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Navigating the higher education landscape: What hope do enabling students have?

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Abstract

Navigating the landscape of Higher Education can be particularly challenging for Enabling students, with their ability to persevere and maintain feelings of 'hope' likely to impact their confidence to complete their Enabling program. This paper explores the impact of hope on student perseverance and progress within an Enabling program. Using data collected from in-depth interviews with two participants, we investigate how hope shapes students' motivation, resilience, and ultimately their ability to cope with academic challenges. The findings reveal that hope serves as a critical psychological resource, fostering a sense of agency and goal-directed behaviour that can enable students to flourish in their educational journeys. Through interpreting participants' experiences using the lens of hope theory (Snyder, 2000), educators in the Enabling space can better appreciate how students navigated obstacles and sustained their commitment to the program. This paper contributes to the understanding of hope as a vital resource in educational contexts, situated within the growing discourse on equity, access, and the emotional dimensions of learning in transitional educational contexts.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Hope is a practical tool that can strengthen students' persistence and resilience. Enabling educators should consider intentionally embedding activities that cultivate hope.
2. Students need both agency and pathways to reach their goals. Educators can model flexible problem-solving, encourage multiple strategies, and celebrate progress towards goals.
3. Feelings of uncertainty and doubt are common among Enabling students. Building classroom practices that normalise struggle, validate emotions and highlight growth mindsets can help promote confidence.
4. Practice and promote equitable practices, including recognising students' diverse backgrounds and valuing the strengths that they bring to their educational journey.
5. Encourage students to articulate their goals and regularly reflect on their goals and their progress towards achieving them.

Keywords

Enabling Education, Enabling students, hope, equity students, access

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Introduction

'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here' (Dante Alighieri)

Starting university for any student is often a time of tension and uncertainty, particularly for students from marginalised backgrounds as they step into unfamiliar academic and social environments. These students may encounter difficulties assimilating, as they may lack the cultural capital that affords others a relative advantage. In Australia, the term Enabling programs is used to describe an alternative pathway into university, with terms such as access, foundation, and bridging programs also used (James, 2024). Internationally, particularly in the United Kingdom, the broader term of 'widening participation' (McCaig, 2025) is used to describe programs that provide open-access, fee-free pathways that equip students with the academic skills and confidence needed to transition into undergraduate study, helping to address systemic inequalities (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; James, 2024). As James et al. (2024) highlight, Enabling programs represent social innovation in action, bridging gaps in academic preparedness and promoting social mobility. Despite these efforts, evidence consistently shows that students entering higher education through Enabling or widening participation routes experience lower rates of retention and progression compared to direct-entry students (Li & Jackson, 2023). Similar patterns are reported internationally, with students in widening participation programs facing ongoing challenges related to retention, belonging, and institutional fit (Office for Students, 2023). At the same time, while pathway programs are often assumed to be effective given rising participation and strong international education outcomes, there remains limited sector-wide evidence identifying which specific elements of pathway provision most effectively support student success or the extent to which outcomes could be further improved (Morgan, 2020).

Enabling students, in particular, navigate a challenging borderland, a disorienting space between their past experiences and the expectations of university life (Willans, 2010). While some students adjust and thrive, many struggle, with a significant percentage contemplating leaving due to feelings of not belonging and doubts about their ability to succeed in a tertiary setting (Kibby, 2015). These feelings of imposter syndrome are especially prevalent among Enabling students, who often begin their studies with lower levels of academic confidence and face additional external pressures such as financial constraints and family responsibilities (Nieuwoudt, 2021). Enabling programs can provide critical academic and emotional support to help students overcome the barriers of imposter syndrome and foster a sense of belonging in the university setting (James, 2024). As initiatives rooted in social innovation, these programs not only bridge gaps in academic preparedness but also empower individuals from diverse and underrepresented groups to pursue higher education, fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic landscape (James et al., 2024).

Despite the pivotal role of the higher education (HE) system in bolstering Australian education, the pervasive inequality inherent in accessing HE, both nationally and internationally, often remains obscured. Rubin et al. (2014) suggest that the educational research community needs to "provide robust and informative research that accurately defines, describes, and communicates the increasingly diverse demography" (p. 9). The research presented in this paper addresses this call through providing a rich insight into two students' (William and Dee, pseudonyms) experiences as they progressed through an Enabling program at a regional university. We offer Snyder's (1995) cognitive model of hope as a compelling lens through which to examine the

transformative experiences of adult learners in Enabling education. Hope is defined as “a positive motivational state” that combines goal-directed energy, or agency, with the capacity to plan pathways toward achieving those goals (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 287). Together, with other psychological concepts such as grit (Duckworth et al., 2007) and growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), these dimensions provide a multidimensional framework for understanding how students like William and Dee re-engage with study, sustain their persistence, and find opportunities for growth after extended absences from formal education. Through a comparison of William and Dee’s experiences, we explore how Enabling programs can help (re)construct hope, particularly for learners from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, this paper addresses the following research question:

How does hope, conceptualised through Snyder’s pathway and agency thinking, influence Enabling students’ persistence and engagement in a higher education Enabling program?

Research indicates that individuals with higher levels of hope are more likely to establish clear and attainable goals, break these into manageable steps, and respond to challenges with flexible strategies while maintaining a strong focus on success (Egan & Butcher, 2009). The following literature review therefore examines existing research on hope and its related constructs in educational contexts, highlighting how hopeful thinking can shape students’ goal setting, problem-solving approaches, and sustained engagement with learning.

Literature

The literature surrounding Enabling education is multifaceted, encompassing themes of access, equity, psychological resilience, and pedagogical innovation. To contextualise the experiences of Enabling students, it is essential to first examine the broader structural and systemic factors that shape participation in higher education. This review begins by exploring issues of equity and access, particularly as they pertain to students from government-designated equity groups. It then considers the psychological and pedagogical frameworks that support student persistence, including concepts such as grit (Duckworth et al., 2007), growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), and hope theory (Snyder, 2000). Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how Enabling programs operate as transformative spaces for learners navigating complex educational and personal landscapes.

Equity and Access to Higher Education

Access to HE remains a persistent equity challenge, particularly in Australia, where disparities based on geography, socioeconomic status, and cultural background continue to limit participation (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Harvey et al., 2016; Naylor & Mifsud, 2019). These barriers are compounded for individuals from government-designated equity groups, which include First Nations students, people with disability, students from regional and rural locations, and students from low-SES backgrounds (Department of Education, 2017). These students often contend with the intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage and systemic exclusion (Bourdieu, 1986; Mallman, 2017; Sellar & Gale, 2011; Webb et al., 2002). The embedding of the equity agenda in policy has supported the development of Enabling programs as transitional pathways into HE. These programs not only build foundational academic skills but also foster confidence and support students in re-engaging with learning (Crawford et al., 2016; Hodges et

al., 2013). A large proportion of Enabling students are mature-age learners returning to study after an extended break, although there is also a growing number entering directly from high school (Ballantyne et al., 2009; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Maclaurin et al., 2025; Morrison & Cowley, 2017). Many of these students face complex challenges, such as balancing work and caregiving responsibilities or managing low confidence stemming from earlier disengagement or negative experiences in formal education (Johnston et al., 2018; Vernon et al., 2019).

While structural barriers persist, psychological attributes such as grit (Braund et al., 2020; Duckworth et al., 2007), growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; James & Walters, 2020), and academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Larsen & James, 2022; Larsen et al., 2025; Snyder, 1995) increasingly feature in research on student success. Bandura's (1997) work on self-efficacy is particularly relevant here, emphasising that students' belief in their capacity to organise and execute actions directly shapes their motivation and perseverance in challenging contexts. Similarly, Pekrun et al.'s (2002) control-value theory of achievement emotions highlights how students' emotional experiences, including hope and hopelessness, emerge from their perceptions of control and the value they attach to study. Students who enter Enabling programs with a sense of resilience, motivation, and belief in their ability to improve often fare better in navigating institutional expectations (Hodges et al., 2013). These dispositions, frequently shaped by hardship, act as protective and fortifying factors (Whannell, 2013). The concept of transformational learning (Anderson & Goldingay, 2017; Mezirow, 2018) further highlights how re-engaging in study can fundamentally reshape learners' identities and capacities, especially among mature-age or non-traditional students (Klinger & Murray, 2011; Merrill, 2015; Osborne et al., 2004). Enabling pedagogies and relational support also play a role in fostering students' motivation and confidence (Motta & Bennett, 2018; Seary & Willans, 2020).

Enabling pedagogies are central to the design of Enabling education curricula that foreground social justice, care, and the intentional support of students' psychological and emotional wellbeing, thereby cultivating belonging, confidence, and learner capability (Bennett et al., 2018; Stokes, 2025). Recent scholarship highlights how embedding enabling pedagogical approaches strengthen students' sense of agency, support the formation of positive learner identities, and equip learners with strategies to navigate university study and future pathways (Stokes, 2025). Such approaches recognise the diverse and often non-linear journeys of enabling students and position Enabling programs as vehicles for widening participation, enhancing access, and promoting success across the higher education continuum. Drawing on critical pedagogical traditions, Enabling pedagogies also challenge structural inequities by valuing students' existing knowledges and experiences, creating dialogical learning spaces that affirm capability and foster empowerment (Bennett et al., 2018; Stokes, 2014; 2025). In this way, Enabling education operates not only as a pathway into higher education but as a transformative practice that advances inclusion and social justice through pedagogy grounded in care.

Determined hope

James (2024) introduces the concept of determined hope, a mindset that blends resilience with future-oriented goal setting. This aligns with work by Bagozzi and Pieters (1998) and Nelissen et al. (2007), who argue that envisioning attainable futures is essential for sustaining motivation. For Enabling students, this hope is not naïve optimism, but a grounded determination to reimagine life trajectories, often in the face of compounded disadvantage (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Although

Enabling programs are not a panacea, they represent a critical space where academic, social, and psychological support intersect. The literature suggests that effective Enabling pedagogy must address not only academic preparedness but also build learners' confidence, agency, and a sense of belonging (Baik et al., 2015; Tinto, 2017; Hodges et al., 2013; Stokes, 2014). Supporting students to persist through setbacks requires recognising both their structural challenges and the internal strengths, like grit and determined hope, that they bring with them.

Hope theory

Many students enter their first year of university study filled with hope, often characterised as optimism (Snyder, 2002). Optimism, however, is largely emotion-based and reflects a belief that any goal is achievable, without necessarily considering how this might be accomplished (Snyder, 2002). While optimism can create an initial sense of confidence, it is fragile and may diminish when students encounter the inevitable challenges of higher education. Hope, by contrast, offers a more robust and structured framework for persistence. Snyder (1995, 2002) defines hope as a cognitive–motivational state comprising three interrelated elements: setting meaningful, goal-directed thoughts; developing strategies to achieve those goals; and sustaining the motivation to act on those strategies. Hopeful individuals tend to set goals that are realistic, clearly defined, and broken into manageable sub-goals, while those with lower levels of hope often establish vague, unrealistic, or unmanageable goals (Egan & Butcher, 2009). The distinction extends to their emotional orientation—hopeful people typically approach goals with positive affect and a focus on success, whereas less hopeful individuals are more likely to experience negative emotions and a preoccupation with failure (Egan & Butcher, 2009). Notably, two students may share the same objective, such as passing an assessment, but their strategies and mindsets for achieving it can differ markedly.

This makes hope particularly relevant in educational contexts, where students often need to navigate setbacks, balance competing demands, and adapt to unfamiliar academic cultures. Whereas optimism can falter under pressure, hope incorporates both the planning and the motivation necessary to continue striving toward a goal, even when obstacles emerge (Rand, 2017). Hope, as defined by Snyder, comprises three interrelated components: goal orientation, pathway thinking, and agency thinking (Snyder, 1995, 2002). Goal orientation involves having clear, meaningful, and attainable goals; pathway thinking refers to the ability to identify strategies or multiple routes to achieve those goals; and agency thinking concerns the motivation and belief in one's ability to pursue these pathways. Together, these components provide a multidimensional framework for understanding how students navigate challenges, persist in their studies, and grow academically and personally.

Goal Orientation

Goal orientation reflects the clarity and direction of an individual's objectives. Students with strong goal orientation are able to define meaningful, achievable goals and maintain focus on them over time. This clarity provides a foundation for both pathway and agency thinking, guiding the strategies they develop and motivating their persistence (Egan & Butcher, 2009; Snyder, 1995).

Pathway thinking

Pathway thinking refers to an individual's capacity to generate identify workable routes toward achieving a desired goal (Snyder, 2000). In education, this might involve planning effective study strategies, seeking academic support, or developing alternative routes when initial strategies fail. Students with strong pathway thinking are able to generate multiple approaches to overcome obstacles, while those with weaker pathway thinking may struggle to adapt and can become discouraged when their first attempt is blocked (Snyder et al., 1996)

Agency thinking

Agency thinking refers to the perceived capacity of the individual to act upon the identified pathways to reach desired goals (Snyder, 2000). It reflects the belief that one's own actions matter and that persistence will bring results. When obstacles or impediments are encountered, agency thinking helps to apply the requisite motivation to the best alternative pathway. In practice, this can manifest as a determination to keep going despite setbacks and is often expressed through positive self-talk such as "I can do this" (James & Walters, 2020; Kibby, 2015; Snyder, 2002). Agency thinking provides the energy and persistence that propel students forward when challenges arise, complementing the strategic problem-solving of pathway thinking.

Taken together, these components highlight why hope is more than simply feeling positive. Research shows that hopeful individuals are more likely to set realistic and well-defined goals, break them down into manageable sub-goals, and approach challenges with flexible strategies and a focus on success (Egan & Butcher, 2009). By contrast, less hopeful individuals may set vague or unrealistic goals, have difficulty adapting when barriers appear, and become preoccupied with failure (James, 2025). In educational contexts, hope theory provides a useful framework for understanding student persistence: pathway thinking equips students to identify viable strategies, while agency thinking sustains the motivation to enact them.

Method

The findings reported here are derived from a wider case study conducted as part of doctoral research exploring how equity students draw on social and cultural capital within an Enabling education context (James, 2024). A case study approach was employed to explore the social and cultural capital equity students draw upon within an Enabling program. Case study research provides an in-depth examination of individuals within a bounded system (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Here, the Enabling program formed the bounded case. An illustrative analytic narrative method (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to develop vignettes, allowing authentic accounts of each student's journey to emerge in an accessible, data-grounded narrative form (Kandemir & Budd, 2018; Klotz et al., 2022).

Participants

The research was situated in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at a regional Australian university, which aims to build academic confidence and skills for lifelong learning (Doyle, 2006). Participants in the original study were recruited via invitation to students commencing STEPS in 2019. Of the 975 students invited, 22 expressed an interest in participating. Using purposive sampling to ensure diversity of age, gender, study mode, and equity background, 13 students were invited into the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 56

years and represented diverse educational backgrounds and modes of study. Seven were First in Family, and all were categorised as equity students.

While the broader doctoral study comprised interviews with a larger participant group, this paper focuses on two contrasting cases, William and Dee (pseudonyms). These cases were selected because their differing trajectories reflect patterns evident across the wider dataset, including variation in goal clarity, confidence, engagement with support, and persistence. The case narratives function analytically to illuminate themes arising across the broader dataset, rather than to support claims of statistical generalisability. In keeping with qualitative case study methodology, the emphasis is on depth, meaning-making, and analytic transferability rather than representativeness (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Both participants completed pre-term surveys and participated in interviews, with their experiences presented as vignettes to illustrate how cultural capital shaped their motivations and trajectories within the program. Their details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Details

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Mode of study	Employment	Identifies in equity category	First in family	Completed study plan
Dee	35–44	Female	Online	Working full-time	Yes	No	Yes
William	25–34	Male	Internal	Not currently employed	Yes	No	Yes

Data Generation and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews conducted before the commencement of study explored participants' educational histories and motivations for enrolling in the Enabling program. Interviews continued approximately every two weeks throughout the students' enrolment in the STEPS program and were conducted by the first author. During these fortnightly interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the preceding two weeks, including what went well, the challenges they faced, and strategies they used to manage these challenges. The goal of this reflective process was to gain a well-rounded and detailed understanding of participants' experiences as they progressed through each step of their learning journey. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions and researcher prompts to ensure depth and clarity (Merriam, 1998). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The narrative approach enabled nuanced insights into how each student's story embodied elements of hope, social and cultural capital, and the tensions encountered when entering higher education.

In designing the study, careful attention was paid to reflexivity. The researchers continuously reflected on their positionality and potential influence on both the data collection and analysis, acknowledging how their own experiences and assumptions might shape interview prompts and thematic interpretation. Participants initially volunteered to participate, which may have introduced

bias towards students more willing or confident in sharing their experiences. The subsequent focus on William and Dee added an additional layer of selection bias, as these two were intentionally chosen to represent contrasting experiences of academic success and challenge within the broader cohort. This purposive selection was intended to highlight the range of experiences observed rather than to generalise across the entire group. By acknowledging and attending to these considerations, the study aimed to provide a transparent and nuanced account of student experiences within the STEPS program. While their experiences occurred in an Australian setting, it is reasonable to expect that students studying in similar programs internationally would experience comparable challenges and setbacks.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis for this paper draws on Snyder's (2002) hope theory, which was used to guide the interpretation of William and Dee's narratives. Hope theory foregrounds goal orientation, pathway thinking, and agency, offering a means to examine how each student's sense of hope influenced their ability to persist or feel that they belonged in the program. Through this lens, it was possible to highlight the structural and personal dimensions which shaped these students' experiences, while revealing the role of hope as a sustaining force in navigating educational transitions through Enabling programs.

Results

The following results are presented as two case studies structured as illustrative analytic narratives, chosen because their differing trajectories reflect patterns evident across the wider dataset. One student demonstrated lower levels of hope (William), while the other exhibited higher levels of hope (Dee). Each case study begins with background information about the participant, followed by interview excerpts that explore their perceptions of self-worth, experiences of setbacks and challenges in their studies, and notable achievements throughout their studies.

William

I've self-sabotaged my whole life. Really, when it comes to education, when it comes to my weight, it's just who I've been my whole life really. Any chance that I can get to crawl back into my bubble, I do it. The less resistance, the better (Term (T)1, Interview (I)1).

Background

William, a man in his 30s, acknowledged that although he completed Year 12 many years earlier, he did not apply himself at school; "I consider myself a smart person; just the application to studies has never been a strong point for me" (T1, Int 2). He shared that his main driver for attending school was the social aspect with his mates and the music classes; aside from that, he did not see the value in gaining an education. He married not long after leaving school, and, at the time of enrolling in STEPs, he and his wife had two pre-teenage children. His life had been a series of jobs and moving from state to state. Most of his work had been in contact centres and customer service, and when his last government contractual job was disbanded, he hit a crossroad in his life. He realised it was time to do something to get himself into a more professional career and he wanted to "set an example for my kids, that it doesn't matter how old you are, or what stage of life you're in, that you can always better yourself" (T1, Int 1). William enrolled in the STEPS course at the suggestion of his wife, who also enrolled in the same course, with both attending the same

internal classes. At the same time as beginning the STEPS program, William had begun a diet so that he qualified for the gastric band surgery planned for the end of the term. He did not identify any issues with the surgery impacting upon his studies, anticipating that he could continue to study pre and post operation. William was studying three units in Term 1 as a pathway for enrolment in the Bachelor of Digital Media.

Self-worth

William identified as a “massive self-sabotager” and a “chronic procrastinator” (T1, Int 1) and stated that

I suffer depression and anxiety, and have negative thoughts ... I'm always self-doubting, and put on that face of, you know, “I'm alright,” and “I can do this,” and “I'm full of confidence.” But you know the excuses start to edge their way in. (T1, Int 1)

He indicated that “I've got good intentions, I've got the best of intentions, sometimes, you know, but my readiness and willingness has just never been there” (T1, Int 1). William's sense of self-worth as a person and a parent seemed to be contingent with the successful completion of the course. For example, he stated

I want to stick it out for my children. I don't want to set a bad example for the kids. ... Like they say “Dad's got a job. Oh, now he doesn't again.” I mean even last night [daughter] said “How long are you going to stay there?” I'm like “As long as possible.” (T1, Int, 3)

William reflected on the impact of his studies on his sense of self-worth, stating “I'm no longer just a bum. It's nice to be able to connect with people and family on a different level. I'm not the different one now. I am studying and I've got a job” (T1, Int 3).

Setbacks and challenges

During the term, William encountered setbacks in relation to achieving good grades, falling behind on assessment tasks, and submitting assessment tasks on time. In addition, competing commitments, such as preparing for his surgery, proved to be challenges difficult to overcome. Mid-way through Term 1, William was devastated when he received a Credit (65–74 grade points) for his first assessment task:

I almost felt like it was, not an attack, but I felt that it was a personal thing even though I know it's not. The feedback is constructive criticism and I understand that, but at the time it's a natural reaction I think for a lot of people just to feel hurt. (T1, Int 4)

William's initial response was

To be honest, I didn't want to come back. Like seriously as soon as I got it, I just sort of thought it's only going to get harder. And if I'm not doing great now with that...well it was a bit of a reality check.

This incident seemed to heighten his procrastination, and he appeared to give up hope. A comment that reflected this was “I began to think, I can't be bothered to do it now, I'll do it later”. William seemed to ‘give in’ to the setback, noting that

The motivation to use the time that I have free to just sit down and do study just doesn't happen. I thought that I was getting better at my procrastination. I certainly haven't. It's

just kicked up a gear. I don't even know how to explain it. I feel snowed in. I feel overwhelmed with everything and I'm never like that. (T1, Int 4)

Towards the end of the term, everything continued to snowball. William struggled to multitask and manage his time to fit in everything that was required. His operation was looming and he had multiple doctor's appointments and tasks to complete prior to his trip away. He missed classes and stated that "I have accomplished nothing except all of my pre-operative appointments and stuff and just getting through those couple of weeks" (T1, Int 4). He identified that it was "a cycle because I get overwhelmed, and then I get sad that I'm not doing anything, then I sit there and wallow and I think about what I could have done" (T1, Int 4).

Achievements

Despite the setbacks, William still had a desire and a hope to succeed in this journey. He voiced this by saying, "I'm still very determined to finish. I'm still confident that I will" (T1, Int 4). During his time enrolled, he was encouraged when he received a Distinction (75–84 grade points) in the unit "Preparation Skills for University," but he was unable to finish the other two units he was enrolled in due to the external circumstances. According to William, he achieved the realisation that he had the capacity to undertake university study.

Summary

In summary, William's journey illustrates how hope and motivation interact with personal and contextual challenges. While he had the goal orientation and desire to succeed, his pathway and agency thinking were constrained by competing commitments, procrastination, and limited self-regulatory capacity. Despite withdrawing, he derived meaningful benefits from the program and valued the experience as a foundation for future personal and professional growth.

Dee

Plenty of people just are working-class, or aren't educated, and have a wonderful life, and are happy with who they are, but I'm not. It is just not enough for me. I know I could be so much more. (T1, Int 1)

Background

Dee, at the age of 40, found herself at a crossroads, realising that "there was more to life than my desk job" (T1, Int 1). She had a fulfilling personal life—happily married, with a young son and a supportive extended family—but felt a yearning for something more. Dee had spent most of her childhood as the "sick child" (T1, Int 1) due to a heart condition that significantly disrupted her schooling. Her erratic attendance meant she missed foundational learning, particularly in Mathematics, which led her to struggle academically in high school and leave school after Year 10. She always felt like she was the "dumb" (T1, Int 1) one of the family as she watched her two sisters go to university and complete degrees. However, she was never jealous of their achievements, just envious that she had not been able to do more with her life professionally. Seeing her sisters undertake university study as mothers, wives, and workers reassured her that the potential was there for her to accomplish the same. When she first enquired about a nursing degree, she was advised to complete the STEPS Enabling course to qualify. Recognising her

lack of academic preparation, Dee took this advice as a practical stepping stone to realise her goals.

Self-Worth

Dee carried deeply ingrained beliefs about her intellectual inadequacy and described herself as the “dumb one of the three girls” (T1, Int 1). This self-perception affected her confidence and social interactions. She felt intimidated by those she deemed more educated, worrying that her language and vocabulary would expose her lack of education. She shared, “I just feel like I can’t hold my own in a conversation ... I get so nervous, and I try not to talk” (T1, Int 1).

Even though she wasn’t in competition with her sisters, she couldn’t shake the internalised narrative that she was lesser. As she began her studies, she was consumed by self-doubt: “I don’t belong” (T1, Int 1). These feelings intensified during academic tasks like forum discussions or referencing, which made her second guess her intellectual legitimacy. Gradually, however, Dee began to challenge these thoughts. Participating in Moodle forums helped her realise that other students were just as uncertain. Over time, she began shedding the “not smart enough” identity and redefined herself: “I think now I’m actually quite intelligent ... I definitely feel more confident” (T1, Int 4).

Setbacks and Challenges

Dee faced multiple challenges throughout her STEPS journey. These included academic, emotional, and health-related obstacles. Initially, Dee encountered academic challenges. For example, she found paraphrasing, referencing, and forum writing intimidating. She struggled with the research process and writing assessments. Like William, she also experienced illness and disruptions. For example, during a mid-term break, she fell behind after leaving her laptop at home while on holiday and then becoming unwell: “I was a little bit surprised that that happened so quickly—that it could just get out of control so quickly” (T1, Int 3).

In Term 2 she fell behind again, despite her meticulous preparation. Her past difficulties with mathematics resurfaced, leading to a failed module test. Support from her first lecturer was lacking, and her confidence was shaken:

I failed; they recommend 15 as a minimum which I didn’t make. I did take it really hard when I got that email. Then I said, “Oh, what can I do now?” There’s nothing I can do about it. I just have to keep going but I just have to really apply myself and ask for help and just keep going over it. (T2, Int 1)

Although she reached out for help from her co-ordinator, the support was not what she expected. She began questioning whether or not she could succeed: “Maybe I’m not even going to be able to do nursing because if I can’t do this ... well, you start to just self-sabotage and think all these things” (T2, Int 2). However, her online lecturer took the time to work closely with her, helping her understand the maths problems and supporting her to address negative self-talk. Through this guidance, the lecturer helped her reframe her perception of her abilities, ensuring that one failed assessment did not define her capacity to succeed.

Stress compounded as her family relocated and her health deteriorated. She was in a highly stressed state, everything felt like it was building up, and she was developing a sense of hopelessness. Early in Term 3, she recognised that she may not have comprehended the basics

of Biology. She joined an online Zoom session and the lecturer “established very quickly that [she] did not understand the topic” (T3, Int 1). Despite this, however, she sought help from her lecturer and rebuilt her understanding: “I had to basically start over, but I am happy with that as I have a better understanding of what I am supposed to be doing” (T3, Int 1).

Achievements

Despite early struggles, Dee demonstrated growth throughout her STEPs journey. She developed strong study habits, self-discipline, and resilience. Her academic confidence grew steadily. She received High Distinctions (85–100 grade points) in Term 1 and maintained a strong performance throughout the course. With support from lecturers and through reflection, Dee redefined what success looked like. A conversation with a support lecturer helped her accept that failure was not final: “If I fail, it’s not the end of the world. I’ll just do it again next term. It’s that easy” (T2, Int 3).

Dee also became more proactive with planning and managing her study load, noting, “I’ve mapped it all out on my calendar ... I pulled it back into control” (T2, Int 3) and “I’ve been a lot more mature with my study... more fore-planning.” (T3, Int 1). Dee began to see herself as a student. She became curious, intellectually engaged, and confident in learning: “I just want to learn more. I’m so surprised.” (T1, Int 3). Dee’s overall mindset and manner were changing as she described: “I feel it inside of me. There is change happening” (T2, Int 4). She was viewing herself in a different light. She reflected, “I think now I’m actually quite intelligent. I think I just, for whatever reason, wasn’t focusing or wasn’t applying myself properly, but I don’t know. I definitely feel more confident” (T1, Int 4).

Dee’s confidence in her ability was evident when the Christmas break fell in the middle of the Term 3. She recognised that this could disrupt her study as she had family coming to visit. However, she remarked, “I know I’m capable to catch up. I feel comfortable with what I’m learning every week so I could drop a few days and catch back up” (T3, Int 2). Her approach to her study had changed as she had a deeper awareness of what she was capable of. As she described, “I just feel more confident—and not just like, academically, but just in everything. I feel more capable than ever” (T3, Int 4).

Dee applied for and was accepted into a Bachelor of Nursing program. By the end of STEPS, she felt fully prepared and excited: “I don’t feel daunted at all ... I can handle that. This is only due to STEPS.” (T3, Int 3).

Summary

Dee demonstrated strong goal orientation by clearly defining her objective of entering a nursing degree. She applied pathway thinking by developing strategies to manage her workload, rebuild foundational knowledge, and seek guidance when required. Her agency thinking was evident in her sustained motivation and persistence, enabling her to act on these strategies and continue progressing despite setbacks. In summary, Dee’s experience illustrates how hope, combined with structured support and persistence, enabled her to overcome early setbacks, develop academic self-efficacy, and transition successfully into higher education. Her journey highlights the transformative potential of Enabling programs in fostering confidence, resilience, and a renewed sense of capability among students from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds. At the time of writing, Dee was in her final year of nursing, maintaining a Distinction average. She credited the reflective interviews with helping her make sense of her learning and gain clarity.

Discussion

While this paper focuses on two illustrative cases of hope and its impact, these participants were purposefully selected from a broader pool of 11 students to represent contrasting experiences—one demonstrating high academic success and the other encountering significant challenges. From a qualitative standpoint, these cases serve as examples that capture the breadth of experiences observed in the data set, providing rich insight into the varied ways hope manifests in students' academic journeys. Although themes reflected in these two cases were evident across the full set of interviews, the decision to focus on these particular narratives was made both to capture this range of experience and to adhere to the word limit constraints of the paper. It is reasonable to expect that students studying in similar programs internationally and educators who teach in similar programs will benefit from insights offered by William and Dee. William and Dee's experiences in an Enabling program illustrate how hope interacts with personal, contextual, and structural factors to influence persistence, engagement, and outcomes. Both students entered the program with a desire to improve their lives and recognised the potential of HE. However, their levels of hope, as conceptualised through goal orientation, pathway thinking, and agency thinking, shaped their respective journeys.

William possessed the desire to succeed but struggled to translate this into sustained action. Competing commitments, procrastination, and limited self-directed motivation constrained his pathway and agency thinking, and setbacks quickly undermined his confidence. This reflects James's (2024) notion of the hysteresis juncture whereby William experienced moments when his habitus fell out of alignment with the demands of study, which in-turn, deepened his oppressive habitus and contributed to his eventual withdrawal. His statements about feeling overwhelmed and procrastinating mirror the cleft habitus and hyperbolic doubt identified by James (2024), where students regress into outsider positions when structural and personal barriers outweigh supportive interventions. Despite deriving personal value and self-worth from participation in the program, he ultimately withdrew, recognising that he could not balance study and work at that time. His experience demonstrates that even when hope and aspiration are present, the capacity to implement strategies and sustain motivation is crucial for success.

Dee, by contrast, combined strong goal orientation with effective pathway and agency thinking. She encountered academic, health, and family-related challenges, including early failures and self-doubt, yet actively sought support and developed strategies to overcome obstacles. Her ability to draw on a subversive habitus (James, 2024) at critical points in her journey demonstrate her capacity to resist deficit narratives and reframe herself as a capable learner. With guidance from lecturers and structured planning, Dee rebuilt her confidence, maintained motivation, and achieved strong academic outcomes. Her successful transition into a Bachelor of Nursing program highlights how high levels of hope, when coupled with a subversive habitus, can enable students to navigate setbacks and achieve transformative outcomes.

Together, these cases illustrate the pivotal role of hope in Enabling education. While both students had the aspiration to improve their lives, differences in goal-directed thinking, strategic planning, and motivational persistence shaped their experiences, demonstrating the complex interplay between personal agency, structural supports, and educational outcomes for non-traditional learners.

Reimagining Futures: Goal Setting

At the foundation of hope is the ability to conceptualise meaningful goals. For both William and Dee, the decision to enrol in the STEPS program represented more than academic re-engagement; it symbolised a broader effort to redefine their personal and professional futures. Dee's vocational goal of becoming a nurse emerged from both personal reflection and familial inspiration, suggesting a forward-looking orientation rooted in relational and identity-based motivations (Merrill, 2015). Similarly, William's desire to be a role model for his children reflects how adult learners often anchor educational goals in intergenerational aspirations (Anderson & Goldingay, 2017).

This capacity to reimagine one's future is important, and adult learners frequently articulate goals that integrate personal healing, social mobility, and transformation of self (Osborne et al., 2004). In Enabling programs, goal clarity is often developed and refined through reflective practices and academic scaffolding (Stokes, 2014), with both Dee and William demonstrating an emerging ability to link their aspirations to concrete educational pathways.

Pathways Thinking: Learning to Navigate

Hopeful individuals not only set goals but believe they can generate viable pathways to achieve them (Snyder, 1995). In Enabling contexts, this often involves acquiring new learning strategies, overcoming prior negative educational experiences, and adapting to academic culture (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Dee's journey clearly illustrates how pathways thinking can be cultivated through consistent effort, strategic help-seeking, and growing confidence. Her engagement with online tutorials, self-regulation using calendars, and iterative learning from assessment feedback reflects what Duckworth et al. (2007) describe as "grit"—a combination of perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Braund et al. (2022) similarly found that many women undertaking Enabling programs construct survival narratives as they balance external responsibilities with the demands of study. These narratives are often encapsulated in one word: hope. This hope is expressed in multiple ways, including hope for improved career prospects, hope for independence, hope for financial security, and hope that role modelling will positively influence their children's opportunities for the future.

Conversely, William's experience highlights the challenges faced by learners whose prior educational histories include repeated failure or trauma. His difficulties with procrastination, cognitive overload, and interpreting feedback are consistent with findings that many Enabling students arrive with low academic self-efficacy (Hodges et al., 2013; Whannell et al., 2013). While William entered the program with aspirations for change, his hope was not accompanied by the capacity to sustain motivation or enact effective strategies. James (2024) describes this as determined hope, a grounded aspiration for a better future that can propel students into study, but which may falter when confronted with hysteresis junctures where habitus falls out of alignment with the demands of higher education. In William's case, the persistence of an oppressive habitus, reinforced by past educational trauma, limited his ability to translate hope into agentic action. This aligns with research showing that hope alone does not guarantee success; rather, it must be supported by self-efficacy, persistence, and the cultivation of a subversive habitus that enables learners to resist deficit narratives and reframe themselves as capable (Bandura, 1997; Braund et al., 2022; James, 2016). Without such supports, students may struggle

to transform hope into the sustained effort required for progression, leading instead to withdrawal or regression into outsider identities.

Agency Thinking: Sustaining Motivation

The final element of hope is agency thinking and refers to one's belief in their capacity to initiate and sustain goal-directed behaviour. Motivation is particularly complex for Enabling students, many of whom juggle caregiving, employment, and psychological challenges (Armstrong et al., 2018; Braund et al., 2022). Dee's increasing agency is evident in her ability to self-motivate through difficult tasks, reframe failure, and internalise success as evidence of personal growth. Her comment, "If I fail, it's not the end of the world," demonstrates a shift towards what Dweck (2006) terms a growth mindset, a key trait in learners who persist despite setbacks. This resonates with James (2024), who found that students able to cultivate a subversive habitus and reframe themselves as capable learners are more likely to sustain determined hope and move towards belonging in higher education. Dee's case also aligns with research highlighting the role of enabling pedagogies and relational support in fostering motivation and confidence (Motta & Bennett, 2018; Seary & Willans, 2020).

William's agency, on the other hand, was more fragile and situational. While he began with strong extrinsic motivation (e.g., to be a role model for his children), this waned when academic difficulties surfaced. His experiences echo those described by Stone and O'Shea (2013), who note that self-sabotage and motivational fatigue are common among students with disrupted educational pathways. James (2024) similarly notes that when students encounter hysteresis junctures, their hope may collapse into hyperbolic doubt, reinforcing an oppressive habitus that undermines persistence. William's return after periods of disengagement demonstrates what Pekrun et al. (2002) describe as the oscillation between hope and anxiety, as his emotions were shaped by fluctuating perceptions of control and the value he attached to study. Yet, without the internalised sense of agency or scaffolding needed to sustain motivation, his trajectory ultimately ended in withdrawal. This pattern underscores Bandura's (1997) point that agency requires not only aspiration but also a firm belief that one's actions can meaningfully influence outcomes. In William's case, hope was present but fragile, as the absence of sustained self-efficacy limited his ability to translate renewed engagement into longer-term persistence.

Conclusion

The experiences of William and Dee illustrate the complex interplay between hope, personal agency, and structural support in Enabling education. While both students entered the program with aspirations for change, their outcomes diverged due to differences in goal clarity, strategic planning, and motivational persistence. Dee's journey exemplifies how hope, when nurtured through relational support and reflective practice, can lead to transformative learning and academic success. William's experience, though marked by withdrawal, still reflects the value of Enabling education in fostering self-awareness and future aspirations. These narratives highlight the significance of Snyder's hope theory in understanding student persistence and resilience. Importantly, the findings suggest that hope is not merely an emotional state but a cognitive–motivational framework that can be cultivated through intentional pedagogy. Enabling programs must therefore go beyond academic skill-building and formally and explicitly embed intentional pedagogies grounded in social justice, care, and inclusion across curriculum design and teaching

practice. Scholarship in Enabling education demonstrates that such pedagogical approaches foster learner agency, positive learner identities, belonging, and capability, while supporting diverse learner journeys and widening participation. Additionally, by recognising and responding to the diverse challenges faced by equity students, educators can create inclusive learning environments that empower individuals not to 'abandon hope' but overcome barriers and pursue meaningful educational futures. Ultimately, this research advocates for a holistic approach to access and equity in higher education, grounded in hope and transformation.

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