



Beyond the Pathway: Insights for Widening Participation from Graduates who Accessed University via Enabling Programs

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Abstract

Educational access and degree completion highlight gaps in student equity (Department of Education, 2024). Australian Enabling programs are part of a global movement to widen university participation. Enabling programs offer insight into supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds through to graduation. These pathways demonstrably improve outcomes for students from government-defined equity groups, in areas such as undergraduate transition and retention (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 4), and undergraduate success (Syme et al., 2022). This research asks how Enabling pedagogy shapes learning for students beyond the pathway program. Semi-structured interviews of two-to-three hours' duration were held with five graduates from underrepresented backgrounds who entered Australian university via a one-year Enabling program (or part-time equivalent). Careful design and purposive sampling ensured strong representation of equity groups, alongside diverse career aspirations and life experience. Interview data was analysed using critical pedagogy to understand systemic marginalisation (Freire, 2004) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to generate deep understanding of how programs support students. This case study utilises the ADEPT framework for Enabling pedagogy (Stokes, 2023) as a theoretical lens for analysing graduate vignettes. This paper articulates how Enabling pedagogy better supports these students, providing insights applicable worldwide for widening university participation at all levels.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Research demonstrates Enabling pedagogy supports students from underrepresented backgrounds to achieve greater learning outcomes at university.
2. The ADEPT framework for Enabling pedagogy guides educators to embed accessible, dialogic, empowering, purposeful and transformative approaches (Stokes, 2023).
3. Embedding Enabling pedagogy supports learners to build confidence in capabilities, develop positive learner identities, gain agency, and implement individual strategies for success at university and beyond.
4. Enabling approaches support diverse learner journeys, leading to attainment of aspirations, and increased opportunities for professional impact and societal transformation.
5. Enabling pedagogy should be adopted across all university levels to foster inclusive teaching and enhance learning outcomes aligned with widening participation, access, and success.

Keywords

ADEPT framework, Enabling pedagogy, Enabling programs, equity groups, graduates

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Introduction

Educational access and degree completion present equity issues worldwide; individuals from privileged backgrounds are more likely to access and complete university studies, whereas those from other demographics are underrepresented at university relative to population presence. The global challenge of unequal access to education led to UNESCO identifying Sustainable Development Goal 4: to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2017, p. VI). University pathway programs, also referred to as Enabling or foundation programs, have been established as a strategic approach to support inclusive and equitable access to education and lifelong learning worldwide. Agosti and Bernat report that these programs are taught in many regions, including Oceania, North America, Africa and Europe, and observe that Australia and the United Kingdom were, “among the first to offer these programs, are currently market leaders in their provision and [...] have served as a model for programs delivered in other countries” (UNESCO, 2017, p. VI). There is much which can be learnt from these programs to shape inclusive teaching and learning practices aligned with widening university participation.

This paper contributes towards understanding by identifying learning and teaching approaches which better support students from underrepresented backgrounds through to graduation. The *Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper: February 2023* (Australian Government, 2023) refocused sector attention on equity at university, specifically asking how we may better support students from underrepresented backgrounds through teaching and learning (p. 36). This research offers insight into the perspectives of students from equity groups who entered university in Australia via an Enabling program and have gone on to successfully complete undergraduate degrees. By closely examining what these students articulate effectively supported their university studies, we can gain insight into transferable approaches which may address disparity and improve university teaching and learning for students from diverse backgrounds.

Australian Enabling programs offer insight into learning and teaching approaches which work to widen university participation. These pathway programs demonstrably improve outcomes for students from equity groups, in areas such as undergraduate transition and retention (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 4), and undergraduate success (Syme et al., 2022). However, there is limited research regarding how these programs shape student experience beyond the pathway. Jackson et al. (2023, p. 26) identify the need for qualitative research which offers insight into trends documented through quantitative studies, to “inform changes to policy and pathway design to better cater to diverse student needs”. This study works to fill this gap by furthering understanding of what pedagogical approaches effectively support students from underrepresented backgrounds at university. Specifically, to address this knowledge gap, this paper asks two research questions: 1) what is the university experience of students from underrepresented backgrounds who entered university via an Enabling program, beyond the pathway?, and 2) how does embedded Enabling pedagogy address their specific needs?

This research complements a growing body of work on Enabling pedagogy (see, for example, Bennett et al., 2018; Stokes, 2014, 2018, 2024). Through exploring the educational journeys of graduates who entered university via Enabling programs, this paper provides insight to support students from equity groups through degrees and beyond.

Literature

Australian university policy recognises ethical and economic imperatives to widen participation, fostering social inclusion through education which prepares knowledge workers and citizens for the future (Australian Government, 2023). Kift et al. (2021, p. 28) assert the importance of student equity in higher education, as “a necessary condition for a fair, democratic, prosperous and enterprising nation”. Fraser argues for “participatory parity” as a socially just approach, “encompassing economic distribution, legal-cultural recognition, and political representation” (2010, p. 284). The recent university sector review outlines disparities in educational attainment for underrepresented groups and advocates widening participation through “equity of access and opportunity” (Australian Government, 2023, p. 6). For example, people from low-socioeconomic status (low-SES) backgrounds constitute 25% of the Australian population and present a critical participation target for educational inclusion. Low-SES often indicates multiple disadvantage wherein students from these backgrounds identify across multiple equity categories (Habel et al., 2016). Bradley et al.’s *Review of Australian Higher Education* (2008) set participation targets, specifically for 40% of 25-34 year olds to hold a bachelor degree by 2020, with 20% of these graduates coming from low-SES backgrounds. Despite this long-held target, in 2021 only 17% of higher education students came from low-SES backgrounds (Australian Government, 2023, p. 24). The 2008 targets led to funding and support, such that university participation has significantly improved for some Government-defined “equity groups”. The recent Australian Government review directs attention to gaps in participatory parity for certain “equity groups”, specifically students from low-SES, First Nations, rural or remote backgrounds, alongside students with disability (Australian Government, 2023, p. 24). In response, the *Australian Universities Accord – Final Report*, “recommends the Australian Government set the target year for achieving parity representation in higher education at 2050” (Department of Education, 2024, p. 111).

In order to achieve these targets and better address underrepresentation, it is useful to first consider how broader contexts perpetuate disparity. Bourdieu (1986) argues that the education system is designed to validate the “cultural capital” of certain privileged groups, thereby replicating power structures in the next generation of learners and retaining power for the privileged few. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 2004) empowers learners and teachers through greater understanding of ways in which systems replicate power, and provides tools to both understand and challenge systemic privilege. Pedagogical recognition provides powerful support for new learners; while “damaging experiences can instil fear and anxiety about education, [...] this can be repaired through teaching strategies that build trust and dialogue, supporting students to identify capabilities and fulfill their academic potential” (Stokes, 2021, p. 143). Development of confidence in capabilities alongside connection to a range of perspectives and worldviews leads to “the broader notion of personal and educational transformation” (Edwards & Ritchie, 2022, p. 16). This is not about “assimilation” to the system, rather transformation involves critically “re-narrativising individual and community self-understanding” and “contesting the internalisation of deficit discourses”, supporting students to recognise “their capacity to study and their right to voice and agency” (Motta & Bennett, 2018, p. 683). Research undertaken in a South African University pathways Preparation Programme (UPP) and Extended Programme (EP) highlighted how these programs show, “potential to dismantle existing structural inequalities and prevent the

reproduction thereof” (Mkwananzi & Vargas, 2024). Transformation of learner identity supports individuals to succeed at university and is a key function of university Enabling programs.

Enabling programs support students from underrepresented backgrounds at university. They foster social inclusion and support wider participation by building students’ academic literacies and knowledge in a supportive environment. Australian Enabling programs are usually fee-free (aside from a Student Amenities Fee, which Humanitarian Visa Holders can apply to waive). Many Australian programs emerged from funding established to achieve Bradley Review targets (2008). In 2020, Australian “enabling programs attracted 32,759 student enrolments” (Department of Education, 2022, as cited in Davis et al., 2023, p. 41). Enabling programs provide the best retention rates for transitioning equity group students into first year university courses (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 4); completing an Enabling program leads to greater undergraduate success than other pathways (Syme et al., 2022). Significantly, Li et al. (2023, p. 153) identified that, “Students from Enabling programs consistently outperform their peers from the traditional secondary education route”, noting however that extra support is needed for students from low-SES backgrounds. Enabling programs address systemic disadvantage and support students to realise their own capabilities (Burke et al., 2016). For example, research with Scottish university students who completed a Top-Up pre-degree pathway program and came from more socio-economically disadvantaged groups, showed that these students attained similar outcomes to undergraduate peers and “perform well in terms of first-year grades [...] the impact of the academic aspects of the programme on the transition to HE study [...] enabled [...] them to become more successful students. The positive transition aided by the programme has enabled students to fulfil their potential across the duration of their degree study” (Browitt et al., 2023, p. 26). Similarly, research in a Foundation year program in England articulated how these pathways programs support student development of academic confidence, literacies and learner identities (Webber, 2023). Through supporting student retention and success, Enabling programs highlight effective practices for widening university participation, which can inform teaching and learning at undergraduate and beyond.

A growing body of research examines effective curricula in Enabling programs (Davis et al., 2023; Relf et al., 2017), and has established Enabling pedagogy (Bennett et al., 2018; Stokes, 2014, 2018, 2021). Building on progressive pedagogies, “enabling pedagogy” supports learners to build confidence, recognise capabilities, and develop strategies “designed to enable tertiary success for students from underrepresented backgrounds” (Stokes, 2021, p. 133). Through research with Enabling students, alumni, and academics, the author developed an evidence-based framework called ADEPT which articulates Enabling pedagogy (Stokes, 2023) and is hereafter referred to as “the ADEPT framework”. This framework was identified through case study research in an Australian Enabling program, via a study designed to better understand the needs of students from underrepresented backgrounds at university. Mixed-methods research was conducted to capture student and staff perspectives at key stages. Surveys were conducted with Enabling program students at university Orientation Day, semi-structured interviews were held with academics teaching in the program, with undergraduates who had entered university via the Enabling program, and with graduates who had also entered university via this pathway. Through publications at each stage (Stokes, 2018, 2021, 2024), this research offered significant insight into the needs of these students and how these may be better supported through Enabling pedagogy. Results were triangulated and patterns emerged, leading to identification of

recommended Enabling pedagogical practices, which attain greater learning outcomes. These insights were codified in the mnemonic A.D.E.P.T., which refers to scaffolded accessible, dialogic, empowering, purposeful, and transformative approaches. The ADEPT framework for Enabling pedagogy can be implemented across all levels to support individuals to reach their capabilities and widen university participation,. To better understand how Enabling pedagogy shapes student experience, this paper applies the ADEPT framework to graduate reflections on university journeys, which commenced via pathway programs. Adopting the ADEPT Framework as a theoretical lens builds upon research within Enabling programs to examine and better understand how Enabling pedagogy actively supports student needs and why this distinct pedagogical approach produces different and better results for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Method

Design

This research employs case study methodology (Merriam, 2010, 2015; Stake, 1978; Yin, 2015). Case study research was undertaken to reveal what graduates from underrepresented backgrounds identified best supported their university transition and undergraduate study. Case study methodology is an effective way to garner “meaning and understanding of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those within the case” (Merriam, 2010, p. 461). University ethics approval was received prior to undertaking the research, and pseudonyms are used throughout.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were held with five university graduates who entered Australian university degrees via a one-year Enabling program (or part-time equivalent). Careful design and purposive sampling ensured strong representation of equity groups, alongside diverse career aspirations and life experience. Two women and three men were interviewed. An effort was made to ensure all equity groups were represented; however, a limitation of the study is that graduates from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds were not available for interview. All interviewees provided insight into the experience of underrepresented cohorts at university, including students from low-SES backgrounds, refugee backgrounds, and students with disabilities.

The sample size allowed for capture of deep reflection via interviews. Interviewees completed the pathway program, then undergraduate degrees in: Pharmaceutical Science, Visual Arts, Education, Social Work, and Geospatial Science. Four entered the workforce; the fifth completed a prestigious internship. Three also undertook postgraduate studies. The graduates’ success via an Enabling pathway into university contrasted against previous educational experiences. Three did not complete Australian high school, one completed with significant disruptions, and one struggled during a prior attempt at tertiary study.

Data collection

Interviews were of two to three hours’ duration. Interview questions explored the experience of graduates who enter university via Enabling programs. Questions focused on educational experience, aspirations, the role of the Enabling pathway, successes, challenges, university transition, and degree study. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed into Word documents.

Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted in the six stages recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 35–36), namely: data familiarisation, coding, initial themes identification, themes review, themes refinement, and report writing. An initial close reading of transcripts was the first step. Manual coding was then conducted on printed copies to identify initial themes, which were then reviewed at the end of this coding stage. Interview transcripts were uploaded to NVivo and manually coded, leading to theme refinement. NVivo autocoding was run and results considered to further refine themes. Data immersion was achieved by moving between manual and digital coding, and this immersion results in “valid and tested analysis (Maher et al., 2018, p. 12). Data triangulation was made possible through the consistency of insights from the data set.

In reporting on this method, it is timely to acknowledge the tension that exists when qualitative data analysis is viewed through quantitative framings. Indeed, Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 278) caution qualitative researchers to be aware of “positivism creep”; and researchers have observed that case studies are often “idiosyncratic” (Stake, 1978, p. 7; Thomas, 2010, p. 575). To resolve this disjunct, rather than focus on saturation, Braun and Clarke (2022) guide qualitative researchers to instead focus on reflection, connection and transferability. Indeed, Yin (2015, p. 197) argues the goal is to “produc[e] a case study whose findings are generalisable”. In this case study research, data saturation was not possible due to the diversity of the subject base; however, the analysis of data evidenced clear patterns in interview responses, which led to transferable insights and generated deep understanding of how these programs support students. Interview data was analysed using a critical pedagogy lens to understand systemic marginalisation (Freire, 2004). Graduate interviews were considered using the ADEPT framework as a theoretical lens to better understand Enabling pedagogical approaches in practice and how these shape learning outcomes for students from underrepresented backgrounds at university. This iterative process of analysis and verification of themes is an important stage in validating the framework, while also providing significant insight into how Enabling pedagogical approaches shape student learning outcomes.

Results

This section captures what brought the interviewees to their Enabling program and how this intervention changed their lives. Graduate vignettes are used to provide depth of lived experience alongside broad, transferable insights. One graduate vignette has been paired with each aspect of the ADEPT framework to provide deep understanding of the role Enabling pedagogy plays in individual journeys. Each vignette shares three parts of a graduate’s journey: what brought them to Enabling, what they gained from Enabling, and what this empowered them to do.

Insight 1: Accessible Learning Supports Students to Rebuild Learner Identities

Accessible learning creates space to rebuild learner identities. It is beneficial to consider access as a first principle that facilitates inclusive learning, and include this to mean both *physical* access to artefacts and environments, as well as structuring content to support *conceptual* access for new students. Lily’s story highlights the importance of accessible learning for students with negative previous educational experiences or those managing complex external contexts. Lily completed high school; however, she performed below her ability due to bullying and mental health impacts from Year Seven onwards. With support from her sister, Lily enrolled in a pathway

program to a Social Work degree. She immediately noticed a difference at university: “I didn’t get bullied here, so it was a very safe environment and sort of very committed to learning. [...] Everyone’s here for a reason”. Learners need to feel psychologically safe, so educators must provide clear guidelines on what is acceptable and respectful in the learning community. For example, clearly articulating educator and university expectations alongside classroom practice at program or course commencement supports students to feel safe and build confidence in engaging with university culture. The inclusive environment helped Lily become comfortable on campus and develop study routines: “go to the lecture theatre early, get my spot [...] Coming here, that was my safe place. I think that was why I did so well”.

Lily’s reflections illustrate how inclusive education helps students connect with knowledge and recognise capabilities. Accessible and inclusive education are aligned with social justice aspects of widening university participation, sharing “values of equity and fairness” (Hockings, 2010, p. 3). Inclusive education is particularly powerful in valuing diverse strengths and enacting pedagogy which resonates with learners, as Hockings articulates:

Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education refers to the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view of the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others (Hockings, 2010, p. 1).

Educators who reject deficit discourses, project belief in student capabilities, and enact “care-full” pedagogies can engage new students with university learning (Motta & Bennett, 2018). Lily valued educators’ inclusive attitudes, which helped build student trust: “The whole caring nature was a big thing. [...] Being able to approach [academics...] because lacking confidence, I would not have been able to do that straight into uni”. She appreciated how diversity was normalised and staff encouraged students to seek learning support by saying, “‘If you need it, it’s there’, instead of, ‘if you’re using it, there’s something wrong’”. Lily found content designed in multiple modes resonated with her learning needs; having options - including text-based, video with captions, and in-person learning - provided opportunity to choose what was most effective for her, meaning she was able to: “cement everything more. Then I got that belief in myself, and I was like, ‘Yes, I can do this!’, and then came that confidence”. As students engage with learning tasks and receive feedback, they begin to recognise their own capabilities and develop agency as independent learners. In contrast to stepping straight into an undergraduate degree, Lily found the Enabling program, “provided me with that safety net [...led to] actually doing quite well - HDs and Distinctions - that was amazing to see!”. Inclusive approaches resonate with students and build trust through positive experiences. Lily felt a sense of belonging on campus: “The tutors and the lecturers were personable. [...] Friends] were like a second family”. The environment shaped Lily’s, “internal monologue of ‘I want to do - this is where I want to go, this is where I want my life trajectory to take me’”. As she built strategies for undergraduate and gained a sense of belonging at university, she developed a positive learner identity. Building upon her strengths led to agency: “Definitely developed my own voice while I was here. [...] It gave me that sort of feeling of power within my own life”.

The confidence she achieved carried through to undergraduate learning, as she reflected, “I know what I’m doing. It’s just a different topic, but I know what I’m doing”. She assisted other students, “They’d be like, ‘I don’t know where I’m going from here’; I’d sort of like have it plotted out”. Lily’s

growing agency alongside friendships at university also empowered her to leave an abusive relationship. Lily's transformation opened professional opportunities in her graduate career as a Youth Worker:

Coming out of high school, I had no confidence, and it's like now I can stand up in front of a magistrate and do this whole speech [...] I've really grown into this person that's been able to do things, [...] I'm like, "Oh yes, the world's my oyster, I can do anything".

Lily's story illuminates the role of *accessible learning* as the critical first step in the ADEPT framework, supporting students to achieve their potential and use their strengths to foster societal change.

Insight 2: Dialogue Builds Understanding and Support to Manage Complex Challenges

University staff do not fully know students' lifeworlds; however, understanding can be achieved through respectful dialogue (Freire, 2004; Shor & Freire, 1987). Azadeh's story illustrates the need for dialogic approaches. Her family sought political refuge in Australia from the Middle East, and her study was complicated by tension between familial pressure to return to a developing nation for an arranged marriage, and her dream of university studies in Australia. Azadeh was excited about opportunities for women in her new country. She started learning English in Australia, undertaking secondary schooling in her third language, but her family sent her overseas to get engaged in her final year of high school. Returning to Australia, she now needed an alternate pathway to pursue her aspirations, and she enrolled in an Enabling program.

Azadeh commenced the program with her female cousin, each gaining confidence from the other's presence. They embraced the supported introduction to Australian academic culture alongside academic skills development. Azadeh went on to complete a Pharmaceutical Science degree while her cousin completed Medical Science. The pathway program provided an accessible introduction to university, where Azadeh enjoyed making peer connections, "getting familiar with the new environment [...] I was learning a lot [...] asking questions and I found different friends. It was enjoyable". Azadeh was nervous about her English; however, she built confidence through developing her presentation skills and observing others: "I pushed myself to do that, and it was good practice [...] Seeing even the English language [...] Australian students – they were kind of nervous as well". She valued the Enabling approaches: "My teachers encouraged me – thanks to them, yeah, and I was doing hard work. [...] At the end I was receiving a good grade".

External pressures can bring significant complexities which disrupt study; however, these can be mitigated through dialogue and advocacy within the system. Azadeh was torn between cultural expectations and the new life she was building. Despite Azadeh's protestations, her family sent her back to the Middle East again for arranged marriage at the end of the third year of her degree. After a traumatic six months, she returned. She was able to prevent her husband from entering Australia and sought a divorce, becoming the first person in her community to attain one. Yet, this life-saving action came at great personal cost, delaying her degree and significantly impacting her mental health. When she returned to university, her experience was so far removed from that of her peers, that she did not want to discuss what had happened. This trauma significantly changed her and her family. As they came to understand what had occurred, her Mum shifted her position

dramatically, stating, “You were right it’s better to study and have your own pathway and your own life. [...] Be in a society, not just staying at home by yourself”.

If academics and university staff are aware of the challenges students are facing, they are better able to connect students with relevant supports. Staff can act as advocates and advisors, supporting students to navigate systems, while also tailoring learning to students’ needs. On returning to study, Azadeh felt uncomfortable approaching her older, male Program Director; however, a university counsellor and her psychologist were able to act as advocates, Enabling the Program Director to support her once connections were made. Azadeh and university staff were able to build trust and understanding through dialogue. She completed her degree, including a placement at a prestigious research institute. At the time of the interview, she was actively looking for employment. Azadeh’s story conveys the importance of opening dialogue and culturally appropriate supports, while also highlighting the role of advocates within the university system. Amidst complex external contexts, *dialogic approaches* supported Azadeh to maintain connection with university learning, emphasising the role this second step plays in the ADEPT framework.

Insight 3: Empowering Learning Builds Capabilities and Agency

Ethan came from a non-English speaking and low-SES background. He found this created challenges: “that can lock you out of certain privileges and also certain opportunities [...] the culture can either advantage you or disadvantage you”. Misrecognition led him to internalise a negative learner identity which impacted his motivation. Ethan noted, it “started in primary school [...] this fixed idea of ability, and then going into high school, I thought I mostly just carried all those beliefs over. So, I’ve just given up”. He reflected, “I thought I was just dumb”. The schooling system sapped his confidence, while bolstering interest in effecting change: “because I wasn’t learning at school, I subconsciously said, ‘You know what, I want to be a teacher so I can do it better’”. As the first one in his family to pursue university, he lacked familial resources on how to realise his ambitions: “What we want and how to get there, they’re two different things”. Torn between aspirations and financial pressures, he finished Year Eleven and left school for supermarket work, then commenced training as a boilermaker. Frustrated by both experiences, he finally found his pathway toward teaching by commencing an university Enabling program.

Ethan had specific goals for his Enabling studies, particularly improving writing, analysis, computing, and social skills, through “being part of that community”. He quickly noticed the difference in the treatment of students in the Enabling program: “Didn’t really matter, what background you came from or how little English you spoke. I think there was support there”. He embraced the positive learning environment and academic support. Learning connected with his lifeworld and helped him adopt a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017): “I started looking at my ability as something that I could progress and something I could develop rather than ‘I can, or I can’t do it’”. Feedback on his work was personalised and strengths-based, which helped build academic literacies, including reading, writing, and critical thinking. Educators provided clear guidance on areas for improvement, alongside information on where he could access specific learning support. Scaffolded assessments opened opportunities for dialogue about his interests and capabilities, while also providing chances to develop feedback literacy. Receiving useful feedback directed him toward recognition, “I said, ‘Hold on a second, all the feedback I’ve received in my life about my capabilities, it was all wrong. I am actually capable of this stuff!’”. Educators can draw upon critical pedagogy (Freire, 2004), which empowers individuals through developing awareness that

marginalisation is largely due to systemic oppression, not innate capabilities; students are then better placed to challenge and change systems. Developing criticality supported Ethan to build confidence: “I got those goals. I am really good at this; I want to be better. So, then that’s when that confidence basically kicked in”. He found he was developing agency through dialogue, and able to shape academic outcomes: “Put in effort, you get the results. That’s the agency I saw”. Developing criticality was not just limited to university; it led him to reconsider his personal epistemology. He realised injustices experienced at school could be seen elsewhere and were often driven by capitalism. Ethan credits his studies for empowering him to better understand the world:

For me it was really, really just unbelievable. It changed me as a person, and the person I am. The person I am now, I’ve changed other people. [...] The minute you start reading, it makes sense. It really does all—it’s like it all clicks in. You just have to see it through a particular lens. At the uni, they said: “What does learning mean to you?”, I said, “It’s like a pair of glasses. The minute you learn something, it changes your perspective”.

Empowered individuals develop their own voices and become agents for change. Ethan is now better able to analyse problems and committed toward positive actions as a teacher. He knows from his own educational journey that not everyone’s potential is recognised. Aligning with Tinto’s (2012) argument that high expectations precede student success, Ethan expects his own students to achieve: “I don’t want these kids hitting minimum benchmarks. [...] I want every child in my class to be hitting 90 to 100%, because that’s where all of them should be”.

Ethan’s story illustrates how engaging students from diverse backgrounds with higher education can work to shape and inform professions. Ethan draws upon his negative schooling experiences as “dark funds of knowledge” (Zipin, 2009). Having his potential missed at school frames Ethan’s positive approach to education. He is now a teacher in a rural school, where he strives to align theory, values and positive learning outcomes. He has made significant changes including in the way that he approaches information: “I think I’ve changed as a person totally. If I measured new Ethan against old Ethan, I’d have to say [...] the way I think about things is different”. He is excited and proud of the impact of the Enabling program in his life and how these benefits impact the broader community as well; “People from my demographic with my experiences, I guess, get left behind [by] the education system. [...] It’s just a more fulfilled life and benefits all aspects of society”. Through commitment and understanding grounded in his own lived experience, Ethan connects with students and generates inclusive learning and empowering outcomes. Ethan’s story of *empowering learning*, seen through the ADEPT framework, emphasises how critical understanding propels students on new trajectories and furthers systems change.

Insight 4: Purposeful Learning Provides Opportunities for Students to Verify Aspirations

Shane’s return to education was motivated by the desire for intellectually stimulating employment. A decade in the manufacturing workforce, “felt like a dead end. [...] I wanted an occupation where I could progress [...] a degree would enable me to achieve a – a position like that”. Having struggled in a prior attempt to enter university, he joined the Enabling program as a mature-age student, burdened by fear of failure. His low-SES background limited familial resources and cultural capital: “My sister did some tertiary education. [...] My parents and my grandparents certainly didn’t undertake any formal training after school”. Shane needed support to investigate

his aspirations. The fee-free aspect of the Enabling program helped reduce financial stress, as he reflected, “I wasn’t ready to pay fees for a full degree program when I wasn’t 100 percent”. He hoped the Enabling program would help him decide whether a degree in Surveying would be the best choice.

Purposeful learning is particularly powerful for individuals who desire further education but are unsure of their own capabilities. Learning experiences focused on individual interests build confidence and address misrecognition. Shane used his Enabling studies to build his knowledge base, strengthen academic skills, and reconnect with a love of learning: “I did well, and I was happy”. The one-year program supported development of successful university practices, establishing that, “routine of study again. [...] It’s difficult. Sitting down for long hours of the day and looking up material that – that can be dry”. Learning with a clear sense of purpose helped anchor Shane to his studies. The Enabling program also provided time to explore interests with academics who hold expertise in relevant fields. Students who connect with educators over meaningful tasks access “hot knowledge” (Ball & Vincent, 1998), supporting them to overcome challenges caused by lack of cultural capital. Shane investigated Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) in a science assignment, and the structured opportunities afforded understanding of degree requirements and career trajectory. He noted, “it’s useful having a lecturer and a tutor who’s understanding, [...] and tries] to explain things and in a different way to help you understand”. Shane verified his aspirations with support and made an informed degree choice.

Shane won a place in a Bachelor of Geospatial Science and excelled in his degree, gaining leadership roles and an opportunity to conduct research overseas. During undergraduate, he further verified his interests through, “a major research project and I chose a GIS subject on purpose”. He then completed a Graduate Diploma in Surveying, which led to employment as a GIS Data Analyst interstate: “I work with data every day and I’m really enjoying it”. Reflecting upon his journey from returning to university through academic accomplishments to winning his desired career, he commented: “I, sometimes I can’t believe it”. Clearly, the Enabling program was an important intervention which supported Shane to contribute to society in ways commensurate with his capabilities. Examining his journey through the ADEPT framework elucidates the role *purposeful learning* plays to anchor students to study and verify aspirations.

Insight 5: Individual Transformation is Powerful and Holds Potential for Systems Change

Arthur grew up in a small country town, where his life was disrupted at age 13 by, “a pretty severe panic anxiety disorder, [...] I missed all of high school”. In his 20s, part-time work became a first step toward societal participation. He soon wanted to move beyond retail as he, “wasn’t getting that satisfaction mentally. I wanted to offer something more and contribute”. Observing his girlfriend studying, he became open to this possibility: “I always loved learning. [...] Seeing her do study, [...] I sort of decided, well, maybe I could”. He identified that an entry test alone would not provide adequate university preparation: “I didn’t know how to structure an essay or anything like that. [...] I assumed that you needed all these skills to be in uni, because I had no real idea about it”. He was moved to action by an alumnus presenting at an Enabling program information session; “It changed his life, and it made a difference to me, because I could see, well, that’s what I want to do’.

Enabling programs provide time to build personalised, individual strategies, which support students to manage university alongside complex external contexts or individual challenges. For

example, a student with dyslexia may connect with the Inclusion unit and gain access to software which enhances online reading, while a student from a low-SES background may identify that applying for annual scholarships provides valuable support for their learning. Commencing with high anxiety, Arthur had high expectations and knew what he needed from the program: “I didn’t just want to pass things, I wanted to do well”. Recognition supports individuals to flourish and transform into confident learners. This transformation should be managed at the student’s pace and responsive to individual needs; here, staff can raise awareness of learning support services and communicate study options. Arthur valued advice from staff to commence part-time: “I’d always go all in on something, but [the lecturer] allowed me to feel like I could do part-time without it being sort of looked down upon”. Arthur built confidence and personalised strategies over time, which meant he was prepared to commence undergraduate as a full-time student.

On completion of his Enabling program, Arthur felt comfortable commencing Visual Arts: “I went into that degree feeling confident, [...] if I needed to find something, I could, [...] once you know that, degrees aren’t so scary”. Arthur’s experience conveys how Enabling approaches facilitate transformation, whereby students develop confidence, academic literacies and positive learner identities. Edwards and Ritchie (2022, p. 16) identify “fostering this kind of transformative development [...] is an essential aspect of Enabling pedagogy”. Arthur reflected upon how knowledge leads to confidence, “when you get to that first assignment, and you know all the systems, [...] you’ve got more time for everything else, so you get more confident about it. You know, I’ll be okay with this”. Developing familiarity with university systems builds success; students are then able to assist others, reinforcing a fledgling sense of capability. Arthur acknowledged his transformation saying he, “was good at being a university student” and followed his interests through Honours to a PhD and tutorial teaching, where he “felt like I could help other students [...] It felt like that’s where I needed - that’s where I was supposed to be”. He now volunteers at university information sessions and recalled a validating moment shaping a new student’s journey. He first spoke to her at a Careers event, then later she appeared as a new student on campus. He reflected, “I spoke at Orientation, and she came up and handed me a note. [...] it just said: ‘You’re the reason I’m here’”. From leaving Year Eight due to anxiety through to becoming a confident public speaker, doctoral graduate and university tutor, Arthur’s personal transformation highlights how Enabling education supports individuals to realise their potential and inspire others.

Transformative learning is the final stage of the ADEPT framework, and interviews shared how new students contribute diverse experiences and cultural knowledge, informing institutional and societal transformation. Each of these graduates experienced life-changing opportunities to realise individual potential and increase societal contribution. System transformation was manifested by all interviewees. Arthur missed high school; yet, became a tutor and earned a doctorate, highlighting how intellectual capability flourishes with support. Lily built her esteem in safe learning spaces at university, was empowered to exit a violent relationship, and now supports disadvantaged youth as a social worker. Azadeh showed great strength, breaking away from an arranged marriage to follow her career aspirations in a new country, while reshaping her family’s and community’s perception of women. Shane was first-in-family at university; now he has completed two postgraduate qualifications and experienced social mobility by following a professional career interstate. Ethan overcame negative educational experiences, and now brings critical systems knowledge and a commitment to inclusive education to better support his own

students. Their stories showcase how graduates from underrepresented backgrounds bring new perspectives to institutions and professions.

Discussion

This research was conducted to answer two research questions: 1) what is the university experience of students from underrepresented backgrounds who entered university via an Enabling program, beyond the pathway?, and 2) how does embedded Enabling pedagogy address their specific needs?

University experience of graduates from underrepresented backgrounds

Each graduate vignette in this study serves to document these under-heard student experiences, and “illuminat[e] a particular issue” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021, p. 524). The vignettes provide deep insight into lived experience and convey how university education supports individuals to reach aspirations, change lives and increase societal contribution.

We cannot predetermine what the outcomes will be when students from underrepresented backgrounds are empowered through critical engagement with university. Interviews revealed that these changes are not limited to workforce impacts alone. Azadeh and Lily were able to escape abusive relationships and pursue professional careers. Ethan turned negative schooling experience into passion for inclusive education. Shane found social mobility through university studies. Arthur was able to shed anxiety, encourage others to try university, and contribute to knowledge development through research. These graduates provide powerful models for others in their communities. Alongside benefits for individuals, empowerment draws us collectively toward a more socially inclusive society, which benefits professions and the academy through new ideas and perspectives.

Enabling approaches address specific needs

Through reflexive thematic analysis of graduate interviews using the ADEPT framework, this study provides insight into how Enabling approaches address the specific needs of students from underrepresented backgrounds at university, and how these approaches carry forward into other aspects of their personal and professional lives. Future research could extend this study through applying the ADEPT framework to interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates. Analysing graduate interviews using reflexive thematic analysis and the ADEPT framework offers specific insight into why Enabling pedagogy delivers enhanced outcomes for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Many of these students have experienced misrecognition in previous educational environments (Burke et al., 2016). Providing accessible, safe learning environments supports students to rebuild learner identities and gain confidence to reach their potential. New students often bear external challenges which distract from study; this is complicated by lack of familiarity with university and supports available (Stokes, 2018). Dialogue can be implemented to build understanding between students and staff (Shor & Freire, 1987), supporting educators to tailor learning, and students to develop strategies to manage individual challenges. Students from equity groups have often been disempowered through systemic marginalisation (Freire, 2004). Fostering critical awareness empowers students to gain confidence in their own capabilities and develop agency to shape professions. First-in-family students and others new to university often lack familial opportunities to investigate aspirations (Stokes, 2024). Purposeful learning provides opportunities to verify

aspirations, anchoring students to studies and generating meaningful outcomes. Students benefit from Enabling strategies which support them to feel a sense of belonging and capability at university (Bennett et al., 2018; Stokes, 2021, 2024). These approaches lead to transformation (Edwards & Ritchie, 2022), as individuals become confident, capable learners who are empowered to succeed at university and beyond. Transformation is powerful for individuals and creates opportunities for systems change, as they model success to communities and society.

New students bring a range of diverse experiences which can shape the institution and professional practice. Providing opportunities to reflect upon the experiences and “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 2005) new students bring to university can help inform understanding and develop new solutions, offering hope for societal transformation. Students from underrepresented backgrounds face diverse challenges and capable students may be excluded from university due to misrecognition (Burke et al., 2016; Stokes, 2021). Demonstrably, Enabling programs are an important intervention (Li et al., 2023; Pitman et al., 2016; Syme et al., 2022), wherein embedded Enabling pedagogy supports individuals to access higher education and realise their capabilities. This research indicates the benefits of these approaches and advocates for embedding Enabling pedagogy broadly across all levels to achieve positive learning outcomes for students from underrepresented backgrounds at university.

Significance of this work

This Australian case study research carries significance for university teaching and learning practice worldwide, by articulating and further validating transferable, evidence-based strategies that better support students from underrepresented backgrounds through to graduation. This research responds to Jackson et al.’s (2023, p. 26) call for deep qualitative work to complement existing broad quantitative studies, in order to better inform understanding of the university experience of students from equity groups. The research findings offer insight to elucidate existing quantitative data, helping the global higher education sector better understand student needs and shape practice in ways which enhance the educational experience and success of students. This investigation also demonstrates how using the ADEPT framework for Enabling pedagogy as a lens can provide new insight into student journeys. The ADEPT framework for Enabling pedagogy actively translates theoretical approaches into readily implementable strategies for academics, educators, and others involved in university teaching, with potential to enhance student equity and improve the student experience. This research offers deep qualitative insight into how Enabling pedagogy actively supports student needs and builds the evidence-base for how these approaches support student success at university, extend individual agency, and shape personal and societal transformation.

Conclusion

Graduate experiences highlight the value of Enabling pedagogy and offer insight into how accessible, dialogic, empowering, purposeful and transformative approaches support students from underrepresented backgrounds through to degree completion. Accessible learning in safe, inclusive environments supports students to build confidence in their own capabilities. Dialogic approaches facilitate understanding for both educator and student, which assists students to build management strategies for individual circumstances. Empowering approaches help students identify systemic marginalisation, gain recognition and agency, and work to effect change at a personal and societal level. Purposeful learning provides students with meaningful opportunities

to verify aspirations, anchoring them to university learning. Through these approaches, transformation occurs, whereby students become confident, capable learners, and gain agency to manage independent learning and graduate from university. Graduates can effect change in the workforce through bringing new knowledges, understanding and, often, a commitment to support those from underrepresented backgrounds, which furthers widening participation and societal transformation.

This Australian case study research documents the experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds and contributes towards greater understanding of what best supports new students at university worldwide. The ADEPT framework enhanced understanding of what graduates gained from Enabling pedagogy, how this intervention changed their journey and what insights this offers for widening participation. The ADEPT framework for Enabling pedagogy shares strategies relevant for practitioners and academics focused on widening university participation with potential application across all levels of higher education. These manageable strategies support learner development and transformation over time, as Lily reflected: “It was just these little things that were actually quite big things in the end”.

These graduate interviews highlight the life-changing impact of university education, which supports individual success and societal contribution in ways commensurate with capabilities. Through embedding Enabling pedagogy across university teaching and learning, we can better support students through to graduation and on into professional practice. By valuing the capabilities new students bring, we can work towards participatory parity and a more socially inclusive society together.

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