has not experienced university education, it can be overwhelming (FNDN 102 Semester 2, 2009).

- I have found (electives) to be a challenge, requiring concentration and diligence. The skills needed for both electives were research skills, essay writing and carefully reading and following instructions, all of which are crucial in a university environment. The work I have completed in both FNDN units have assisted me greatly to master such skills (FNDN 102 Semester 2, 2010).
- Initially I was against the foundation units, as I just wanted to get started on the more appealing topics which were my electives. On reflection, the foundation units have assisted me to meet and understand the criteria for my electives and I doubt I would have received the marks I gained if it wasn't for the Foundation units (FNDN 102 Semester 2, 2010).
- I enjoyed ... the reflection post. It helped me to evaluate where I am heading in my university study (FNDN 102 Unit evaluation 2009).
- The four reflection tasks are a good way to check that you are learning the skills (FNDN 102 Unit evaluation 2010).

### **Attrition**

The 57% attrition rate described above is substantially higher than attrition from university undergraduate programs which itself has long been a matter of concern in Australia (White 2006; Taylor 2008). Approximately one third of students who begin university studies do not graduate and approximately half of those drop out in their first year (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs 2000; Krause, Hartley et al. 2005; McMillan 2005). However, the PEP attrition rate is very similar to attrition rates in enabling education programs elsewhere in Australia. For example: Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle, 2005-09: 45-55% attrition; Open Access College at the University of Southern Queensland, 2009: 55-58% attrition. There is a growing literature around undergraduate attrition but what is not well known is how enabling education attrition differs from undergraduate attrition and to what extent the findings about undergraduate attrition are applicable to enabling education programs.

What is generally understood amongst enabling education practitioners is that attrition is often 'positive attrition' wherein students make an informed decision to withdraw, choosing not to continue because they have discovered that university education is actually not for them. They then do not become an undergraduate drop out and therefore do not contribute to undergraduate attrition statistic as they might otherwise have.

With the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda described above the role of enabling education will become more important, as will the need to learn more about enabling education attrition and whether it has distinctive features that may be addressed. To that end there is currently a government funded national research project investigating the causes of attrition in enabling education programs in five universities in Australia, including UNE, with the goal of developing strategies to improve retention in such programs.

## Conclusion

Results show that with appropriate nurturing and supportive induction to university expectations, norms and conventions including meaningful, contextualised tertiary literacy development, many PEP students have a similar propensity for success in higher education as traditional entry students.

Analysis of student outcomes and progression has shown that overall it is fair to conclude that the Pathways Enabling Program provides an effective preparation for successful university study, for potential students who lack educational qualifications for entry.

It appears that this program has removed, to varying degrees, the constraints and disadvantages previously experienced by many of its participants. On the other hand, attrition rates are high. Some of this is 'positive' attrition. However, there may be causes of attrition which are distinctive to enabling education participants. Understanding this and developing appropriate intervention is critical to further improving the outcomes of the PEP and other similar programs aimed at removing barriers to higher education participation for people previously affected by educational and social disadvantage.

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