

Foundations for change, confidence, and new opportunities: impacts of a university enabling program in north-west Tasmania

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Abstract

University enabling programs develop students' academic skills and understandings of the academic culture and environments, facilitating students' transition into undergraduate courses. In addition to confirming these short-term benefits of enabling programs, this research explored the medium and longer-term impacts of the University of Tasmania's University Preparation Program (UPP). Past cohorts of successful UPP students from 1996 to 2007, in north-west Tasmania, were targeted. The study used a mixed methods approach, with surveys (quantitative) and interviews (qualitative). The findings are described in terms of three inter-related layers: foundations for change, confidence, and new opportunities. Developing academic skills and an understanding of the new culture led to students developing confidence, which empowered them to undertake undergraduate studies; this step, in turn, flowed on to further new opportunities, such as employment and leadership roles. This study illustrates that enabling programs are a transition strategy with multiple benefits, especially for students from under-represented backgrounds.

Keywords

Enabling program; preparation program; bridging course; transition to university; academic skills; confidence; transformation; leadership; regional education

Introduction

Enabling programs¹ have been operating in universities in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA for several decades, in some cases, and for only a few years in others. They provide a pathway to university, especially for students from under-represented backgrounds. In Australia, enabling programs play an important role in regional areas where educational attainment in secondary school and participation in higher education are low. The University of Tasmania's (UTAS) Cradle Coast campus in Burnie is located on the north-west coast of Tasmania, an area with some of the lowest levels of educational attainment in Australia. In this region, university participation is significantly lower than state and national averages; for example, the percentage of the labour force with a university-level qualification is 8.7% in the north-west region, 14.3% in Tasmania, and 18.8% Australia-wide (ABS, 2011). The

¹ Enabling programs are also known as bridging courses, access programs, transition programs, preparation programs, and foundation courses.

UTAS enabling program, the University Preparation Program (UPP), is a strategy to widen participation in higher education; it aims to equip students with the academic skills and an understanding of the academic culture to successfully transition to undergraduate courses. UPP is a semester-based course in which students study units that focus on study skills, academic writing, and numeracy; it is offered full-time or part-time, and on-campus or distance. In areas such as north-west Tasmania, the program is critical for providing opportunities for people from under-represented backgrounds to gain the skills and confidence necessary for university studies.

In Australia, literature in the field of enabling programs includes analyses of enabling programs, in which shorter-term impacts and outcomes have been identified, as well as students' performances once in degrees (Cantwell, 2004; Cantwell & Grayson, 2002; Clarke, Bull, Neil, Turner, & Birney, 2000; Crawford, 2014; Klinger, 2011; Klinger & Murray, 2009; Klinger & Tranter, 2009). Debenham and May (2005), and Willans and co-authors have focused particularly on transformative learning (Willans, 2010; Willans, Harreveld, & Danaher, 2003; Willans & Simpson, 2004; Willans & Seary, 2007, 2011). A noticeable gap in the literature has been the medium and longer-term outcomes of enabling programs, with the exception of recent research by Bunn (2013), and Albright and Fagan (2014). As a result, the research project upon which this paper is based aimed to fill this gap by exploring the medium to longer-term outcomes, specifically for students and the communities in the rural and regional areas of north-west Tasmania (Johns et al., 2014). The main aim of this research was to gain an understanding of the post-UPP pathways of individuals.

Methods

This study used a mixed methods approach involving two phases of data collection, quantitative (in the form of a survey), and qualitative (in the form of interviews). The quantitative aspect provided an understanding of the impact of UPP on a larger number of individuals. In addition, the quantitative data generated from the surveys informed the types of questions asked in the qualitative interviews. The qualitative element enabled the researchers to explore the participants' experiences in depth (Creswell, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches enables both broader generalisations to be made and a deeper understanding of the impacts on individuals of participation in UPP.

Past cohorts of "successful" UPP students from the Cradle Coast from 1996 to 2007 were the target group. These cohorts were selected in order to track former students' pathways post-UPP over a number of years; therefore, recent graduates were not included. "Successful" students were defined as those who had completed (received a Pass grade or higher) at least one UPP unit. Surveys were mailed or emailed to the target group of 614 former students. Fifty-six surveys were completed, which was an 11.5% response rate. Survey respondents were given the option of also participating in an interview. Twenty-five interviews took place. In addition to collecting interview data from former students, two key stakeholders (the former UPP coordinator and the former Cradle Coast Campus manager) were interviewed, which enabled an exploration of the broader impact of participation in UPP on UTAS and the Cradle Coast community. Survey data were analysed using IBM SPSS version 21. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each member of the project team coded the interviews that they conducted, based on a shared code book of agreed themes, definitions, and examples to ensure consistency. Then cross-interview data analysis was performed.

Limitations of the study are that it is based on UPP participants who had passed (that is, received a Pass grade or higher) at least one UPP unit; it did not investigate the impacts on students who did not pass. Therefore, the outcomes reported by UPP interviewees do not necessarily represent the outcomes of the broader UPP cohorts. Furthermore, due to the retrospective nature of the study, it favoured past participants who had remained in Burnie and surrounding areas, particularly those who had remained at the same address, as contacting participants by post was the main way in which surveys were administered.

Findings and discussion

This section will briefly present some background/contextual information before focusing on the impacts of UPP. Pseudonyms are used when quoting or paraphrasing participants.

Background/contextual information about the participants

The majority of the survey respondents (71%) were females, which is similar to the gender ratio in the 1996-2007 UPP cohorts. There was a spread of ages, with a clustering in the 30-54 age groupings, and a spread in terms of previous education levels. Twenty-one per cent had completed Year 12. Fifty-nine per cent of the survey participants were the first in their family to attend university. Those who were not first-in-family reported siblings rather than parents as having attended university.

Interviewees who discussed the reasons why they had not previously studied at university mentioned family circumstances, such as their parents' inability to financially support them to attend university, and family expectations. For example, a commonly-held attitude was that university was for the "brainy" and "wealthy". Some female interviewees spoke about their families having particular expectations for girls. Wendy, for instance, explained: 'I came from a family, a generation of parents where boys studied and girls didn't.' She recounted a remark from her father: 'just get a job and wait until [you are] married.' The former UPP Coordinator reiterates this attitude in the following comment about a student:

...and she came to UPP because she'd left school at the end of Year 10 and her family had the view – and this was a very traditional view at the time and probably still remains that way on the north-west coast – that a girl didn't need to go to university.

Melissa describes a similar attitude: 'there was an expectation that I would go on and just work after Year 10. My parents... didn't think that [university] was a pathway for me.' Males were also constrained by the expectation that after school they would become tradesmen.

The step of enrolling in UPP often created tensions with family and friends; for example, it was perceived as a 'threat' to those not undertaking study, and went against community expectations and values. In addition to lack of family support, other challenges related to being the first-in-family and, as Josh explained, having 'absolutely no idea what to expect'.

Eighty-two per cent of the survey respondents still live in the north-west coast region; of the ten who do not, nine live in rural or regional locations in states on the Australian

mainland. The main reason for leaving the north-west of Tasmania was for employment.

Impacts of participation in UPP

The numerous outcomes of participation in UPP can be grouped into three inter-related areas, as shown in Figure 1: i) foundations for change; ii) confidence; and, iii) new opportunities.



Figure 1: Impacts of participation in UPP

Foundations for change

Consistent with one of the major aims of UPP, interview findings illustrate that students learnt about the university culture. The following quotation from Amanda explicitly refers to gaining an awareness of the expectations of university:

I think the UPP program introduced me to academic life and showed me what the expectations were. So, 'this is uni', 'this is what is expected of you', 'if you don't like it, get out now', 'if you don't like it but want to keep going, this is what you have to deal with'.

A number of interviewees mentioned that they developed academic skills, such as literacy, IT, research skills, and time management, which are invaluable for further study, and for the workplace and lifelong learning. Gaining an understanding of the university culture and developing academic skills are aims of enabling programs, so this finding is not surprising or new, but it is desirable, and supports other research (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Stone, 2009; Crawford, 2014). Academic skills and an awareness of the academic culture provided students with the necessary foundation for studying at university; this grounding, in turn, led to the development of confidence.

Confidence

The survey results indicate that increased self-confidence was a major impact of UPP. Eighty-five per cent of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in UPP increased their confidence. Similarly, the theme of self-confidence permeated the interviews. All except for two interviewees explicitly mentioned or implied that they gained confidence. Mostly, the increase in confidence was linked to developing academic skills. Many interviewees emphasised that they would not have

gone on to further study without UPP, as illustrated by Gaylene in the following comment:

But I couldn't have done it without UPP, because I had been out of education for so long, and it gave me the confidence to move forward, to live my dream.

Some interviewees explained how UPP gave them confidence in their own abilities, such as Chris: 'the most important thing was that it gave me confidence in my ability to undertake university', and Amanda: 'Well, it showed me that I could do it. It gave me confidence.' Others mentioned that increased confidence led to them developing personally and overcoming barriers, such as shyness and nervousness. It led, for instance, to them becoming unafraid of asking questions and speaking up in class. These findings about confidence are supported by literature on enabling programs (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999; Crawford, 2014; Smith, 2010; Stone, 2009; Walter, 2000). The confidence gained during UPP equipped and empowered students to move on to further study, and/or to take up other new opportunities.

New opportunities

In the area of new opportunities, several thematic areas were identified: i) further study; ii) connections/networks; iii) willingness to continue lifelong learning; iv) employment; and, v) leadership.

Firstly, nearly all survey respondents (88%) continued with further study after UPP. Participation in UPP had a positive influence on further learning/study, with over half of the survey respondents strongly agreeing that participation in UPP had influenced their decision to undertake further learning or study. Eighty per cent of the survey respondents who continued with further study undertook higher education (rather than vocational education and training, or other specified study). Most of the further study was undertaken at UTAS, which shows that UPP was a pathway to undergraduate study at UTAS.

Of those who continued with higher education, 72% studied in a Bachelor degree; 28% completed a Bachelor degree then continued with postgraduate study. Education (31%) and Society and Culture (including social work/counselling) (25%) were the most popular fields of further study. These choices were expected as these courses were delivered (in part, if not wholly) on the Cradle Coast campus; it shows that students were likely to choose courses that did not require them to leave their local area. The completion rates for those who continued with further study were relatively good with over 75% having completed their course or still studying.

The second important impact is the networks and connections that students made from studying in UPP. Some interviewees mentioned the importance of these connections in providing support in their further study. For example, as Melissa explained:

...there was certainly always people who I knew who I'd met that initial year before I began my education degree, met as part of UPP who were able to assist you and, you know, keep you buoyed up along the way, you know, to do this.

The importance of connections developed with peers, staff, and the university are supported by literature on enabling programs (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Crawford, 2014; Debenham & May, 2005; Ramsay, 2004).

Thirdly, findings from the interviews imply that a number of interviewees show a willingness to continue with their learning, beyond Bachelor degrees. For example, two students had completed PhDs. Some indicated an interest in embarking on higher degrees. Others are interested in further study to develop their workplace skills. Laura, a teacher, is an example of the latter:

I'd like to extend some of my learning, maybe take on another course, just to be a better teacher because I know more and have more interests. So really, to continue what I'm doing but to include more things in my repertoire, I suppose.

For interviewees such as Kevin, study has become a part of life; he stated: 'further study is always ongoing'. Similarly, for Andrea UPP was just the beginning; she explained: 'once started, I haven't stopped, really. I'm still on it'. Likewise, for Amanda:

I always wanted to be really good at something or know a lot about at least one thing. And the UPP program showed me what I had to do to get to that point...yeah, but I just couldn't stop. Every time I finished a course or a degree, I wanted to do something else. Um, so yeah, just the bug.

In regard to the fourth area, employment, there are two particularly interesting findings. Although the reported employment rates of the survey respondents (two thirds in paid employment) are similar to the pre-UPP rates, one major difference is in terms of gender; there has been a shift in employment rates post-UPP for females compared with males (72% versus 44%). Another interesting finding is the type of employment gained. Before UPP only four survey respondents had professional roles; post-UPP, in contrast, around two thirds of the survey respondents who are currently working are employed in professional roles. For most of the interviewees, UPP led to undergraduate study, which led to employment (and frequently to better employment than before). Some interviewees talked about doors opening and an increased range of employment options.

The fifth sub-theme in the area of new opportunities is leadership. One example is interviewees taking on leadership roles in their jobs or in the community, as is illustrated in the following two quotations by Gaylene and Barbara respectively:

So you feel more qualified, to be able to be part of it. And give back, and know you are giving back sound knowledge. You know, not just helping out at a lower level, you're quite happy to step up to that next level.

Go on the committee and quite happy to do the secretary's [role] whereas before I would have been like 'yeah, nup.' I'll be your dog's body, you go and do that job.

Another aspect is exhibiting leadership as a student; that is, students helping other students. One interviewee, Melissa, spoke about helping her peers in the first year of her degree. She said:

There were lots of questions I was able to answer for the people I did my education degree with... and it was just because I had that knowledge, I knew the programs they were using for their distance part – how to submit things online – where other people even...you know, they'd been straight out from school.

The finding that a potential outcome of enabling programs is leadership is relatively new in the literature. In a recent qualitative study, Crawford (2014) found that the former enabling students were assisting their new peers in the first semester of their

degree studies and taking the initiative to organise study groups. She argues that this is a flow-on effect of the program for the university.

While the findings in relation to ‘foundations for change’ and ‘confidence’ are supported by the literature, much of the data and information in the five themes within the area of ‘new opportunities’ are new contributions to the field. These new opportunities, such as the type of employment gained post-UPP, are longer-term impacts of enabling programs.

Extent of the impact of UPP

Another theme that arose in the analysis was the extent of the impact of UPP on the interviewees’ lives and attitudes. Descriptions of how attitudes had changed fall into three categories: i) changing the way one thinks about issues; ii) changing one’s attitude towards education; and iii) major changes to one’s life.

In regard to the first category, comments suggest that the interviewees changed their thinking from being ‘black and white’ on issues to realising that there could be many perspectives and diverse views. Daniel, for example, explained:

I’ve learned to listen, I’ve learned to accept that somebody else may have a different view to me and I’m certain that that all came out of doing UPP.

Furthermore, interviewees, such as Brandon, spoke about learning to think: ‘[t]hat’s ... what UPP and that first year did to me was make me think. Oh, it’s the greatest positive in my life’. Joshua expressed similar sentiments, stressing that UPP ‘certainly changed [his] way of thinking’. He added:

even before UPP, I would have considered myself a fairly unengaged person with issues... Whereas now, and still today, when I look at the news, I don’t believe anything they tell me sort of thing.

In regard to the second category, the following comment from Cynthia illustrates a changed attitude towards the value of education:

I just found UPP was a wonderful thing to do because it showed me how important education was too, for people who had ... you know, had a break in their life, like having children or not having gone to school.

In regard to the third category, some interviewees spoke about how UPP had changed their lives. Robert, for example, credits UPP for meeting his wife and for his professional life:

Well I could tell you a story about how the UPP has pretty much set up my entire life. Met my wife while doing UPP, she also did the UPP the same year. If I hadn’t of met my wife, I wouldn’t have my son. Wouldn’t have anything I’ve got now so, I put it all down to the UPP... I owe everything I have right now to the UPP, that’s all I’ve got. I’ve got two degrees, I’ve got a beautiful wife and a friendly little (sometimes) almost teenager. I’ve got a solid job that pays really well.

Over half of the interviewees commented on the level of impact UPP had on them; many used superlatives, such as ‘significant’, ‘valuable’, ‘huge’, ‘profound’, ‘fantastic’, to describe the impact. Others referred to the program as being ‘revolutionising’, ‘a turning point’, and ‘a circuit breaker’.

The findings about students changing their way of thinking highlights that they learn to think critically in UPP. These critical thinking skills or ability to ‘think differently’ have a significant impact on how the individuals understand issues, and, potentially, may lead to them changing their world-views; it transforms them on many levels, as Willans and Simpson (2004) found in research on enabling students. As Cantwell (2004) argues, far deeper learning, than simply skill acquisition, occurs in enabling programs.

Conclusion

This study found a range of positive impacts from studying in UPP for individuals on the north-west of Tasmania. Initially, students gained the foundations for change, such as an awareness of the academic culture and academic skills. It was this grounding that gave students the confidence to take the next step of embarking on an undergraduate degree. For students who live in an environment in which university study is not part of the family tradition or community culture and expectations, this confidence in themselves and their newfound academic skills empowered them to commence and persist with university studies, in spite of the lack of support they may have experienced from family and friendship groups. These outcomes illustrate that enabling programs are a successful transition strategy and overcome many of the challenges that students face when commencing the first year of a degree if they have not undertaken preparatory studies. This is particularly so for students from under-represented backgrounds.

In the longer term, gaining degrees tended to lead to employment in professional roles, which is a noticeable difference to the type of employment the interviewees were engaged in prior to UPP. Other new opportunities and interests arose either directly or indirectly from involvement in UPP, such as: connections and networks with peers and staff; viewing learning as a part of life and as ongoing; and leadership, in terms of helping their peers, taking on leadership roles in their profession and in the community. Studying in UPP had a transformative effect on many of the participants, personally, educationally, and professionally, and in the short, medium and longer term.

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