# Willing and enabled: The academic outcomes of a tertiary enabling program in regional Australia

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*This paper examines the achievement levels of students undertaking the Tertiary Enabling Program (TEP) at La Trobe University. The TEP is an alternative pathway program that traverses multiple institutions, campuses, and disciplinary areas, and is designed to prepare a diverse student cohort for tertiary study. The Program integrates several sources of support, including tutorials, mentoring, and counselling. We found high overall achievement levels, indicating success in teaching and supporting students with variant needs. Nevertheless, there was substantial variation in achievement between subjects, campuses, and student groups. Variable achievement is likely to reflect differing levels of prior educational attainment and preparedness among students. However, results also highlight the complexity in managing a Program across multiple sites, subjects, and institutions. We suggest further comparative research into curriculum and teaching practice of enabling programs nationwide to enable more effective benchmarking and expansion of these pathways.*

## Introduction

La Trobe University's Tertiary Enabling Program (TEP) was expanded in 2012 to operate across all four regional campuses of the University and one metropolitan site. The Program was delivered in partnership with Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) institutions and catered to students from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds. Given the expected diversity of the student cohort, several sources of academic and student support were incorporated into the Program. This support included: one hour optional tutorials scheduled two days per week; dedicated student and staff mentors to assist in lectures and tutorials and support engagement on campus; and integrated service models where counsellors visited classes, developed a profile and attempted to 'normalise' the counselling experience for students.

The expanded Program was evaluated by the authors to examine progress against multiple objectives, and this paper draws on the findings of that evaluation. Our specific focus here is the academic achievement levels of participating students. In particular, we explore the extent of differences in performance by subject area, campus of delivery, and student cohort. By identifying and analysing variations in achievement, we hope to provide insight into how a cross-institutional, multi-campus, cross-disciplinary enabling program can achieve consistently strong academic results across a diverse student cohort.

The broad policy and funding context for our research is initially outlined, with particular reference to the recent Australian Higher Education Base Funding Review and developments in the area of sub-degree qualifications. While enabling programs are growing nationwide, there remains concern about their level of effectiveness, particularly relative to other transition pathways into higher education. Moreover, while several studies have reported positive achievement and university transition outcomes among enabling

program cohorts, students are typically studying at a single campus and/or within a single higher education institution (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Trounson, 2012). We maintain a focus on academic achievement when turning to La Trobe University's Tertiary Enabling Program, consistent with previously published studies. However, our particular focus is on isolating and examining contextual factors within the Program, to enable exploration of the effects of campus, institution, disciplinary area, and geo-demographic cohort on academic performance. La Trobe's Program is unique in Australia in its operation across multiple institutions and campuses in regional areas, and this distinction provides an opportunity to explore a range of variables that potentially affect academic achievement.

In examining performance within the Program, we note that overall academic achievement levels were high, indicating general effectiveness of teaching and support strategies. The overall academic success of the cohort supports previous studies highlighting the effectiveness of enabling programs as pathways into tertiary education (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Trounson, 2012). Nevertheless, there was substantial variation in achievement levels despite the high level of academic and student support offered. In particular, achievement differed between disciplinary subjects and across delivery locations. There was also substantial variation by specific demographic cohorts, with relatively low achievement by Indigenous students and relatively high achievement by students from refugee and non-English speaking backgrounds. Levels of variability highlight the need for ongoing measures to ensure consistent entry standards and pedagogical practice across subjects and institutions. However, the results also indicate several areas for further investigation. These areas include the potential efficacy of cross-institutional relationships; the relative effectiveness of different curriculum models in enabling programs, including the breadth of disciplinary content and the extent of student choice; and the potential impact of demographic background, cultural expectations, and site-specific factors on academic achievement within an enabling program.

## Context

In 2008, the Australian Government initiated a comprehensive review of higher education in Australia. The Bradley Review, undertaken by an independent panel, examined the direction of the higher education sector, its ability to meet the needs of the Australian community and economy, and opportunities for ongoing reform (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). In response to the Bradley Review, the Australian Government outlined ambitious growth and equity targets in a report titled Transforming Australia's Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009). This report included the objectives that 20 per cent of undergraduate students will hail from low socio-economic backgrounds by 2020, and 40 per cent of all 25 to 34 year olds will hold a qualification at Bachelor degree or above by 2025. These targets will only be met by increasing demand for higher education, in turn by raising educational achievement of under-represented groups. Groups that are under-represented in higher education include low socio-economic status students, students from refugee backgrounds, students from rural and isolated areas, Indigenous students, and students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). These Government targets renewed interest in alternative pathways to university for students who lack prerequisites for entry into a degree course.

There are numerous alternative pathways to higher education for students who would not otherwise qualify for entry. Many institutions offer alternative entry schemes that take into account short and long-term educational disadvantage (Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2013a). Students applying through tertiary admissions centres outline the disadvantage they have experienced and receive special consideration. There are also many sub-degree programs that provide pathways to higher education. Sub-degree programs include university diplomas and vocational education and training (VET) pathways and qualifications. Unlike Bachelor degree places, sub-degree places are now capped by the Government, although these arrangements are being reviewed (Ross, 2013). Most sub-degree programs incur some cost to the student and offer a qualification that

is typically counted as credit towards undergraduate study (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011).

Enabling programs represent an alternative pathway to higher education that has seen a steady growth in student numbers over the past two decades (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). There are two types of enabling programs: programs that provide a distinct pathway to higher education; and remedial enabling programs which are undertaken concurrently with university education study and cater to students who have qualified for entry but are academically under-prepared. Pathway enabling programs are the most common type and, in 2009, comprised 12,411 out of 19,298 students in enabling programs (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). While the sub-degree level is increasingly congested, pathway enabling programs occupy a unique space. Such programs typically maintain an academic standard below diploma level, are free for participating students, have a clear equity focus, and aim to equip a diverse cohort of students with necessary academic confidence and abilities to progress to tertiary study (Anderson, 2007; Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Willans & Seary, 2011).

In 2010, the role of enabling programs was examined as part of the Higher Education Base Funding Review (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). The broad purpose of the Review was to define principles for the long-term funding of Australian higher education and make recommendations for a reformed funding model. The Review noted that 97 per cent of enabling students are in Commonwealth supported places. Universities offering Commonwealth supported places in enabling programs cannot charge a student contribution, as they can for undergraduate students. Instead, universities receive an Enabling Loading in addition to the Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for Commonwealth supported places. In 2010, the estimated funding for all enabling places was $66 million, with the Enabling Loading accounting for $14 million of this total. While the Enabling Loading is paid per student, the total amount of funding is fixed. This has meant that as enrolments in enabling programs have increased, the amount of enabling funding per student has decreased, from $3,592 in 2005 to $2,044 in 2011. Several submissions to the Review Panel highlighted concerns that this funding structure may provide a

disincentive to universities offering Commonwealth supported places in enabling programs (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011).

Unlike higher education and VET courses, enabling programs are not part of the Australian Qualifications Framework which was established in 1995 to monitor the quality of Australian qualifications (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013). Furthermore, despite their existence since 1990, enabling programs have never been subject to a targeted review of effectiveness (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). One recommendation of the Base Funding Review was to examine the effectiveness of pathway enabling programs in comparison with the many other pathways to higher education. This work would be complicated by the diverse nature of enabling programs nationwide, with some operating over a full year, some for one semester only, some delivered to distinct groups (e.g. Indigenous; mature age), and some delivered online (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Vandyke, Shanahan & Wieland, 2012).

Nationally, enabling programs have demonstrated success in attracting under-represented cohorts. Students from equity groups comprise approximately 50 per cent of students in enabling programs, compared with 30 per cent of all domestic undergraduate students (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). The University of South Australia (UniSA), for example, runs a rapidly expanding pathway enabling program called Foundation Studies, which catered to 477 students in 2011 and 753 students in 2012 (Cocks & Stokes, 2013). Access and participation rates for equity groups in this program are substantially higher than institutional rates, particularly for low socio-economic, rural, and NESB students (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). Other universities offer specifically tailored enabling programs for distinct student cohorts. The University of Newcastle has been offering free pathway enabling programs for over 20 years and maintains the largest enabling program nationally. This program has provided a substantial recruitment pipeline for the university, particularly in relation to under-represented students. In 2012, around 3,000 students participated across three streams: Indigenous students; mature age students; and 17-20 year olds (Vandyke et al., 2012).

Students in enabling programs may require a high level of support to succeed. Cohorts often comprise students with family and employment responsibilities, low academic confidence levels, social and cultural displacement, and poor English language proficiency (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). To cater to the variant needs of students, programs typically embed numerous sources of academic and social support. In UniSA's Foundation Studies, for example, students can meet regularly with counsellors, language learning advisors, and career advisors, and also have access to other forms of ongoing support (Cocks & Stokes, 2013).

Despite their attractiveness, enabling programs typically record attrition rates of about 50 per cent (Klinger & Murray, 2012). Decisions to discontinue studying are strongly influenced by the difficult personal circumstances and competing demands that are inherent to enabling students (Bedford, 2009). Additionally, attrition rates include 'positive attrition' where students make informed decisions to discontinue after learning that university education is not the right choice for them (Muldoon, 2011).

A significant proportion of students who complete enabling programs transition into further study. Of the 12, 411 students who undertook a pathway enabling program in 2009, 4,061 had progressed into a Bachelor degree level course in 2010 (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). At UniSA, about 50-55 per cent of students who successfully complete Foundation Studies continue on to undergraduate studies the following year (Cocks & Stokes, 2013). At the University of Newcastle, approximately 70 per cent of students in enabling programs continue on to university study (Trounson, 2012). Importantly, many of these students would not have gained entry into university education without access to an enabling program.

## The program

La Trobe's Tertiary Enabling Program (TEP) runs over eighteen weeks in second semester, with a curriculum covering social science, adult learning, mathematics, and science. Students are encouraged to undertake all subjects, and are guaranteed entry into selected La

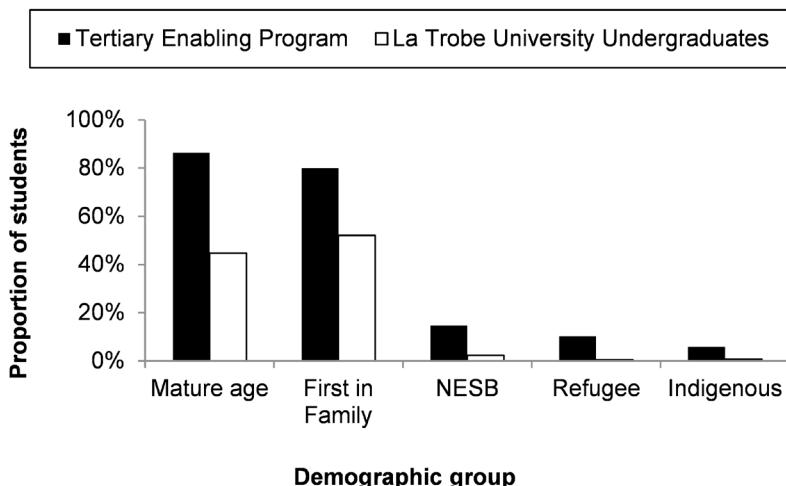Trobe degree courses if they pass all four subjects to an approved standard.

The TEP has been delivered at the University's Albury-Wodonga campus since 1990, catering to approximately 25 mature age students each year, including many under-represented students. In 2012, the TEP expanded to the University's other regional campuses at Bendigo, Mildura and Shepparton, in partnership with local TAFE institutions. In these locations, students spent one day a week at the University and another day at the TAFE. The Program continued to be delivered at Albury-Wodonga and was also launched at the Kangan Institute in Broadmeadows, one of the lowest socio-economic urban areas of Melbourne. In 2012, the targeted cohort was also expanded to include younger students aged 18 years and over. Dedicated mentors were also introduced and integrated into the TEP along with other sources of social and academic support, including optional tutorials and counselling.

The initial TEP target in 2012 was to enrol 150 students, with 30 students at each of the five locations. Enrolment targets were met, or approached, at four out of the five campuses. Specifically, 116 enrolments were confirmed after the census date, with 30 students at Shepparton, 28 students at Albury-Wodonga, 28 students at Bendigo, and 22 students at Mildura. The Kangan Institute recorded relatively few enrolments, with only eight students.

The TEP recruited a relatively high proportion of students from traditionally under-represented groups. Comparisons were made between the TEP cohort in 2012 and the La Trobe University domestic, commencing undergraduate cohort in 2012, where data were available. Figure 1 shows that the TEP students were more likely than their undergraduate counterparts to be mature age (86.3 per cent compared with 44.7 per cent) and first in their family to study at university (80 per cent compared with 52.1 per cent). The TEP also enrolled a considerably higher proportion of NESB students (14.7 per cent compared with 2.3 per cent), students from refugee backgrounds, defined as those holding a permanent humanitarian visa (10.3 per cent compared with 0.5 per cent), and Indigenous

students (5.9 per cent compared with 0.8 per cent). Data on socio-economic status and disability status were not available at the time of writing. Eighty-one of the students in the TEP were female (69.8 per cent) which is comparable to the representation of female students in the undergraduate population (65.3 per cent). Many students had personal circumstances that made studying difficult, including negative secondary school experiences, single parenthood, and mental health issues.

**Figure 1:** *Proportion of mature age, first in family, NESB, refugee, and Indigenous students enrolled in the TEP compared with undergraduate level at La Trobe University in 2012*



## Methodology

This paper draws from a comprehensive evaluation undertaken by La Trobe University's Access and Achievement Research Unit to measure the success of the expansion of the TEP. Our focus is the achievement levels of students, with a specific examination of factors correlated with variability in achievement. By exploring a range of contextual variables, we investigate the ability of a cross-institutional, multi-campus, cross-disciplinary enabling program to achieve consistently strong results across a diverse cohort of students.

Institutional data pertaining to the TEP were analysed, including enrolment numbers and student demographics, withdrawal rates, course weighted average marks, and subject marks. Data were sourced via the Student Information System (SISONE) on 1 February 2013. It is worth noting some caveats around these data. The number of students holding a permanent humanitarian visa was used as an indication of the number of students from a refugee background. Some data were not available in the Student SISONE at the time of reporting, such as low socio-economic status and disability status. In addition, a proportion of students who remained classified as 'enrolled' had actually disengaged from the Program and stopped participating. This trend was evident in the very low Course Weighted Average Marks received by these students.
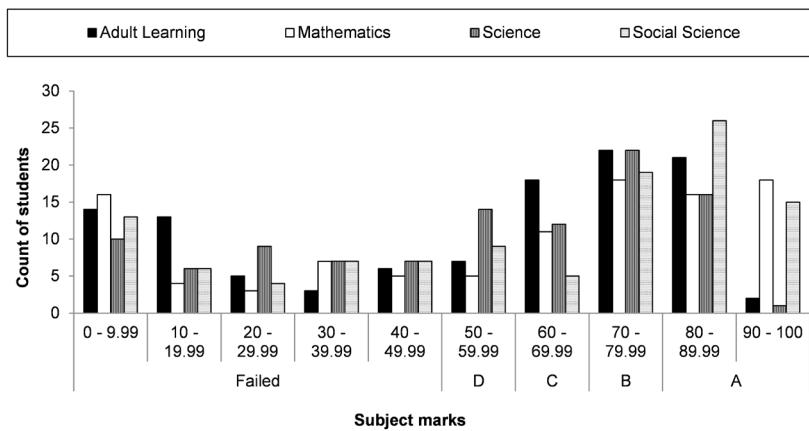
## Results

The overall retention rate for participating students was relatively high. Only eight students officially withdrew from the Program, leaving 108 students enrolled (93 per cent). However, additional students disengaged and stopped participating, with 65 per cent remaining active until the final exam. This compares well with the typical retention rate of 50 per cent for enabling programs (Klinger & Murray, 2012), though it should be noted that the La Trobe Program runs for eighteen weeks while some other programs run across two semesters. Many students who left the Program, officially or unofficially, cited personal reasons rather than dissatisfaction with the TEP. This outcome is consistent with previous research finding personal circumstances to have a particularly strong influence on decisions to discontinue studying in enabling programs (Bedford, 2009).

As with retention, achievement levels of the Program cohort were high. The vast majority of students enrolled in all four subjects, and 55 per cent passed all four subjects. Notably, 30 per cent of students passed all four subjects with a mark of 70 or above, guaranteeing them entry into selected courses at La Trobe University. The mean course weighted average mark for the TEP students in 2012 was 58.1 out of 100. While an imperfect benchmark, this result is in

line with the 61.4 mean course weighted average mark for the La Trobe undergraduate cohort for 2012 (domestic, commencing undergraduate enrolments). The general academic success of the cohort suggests the potential for significant Program expansion, and results also suggest its potential value to University recruitment.

Despite overall cohort success, academic outcomes data reveal important disparities by subject and campus. The distribution of subject marks can be examined in more detail in Figure 2.
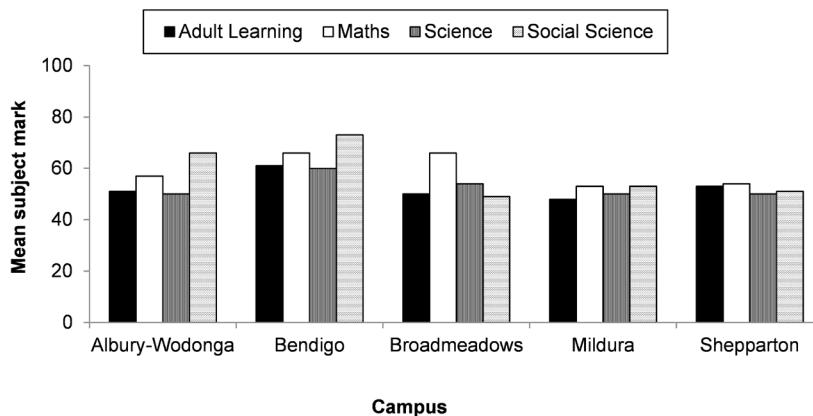
**Figure 2:** *Distribution of subject marks*



The aggregate distribution of subject marks is fairly typical when compared with undergraduate level at La Trobe. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of students received very low aggregate subject marks which suggests non-submission of assignments and a lack of engagement.

Despite strong overall performance, there was significant subject variability. On average, students achieved higher subject marks in Social Sciences (60) and Mathematics (58) compared with Adult Learning (53) and Science (52). Further disparities become apparent when results are disaggregated to campus level (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** *Mean subject marks for the TEP by subject and campus*



An examination across campuses reveals that Bendigo students achieved the highest marks for all four subjects. The subject with the highest mean mark was Social Science at Bendigo (73). Two subjects had mean subject marks below 50: Adult Learning at Mildura (48) and Social Science at Broadmeadows (49).
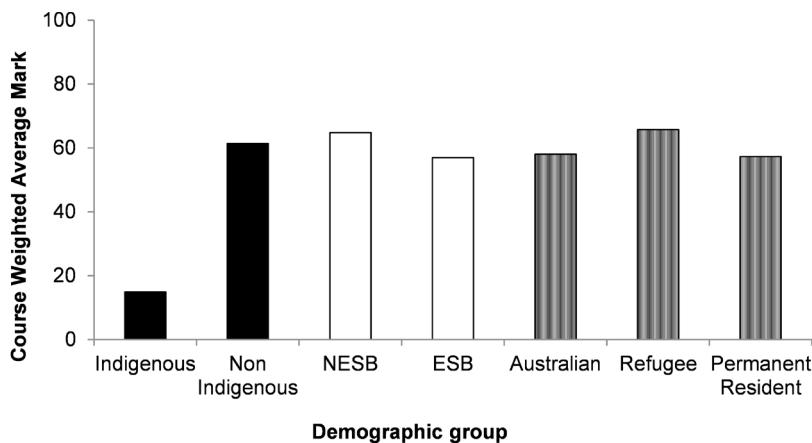
The results reveal an important relationship between subject and campus factors. Variations in mean marks by subject may themselves be mediated by the location of delivery. Thus, Social Science is responsible for both the highest mean mark of any subject in the Program and the lowest mean mark, in Bendigo and Broadmeadows respectively. Further investigation is required to understand the reasons for such variation, which may include different student levels of academic preparedness and/or broader teaching and environmental factors. In addition to subject and campus variability, there was substantial variation by student group.

### Indigenous students

There was a high attrition rate among Indigenous students in the TEP. There were six confirmed Indigenous enrolments in 2012, four of whom were enrolled at Shepparton and came to the Program through the Indigenous Student Services Officer at the Indigenous Centre. There was also one Indigenous student enrolled at Albury-Wodonga

and one at Mildura. Only one of these students formally withdrew from the Program. However, Figure 4 shows the course weighted average mark for the five remaining Indigenous students was very low (14.9 compared with 61.4 for their non-Indigenous peers) and these marks suggest a lack of engagement and participation. Further investigation revealed that the marks for at least three of these students were so low as to indicate that they had also discontinued with the TEP (without officially withdrawing).

**Figure 4:** *Course weighted average marks for the TEP by demographic group*



*Students from refugee and non-English speaking backgrounds*

The TEP attracted a relatively high proportion of NESB students and students from refugee backgrounds, with substantial overlap between the two groups. These students performed particularly well in the Program. As Figure 4 highlights, NESB students received a mean course weighted average mark of 64.8 compared with 57.0 for students from an English-speaking background. Students from refugee backgrounds received a mean course weighted average mark of 65.7 compared with 58.1 for students from Australian backgrounds, and 57.3 for permanent residents. Most of these students were enrolled at Albury-Wodonga, Shepparton and Mildura, and spoke a

variety of languages such as Arabic, Dari, Hazaraghi, Karen, Korean, and Nepali.

## Discussion

Achievement levels of the Program cohort were encouraging. The mean course weighted average mark for the TEP students was consistent with the mean course weighted average mark for the La Trobe undergraduate cohort for 2012. Levels of academic achievement, student retention, and qualification for entry into La Trobe undergraduate courses all indicate the value of the Program in preparing students for tertiary study, including at university level. The results also highlight the potential efficacy of a provision model in which universities and TAFEs share teaching and other responsibilities. The successful adoption of a collaborative enabling program model may have national implications.

Despite overall academic success, significant variability by subject, campus, and student group was found. At a disciplinary level, students achieved higher subject marks in Social Sciences and Mathematics compared with Adult Learning and Science. Disparities highlight a potential limitation with the Program pathways, in that university entry at La Trobe is only guaranteed if all four subjects are passed to a set standard. This requirement might be considered overly onerous in that the four subjects are neither compulsory VCE subjects nor common pre-requisites for degree programs. University entry criteria currently allow little discretion for inconsistency of achievement across TEP subjects, whereas state curriculum and assessment authorities privilege only the best four of five subjects undertaken by VCE students in determining tertiary rank (Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2013b).

More broadly, the results highlight the need for further interrogation and clarification of the skills and capabilities required for university entry. The curriculum of La Trobe's TEP differs in scope from other enabling programs nationwide, and there appears to be limited consistency in curriculum offerings and limited agreement on the extent to which skills such as mathematical literacy should be

mandated within tertiary enabling programs. The UniSA Foundation Studies program, for example, blends some compulsory units with selective strands, affording students curriculum choice in line with their post-study ambitions (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). The Base Funding Review highlighted a paucity of evidence around the relative effectiveness of enabling programs (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011), and comparative curricular work could improve commensurability and strengthen this evidence base.

Further disparities become apparent when results are disaggregated to campus level. For example, an examination across campuses revealed that Bendigo students achieved the highest marks for all four subjects. Different results in the same subjects across campuses require further interrogation. In particular, it is necessary to understand whether student cohorts held substantially different levels of academic preparedness by region, and/or whether teaching practices or support services were more effective in some locations. It would also be helpful in future to investigate the relationship between university and TAFE teaching practices, particularly given the contribution of multiple TAFEs to the Program across different campuses.

The Program attracted several Indigenous students, and its potential appeal in future years is highlighted by the University of Newcastle's longstanding and successful Yapug program which caters to Indigenous students (Vandyke et al., 2012). Despite these enrolments and the integration of multiple sources of support, high attrition rates and poor completion rates were observed among the Indigenous student cohort. At one level, attrition rates reflect a well-known and ongoing concern in the higher education sector (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). Undergraduate retention of Indigenous students is relatively poor, but the experience of the University of Newcastle has demonstrated that enabling programs can attract numerous Indigenous students and result in positive academic outcomes and transition rates (Trounson, 2012). Improving recruitment and achievement outcomes among Indigenous student cohorts will be a challenge as the expanded Program develops.

By contrast, the Program attracted a relatively high number of NESB students and this cohort performed extremely well academically. The number of students from refugee backgrounds attracted to the Program was also significant, and their academic achievement was above average. The number of participating students from refugee backgrounds was likely influenced in part by the location of the Program sites in regional areas of high recent immigration, but also by the attractiveness of the offering, particularly in its availability free of charge to students. Nationally, there is some evidence that the demography of enabling programs has recently changed with increased take up by NESB students and students from refugee backgrounds (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). Results from our study indicate that the Program is not only attractive to students from a refugee background, but that these students record relatively high academic achievement. If expanded to further regional areas of high immigration, tertiary enabling programs may thus provide a valuable strategy to recruit an academically prepared yet under-represented student cohort into university.

## Conclusion

La Trobe's Program produced strong academic outcomes for a diverse cohort of students, despite some variability across delivery sites, disciplinary areas, and student groups. Most notably, students from a refugee background recorded impressive achievement levels, highlighting the potential of the Program to attract disadvantaged cohorts who are academically prepared and committed. Achievement levels were particularly encouraging given delivery into regions characterised by low university transition rates and high recent migration, such as Shepparton and Broadmeadows. The Program may be uniquely placed to benefit some student cohorts who are currently under-represented in tertiary education.

Many broader benefits of the Program require further evaluation to confirm. In establishing a cross-institutional delivery model, the TEP allows students to become familiar with both TAFE and university environments. Breadth of experience is likely to improve participating students' understanding of the full tertiary sector, though exploring

this potential benefit lies outside the scope of our paper. Moreover, ongoing evaluation is required to establish the extent to which Program achievement is translated to university transition and other tertiary outcomes.

As the Base Funding Review notes, there also remains room for further research into the relative effectiveness of enabling programs nationwide. Variability in achievement levels by subject, cohort and delivery site within the La Trobe Program likely reflect broader sectoral issues around curriculum, standards and expectations. What entry standards should be adopted for enabling program applicants? What breadth of disciplinary knowledge should we expect enabling program completers to hold for successful university admission? How might we articulate the academic capabilities expected of program completers, particularly within a model of joint tertiary provision? The diversity of national enabling programs provides rich potential for comparative study, but also highlights the present difficulty in benchmarking achievement, curriculum, and student outcomes.

## Acknowledgement

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**Note**

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