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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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The barrier is down but the finishing line recedes for many: improving opportunities and outcomes in enabling education

Robyn Muldoon and Ingrid Wijeyewardene
University of New England (Australia)

Abstract

Tertiary enabling education is expanding rapidly in Australia following government initiatives in 2008 aimed at increasing the proportion engaged in higher education of people from disadvantaged groups, especially those from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

The University of New England became involved in enabling education with the Pathways Enabling Program (PEP) which was designed to make the benefits of higher education accessible to people who do not otherwise have the necessary skills and credentials. Student outcomes in the first five years of the Program show that it has removed previous constraints and disadvantages for many. However, attrition rates are very high (Muldoon, 2011).

This paper reports on research exploring the experience of persisting and non-persisting PEP students in 2011-2012. Two questionnaires were administered to enrolled PEP students in the second week and the second last week of two consecutive intakes to the Program and a third questionnaire targeted students in the same cohorts who dropped out in between. The surveys probed students' past educational experiences, their personal circumstances, their expectations of the Program, their learning styles and approaches, and in the case of non-persisters, their reasons for leaving the Program.

It appears that attrition is far less of a problem than it appears. Most of it is 'positive' attrition attributed to students making an informed choice to withdraw. Some is similar to undergraduate attrition. However, most reasons for withdrawal seem to be distinctive to enabling education. Surprisingly, they are not related to students' prior educational disadvantage or approach to learning but more to current lifestyle factors with the majority of non-persisting students not ruling out the possibility of re-enrolling at another time. Understanding these lifestyle factors and making adjustments to accommodate them is critical to the success of the PEP and other similar programs aimed at removing barriers to participation in higher education for people previously affected by educational and social disadvantage.

Keywords: *Enabling education, educational and social disadvantage, attrition, persistence and non-persistence.*

Introduction

Australian universities are currently implementing a variety of strategies to increase and retain enrolments to meet government targets aimed at increasing the proportion of

students from disadvantaged groups engaged in higher education. These targets, announced in 2008, include raising the proportion of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds participating in higher education to 20% by 2020 with an overall aim of 40% of all 25-34 year olds holding a qualification at bachelor level and above by 2025 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Establishing alternative pathways to higher education through enabling education is one such strategy.

At the University of New England (UNE), NSW, Australia, enabling education is offered through the UNE Pathways Enabling Program (PEP), launched in 2008 (Muldoon, 2011). This fee free, part-time, year-long (two semesters) program was designed to make the benefits of higher education accessible to people who do not otherwise have the necessary skills and credentials. This is a common goal of enabling educators (Anderson, 2007; Ramsey, 2007). Key features of the Program were two foundation skills units which were consecutive and each taken concurrently with a faculty-based elective unit of study. The electives are drawn from a select group of first year offerings which comprise 24 disciplinary introductory units (Muldoon, 2011). The foundation skills units cover academic writing, information literacy, critical thinking and reflective writing within a framework of practical techniques for successful independent study thereby providing an effective integrated program as recommended in the literature (East, 2009; Yucel, 2009). Students are also inducted into the University's core support services and resources. There are no pre-requisites for entry into the Program. Successful completion enables entry into most UNE undergraduate degree programs.

Foundation skills assessment is continuous and formative rather than summative and feedback is friendly, responsive and non-threatening, an important aspect of enabling education (Anderson, 2007). Successful completion requires completion of tasks only, irrespective of grades. Students are able to resubmit assignments after feedback from teachers. They are encouraged and supported to push their own boundaries but are not compelled to do so. At the same time, students are undergoing university assessment tasks in their faculty-based electives which are marked and graded according to university policy which requires both formative and summative assessment. This mix of assessment approaches means that students are nurtured in their skills development whilst also, within that supportive environment, preparing for the reality of summative assessment (Muldoon, 2011; Muldoon, O' Brien, Pendreigh & Wijeyewardene, 2009).
Outcomes of the PEP in its first three years appeared to be mixed. An analysis of the results of the first 96 students to successfully complete the PEP and go on to enroll in degree programs at UNE showed that success rates (the measure of the number of units passed versus the number of units attempted) and grade point averages were closely comparable with a control group of 1,818 non-PEP students in the same degree programs (Muldoon, 2011). However, there was, and continues to be, a very high attrition rate.

In the first five semesters of the PEP the raw attrition rate was 57% (Muldoon, 2011). Although this rate was not dissimilar to attrition rates in other comparable enabling education programs in Australia (Muldoon, 2011) they were concerning enough to give rise to the current study. Subsequent exploration has discerned that approximately half the students who appear to be non-persisters never in fact engaged with the Program. This means that the decision to not begin was made prior to the commencement of the

Program and so these students did not actually drop out or withdraw. It appears that the absence of fees and therefore no possibility of losing money increases the likelihood of people not bothering to officially cancel their enrolment. They are 'phantom' students and become an 'unsatisfactory' statistic because they have not engaged in the Program at all. Phantom students are not uncommon in enabling education programs (Ramsey, 2004). In the period of this study (early 2011 to mid-2012) the raw attrition rate averaged 61% but the real attrition rate after removing the phantom students averaged 36% (see Table 1 below).

	Commencing Semester 1, 2011	Commencing Semester 2, 2011	
Total enrolled	254	233	
Satisfactory results	115	77	
Unsatisfactory (never or rarely engaged)	44	75	
Withdrawn	95	81	
Raw Attrition rate	54.7	66.9	Average 60.8%
Adjusted Attrition rate	37.4	34.8	Average 36.1%

Table 1: PEP attrition in the period of this study

Nonetheless this adjusted attrition rate remains higher than the average attrition rate for commencing undergraduate students in Australia which is approximately 16% (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011; Danahera, Bowserb, & Somasundaram, 2008; Willcoxson, 2010). There is a growing literature around undergraduate attrition but what is not well known is how enabling education attrition differs from undergraduate attrition and to what extent the findings about undergraduate attrition are applicable to enabling education programs.

Undergraduate attrition

The most common factors in undergraduate attrition are related to previous disadvantage including socio-economic status and prior educational experience (Gabb, Milne, & Coa, 2006; Simpson, 2003). Students are more likely to drop out when they have a low level of previous educational achievement (Gabb et al., 2006; McMillan, 2005) and when they do not possess an adequate level of academic preparedness (Rose-Adams, 2012). Related to that is a well-established link between approaches to learning and educational outcomes (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 1992). Other known factors are when students are the first in their family to attend university (Slee, 2002) and when they are experiencing difficult personal and financial circumstances (McInnes, 2001). A further cause of undergraduate attrition is a mismatch between the student's expectations and preferences and the courses studied or 'course fit' (Gabb et al., 2006; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes, 2005). Overall, there is widespread agreement that lack of engagement of undergraduate students in their studies is a major predictor of withdrawal (Krause et al., 2005; Tinto, 2009). This can be caused by all or any of the above factors but can also be a result of institutional issues which alienate students from the teaching, learning and social environments of the university (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2009). The Australian Council for Educational Research views student engagement as an idea specifically focused on students and their interactions with their institution. It involves

the broader student experience, learners' lives beyond university and institutional support (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009)

The Study

This paper reports on research into attrition in the PEP carried out from early 2011 to mid-2012. The research was part of a larger multi-institution project funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching to investigate attrition in enabling education. Two surveys were administered to participating students who commenced the PEP in Semester 1, 2011 and Semester 2, 2011: an Initial Survey in each cohorts' second week and either an Exit Survey to students identified as having left the Program within the first semester; or a Concluding Survey for students remaining in the Program in each cohorts' second-last week of their second (final) semester.

The Initial Survey included questions concerning demographics, past educational experiences, personal circumstances and students' expectations of the Program. It also included a specially adapted version of Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Biggs, 1987) to discover students' approaches to learning as possible predictors of attrition. This is an established scale, in which low achievement motivation, a surface approach to learning and an absence of deep learning might all be significant predictors.

The Exit Survey included questions about the respondents' study experience including time available, financial strain, outside responsibilities, and the demands of the course. Students were asked to identify their reasons for leaving. This survey also asked about students' prior expectations of the Program.

The Concluding Survey included the same Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) as in the Initial Survey described above. It also asked for general information about the respondents' experience of the Program.

All three surveys were administered online using Survey Monkey following an emailed invitation to participate which contained the rationale for the study as well as the required ethics approval information. An online survey was considered the most appropriate method as the PEP is fully online and all students study by distance and are therefore used to interacting with the university electronically. Additional information about the study was also posted within the compulsory foundation skills units in the online learning management system. Because the study involved surveys offered to two consecutive cohorts of PEP students (those commencing in Semester 1, 2011 and those commencing in Semester 2, 2011), each survey was offered twice with the final survey being carried out in Semester 1, 2012 when the second cohort reached the end of the year long Program.

Results

Overall, 111 students responded to the Initial Survey (50 in Semester 1, 2011 and 61 in Semester 2, 2011). Of these 111, 25 students subsequently dropped out. The Exit Survey had 24 respondents (20 in Semester 1, 2011 and 4 in Semester 2, 2011). 109

students responded to the Concluding Survey (61 in Semester 2, 2011 and 48 in Semester 1, 2012).

Personal circumstances

The majority (66%) of respondents to the Initial Survey were aged between 20 and 40, spread evenly between the 20-30 group (33%) and the 31-40 group (33%). The age groups of the 25 respondents to the Initial Survey who subsequently withdrew from their studies are set out in Table 2 below. Those in the 31-40 age group were far more likely to drop out.

Age	Number withdrawn
Under 20	2
20-30	3
31-40	14
41-50	4
Over 50	2
Total	25

Table 2: Ages of the 25 students who completed the Initial Survey but subsequently withdrew from the course

More than two thirds of the respondents to the Initial Survey were in paid employment. Of the 25 who subsequently dropped out, 16 or 64% were in paid employment.

Prior educational experience

Of the 111 respondents to the Initial Survey, approximately 39% had completed secondary school and approximately 37% had completed a vocational qualification. The remainder (24%) had not completed secondary school. For approximately 42%, it had been more than 10 years since they last undertook any form of formal study.

This is not an unexpected profile given that enabling education is 'second chance' education aimed at people who have experienced prior educational disadvantage or have not been successful in their prior education and who now find themselves looking for educational opportunities. Usually these students are characterised by a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in education as a result of their prior experiences. They may not possess sound study skills but they do possess life skills gained from their life experiences although they are not always aware of or confident about the latter.

The drop out rates based on the 25 students who completed the Initial Survey and subsequently withdrew from their studies, for each of these groupings, is set out in Table 3 below. These results are consistent with undergraduate attrition in that there is a greater chance of students dropping out the lower the level of previous educational attainment. There is also a greater chance of dropping out for students who have been out of the education system for more than 10 years which is a problem for the PEP as the largest group of students fall into that category. Those who persisted and satisfactorily passed their first compulsory unit were more likely (30 or 45%) to have been involved more recently in study i.e. less than 5 years ago

	Drop out rate
Did not complete secondary school	52%
Completed secondary school	24%
Completed vocational qualification	16%
More than 10 years since last study	56%

Table 3: Previous educational experience and related drop out rates of 25 students who completed the Initial Survey but subsequently dropped out

Slightly more than a third (41 or 37%) of the 111 respondents to the Initial Questionnaire were the first in their immediate families to attend university. Of the 25 students who completed the Initial Questionnaire but subsequently withdrew, 11 (44%) were the first in their families to attend university so there was an insignificant difference between those who were and those who were not the first in their families in their propensity to withdraw.

Expectations of the Program

68% of the 111 respondents to the Initial Survey said that they expected the Program to be more difficult than their previous educational experience. 25% thought it would be of a similar level of difficulty and 7% expected it to be less difficult.

85% of the respondents to the Initial Survey said that they expected to work harder than at school. 4% did not expect to work harder and 12% expected the work required to be about the same as school (see Table 4 below).

Expecting PEP to be more difficult than school	Expecting PEP to be less difficult than school	Expecting PEP to be about the same level of difficulty
75 (68%)	8 (7%)	28 (25%)
Expecting to work harder	Not expecting to work harder	Expecting to work about the same as school
94 (85%)	4 (3%)	13 (12%)

Table 4: Students' expectations of the Program

Interestingly, of the 25 respondents to the Initial Survey who subsequently dropped out, a clear majority (23 or 92%) expected the Program to be more difficult than school and a clear majority (24 or 96%) expected that they would need to work harder than they did at school demonstrating that their expectations were not unrealistic.

Learning approaches

The theory underlying Biggs' SPQ is that study process factors determine the way students go about learning. They comprise students' motives for learning and their accompanying strategies. Motive and strategy determine a student's overall approach to learning. Basically, students with a predominantly deep approach to learning are motivated to learn as much as possible about the subject and any related area, simply for the joy of learning and because of an intrinsic interest in the subject. Their learning strategies are characterised by wide reading and attempting to fully understand all

concepts introduced. Conversely, students with a predominantly Surface Approach to learning are motivated to get through study with as little effort and disruption to life as possible. In order to achieve this strategies are to rote learn the bare essentials, read only those sections of texts specified in the course and avoid anything that would entail extra effort on their part. Students who are motivated to achieve high grades use strategies which effectively organise their time and working space, follow all instructions and behave as 'model' students (Biggs, 1987).

The SPQ comprised statements that correlated to deep, surface and achieving motives and strategies. Respondents were asked to rate each statement from 1 to 4 with 1 indicating the statement is never or rarely true for them; 2 indicating that the statement is sometimes true for them; 3 indicating the statement is often true for them; and 4 indicating the statement is always or almost always true for them.

In this study, it was hypothesised that a predominantly Surface Approach to study would be common amongst the PEP cohort as a result of their poor and/or unsuccessful prior learning experiences. It was also hypothesised that students with a predominantly Surface Approach would be less successful in the relatively unstructured environment of tertiary study and that these students would then be more likely to drop out.

Surprisingly, respondents to the Initial Survey were predominantly Deep and Achieving Approach learners. When analysed by age group it appeared that as age increased, the predominance of the Deep Approach over the Surface Approach increased, as did consistency between motives and strategies. Little difference was found in the Achieving Approach.

In order to explore possible differences in approaches to learning of persisters and non-persisters, the deep and surface motive and strategy items in this section of the survey were analysed according to the two factor approach (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001). Of the 109 students who responded to the Concluding Survey, 41 were the same students who responded to the Initial Survey. In the Initial Survey a clear majority of these respondents (39 or 95%) scored as predominantly Deep Approach learners. Two were predominately Surface Approach learners. In the Concluding Survey, again a clear majority (38 or 94 %) scored as predominantly Deep Approach learners. One student's approach had changed dramatically in the intervening time from being a high scoring Deep Approach leaner to a high scoring Surface Approach learner. Nonetheless, that student satisfactorily completed both the Foundations Skills units in the Program, along with all the other respondents to both the Initial and the Concluding Surveys.

Of the 111 students who completed the Initial Survey, 25 dropped out after Week 2 of their first semester studies, 12 in the Semester 1, 2011 intake and 13 in the Semester 2, 2011 intake. Surprisingly, the majority of those (22 or 88%) also scored as predominantly Deep Approach learners thereby clearly undermining the hypothesis that those who dropped out were more likely to be predominantly Surface Approach learners.

Students' reasons for withdrawal

The reasons for withdrawal from the Program for these 24 respondents to the Exit Survey are set out in Table 5 below. Note that some ticked more than one reason. The most common reason was to do with work followed by family related issues, then concerns around the first assignment.

Work related		13
Illness (self or family)		7
Childcare problems		3
Panic over first assignment		6
Disappointing results in first assignment		3
Other	Pregnancy	1
	House renovations	1

Table 5: Reasons for withdrawal given by the 24 respondents to the Exit Survey

The 24 Exit Survey respondents rated the importance of the following items as set out in Table 6 below. Note that 1= *Of no importance at all*, 2= *Of not much importance*, 3= *Quite important*, 4= *Very important* and the number of responses is in brackets. One respondent did not answer all the questions.

While doing the Program, I found that:	
The time required for study turned out to be more than I had available.	1[4]..2 [5]..3[4] ..4[10]
I just couldn't afford financially to continue at University.	1[16].2 [2]..3[3]..4[2]
I had medical problems (physical/emotional).	1[12] 2 [2]..3[4] 4[6]
My family responsibilities were heavier than I had anticipated.	1[8]..2[1]..3[7]…4[8]
I felt that I just didn't have the skills that I needed to do the course.	1[10].2 [8]..3[5]..4[1]
The official information I was given before enrolling was inadequate.	1[12].2[4]..3[4]..4[3]
I hadn't understood that my course required prior, assumed knowledge.	1[15].2 [6]..3[0]..4[2]

Table 6: Exit Survey respondents' personal experience of PEP

Clear factors for non-persisting students were time available for study (quite or very important for 59%) and family responsibilities (quite or very important for 62%). Other less important factors were medical problems (quite or very important for 42%) and not fully understanding the demands of distance education (quite or very important for 42%).

Discussion

The very nature of enabling education means that most participants are drawn from low socio-economic backgrounds and have had poor prior educational experiences. Therefore they would be expected to be highly susceptible to the same pressures experienced by undergraduates from similar backgrounds as described above.

PEP attrition is similar to undergraduate attrition in that a low level of previous educational attainment does appear to increase the propensity to drop out. It is expected that students from such backgrounds will not possess an adequate level of academic preparedness for university study and so this is addressed in the foundation skills units from the very start but it appears further attention needs to be paid to this. Unlike in undergraduate attrition, whether or not students are the first in their families to attend university is an insignificant factor in this study. Surprisingly though, students' learning approaches, which would reasonably be expected to be a predominantly surface approach, given their prior levels of educational attainment, appeared to be an irrelevant factor. Indeed, the majority of PEP students employed deep approaches to their learning, including those who dropped out. It could be surmised that a link exists between people's desire to re-enter the education system after a long time out of it, a genuine desire to learn and a deep approach to learning. Their various life experiences may also contribute to their life skills, their self-efficacy and their approach to study.

The 'course fit' factor in undergraduate attrition is not relevant to enabling education as it is itself a pathway towards further learning. However, enabling education does carry out the very important but often invisible function of providing people the opportunity to discover if higher education really is what they want and are able to do and achieve. In the case of the PEP, the ability to choose elective units across a broad range of disciplines also provides an opportunity for students to taste test subjects of interest which further enhances students' decision making about future study. Withdrawing in such instances may be just as positive a result for some students (and the institution) as successful completion. Enabling education practitioners understand that this is positive attrition. These students do not then go on to become an undergraduate drop out and therefore do not contribute to undergraduate attrition statistics as they might have otherwise, not to mention incur related costs to institutions and themselves. Additionally, those that do go on to undergraduate study are more likely to make well-informed subject/course choices which result in good 'course fit'.

The clearest factors in PEP attrition are related to the students' personal circumstances. The people most likely to drop are in the 31-40 age group and are in paid employment. People in this age group are possibly the most likely to have young families and be experiencing related financial pressures. They are also, arguably, the ones most likely to want to improve their circumstances. For them the most common reasons for dropping out are to do with work and family pressure and related time constraints including not fully understanding the demands of distance education, plus anxiety caused by the first assignment.

In terms of engagement, the lack of which is a common cause of attrition of undergraduates, the situation is different for PEP students. The Program is fully online so students are studying from a distance and do not have the opportunities to engage with the institution in the myriad ways possible for on-campus students, although they are introduced very early to the University's support services and resources designed specifically for students studying by distance. Actually engaging with the Program itself though is an issue as is demonstrated by the large number of students who do not engage at all as described above. Keeping the actual commencers engaged in the Program is also

an issue as clearly not all the students who drop out can be classified as positive attrition statistics.

A common response to specific instances of attrition related to inability to complete the course is to increase entry requirements. The PEP has no prerequisites and to introduce entry restrictions would be in contradiction to the aims of the Program which is to increase the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups engaging in higher education.

Recommendations

The underlying philosophy of the PEP is that students embark on an apprenticeship in academic skills whilst also applying these skills in real contexts (Muldoon et al., 2009), hence the consecutive foundation skills units taken concurrently with 'real' electives and the workload being half of the usual undergraduate load. In the light of the findings of this study this course design was reconsidered in order to further lessen the pressure on typical PEP students whose personal circumstances mean that the current hours of study required are problematic. Subsequently, in late 2012 the foundation skills units were uncoupled from the elective units as co-requisites so that the PEP course load became quarter time rather than half time in comparison to normal undergraduate full time load. This involved redesigning the foundation skills units as stand alone units of study which lead into the electives rather than contribute to and support student learning in the electives.

A further recommendation resulting from this study is that more support needs to be offered at critical times such as the first assessment task, in the elective units where enabling students currently do not get the same level of support and opportunities to resubmit as they do in the foundation skills units. This will be even more critical now that PEP students do not have the option to discuss or seek help with their elective assessment tasks within their (now not concurrent) foundation skills unit. This recommendation carries resourcing issues for the Schools from which the electives are offered and this could be problematic.

Additionally, enhanced early intervention needs to be offered to all who commence the PEP in order to ensure that they fully understand the demands of distance education from the start and that all opportunities for positive engagement with the institution are made available. Particularly, more needs to be done to entice non-starters to engage with the course and the university through a more effective online community and to support all who commence to overcome the various obstacles in their path if they truly desire to reach the finishing line.

Conclusion

Analysis of student outcomes and progression has shown that overall it is fair to conclude that the PEP provides an effective preparation for successful university study, for potential students who otherwise lack educational qualifications for entry. The Program does effectively remove the barrier of previous disadvantage for many

(Muldoon, 2011; Muldoon et al., 2009). However, for others, the barrier might be down but the finishing line seems to recede.

Whilst real attrition rates, based on those who actually commence the Program, are not as high as raw attrition based on all who enrol, the overall rates could be improved. At the same time however the value of positive attrition, where students deliberately and for good reason withdraw, should not be underestimated.

It is true however, that those who wish to continue possess a genuine desire to learn, as demonstrated by their predominantly deep approaches to learning but more needs to be done to support them to reach their goals. Retention strategies need to focus particularly on students' personal circumstances so that courses are tailored to fit in with the lifestyles and family situations of students. Such adjustments should also extend into undergraduate courses so that further barriers are not placed in the way of successful enabling education students. Additionally, early identification of non-participating students and timely intervention to assist in engagement or positive withdrawal is also important.

Understanding enabling education students and their backgrounds and contexts in this way is critical if they are to be effectively enabled to pursue higher education. Only then will national government imperatives aimed at removing barriers to higher education participation for people previously affected by educational and social disadvantage be achieved.

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