

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

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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 became 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 | 1 st 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 Dithen 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 *"every 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.

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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.

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