STEPS, LEAPS and bounds: Is there a recipe for success?

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Abstract

The development of a student identity as it relates to the transition of commencing students to higher education has long been identified in the literature as essential to success. As importantly, the existence of a sense of belonging has been considered key to transition and success and the formation of a student identity. Less prominent in the literature, the newly articulated notion of mattering has evolved from and is currently challenging the concept of student belonging. Mattering offers a broader understanding of what it means to have students in transition believe they are important, that they matter to the institution of study. The notion of mattering resonates strongly with the authors as transition educators. This paper draws on the work of Lizzio (2006) and MacFarlane (2018) to consider the essential ingredients any preparatory course should include to successfully transition underrepresented groups of students to study at the award level. A comparison of the STEPS course in the Australian context to LEAPS in the Scottish context provided avenue to propose a five-tenet framework as a possible recipe for success to best support the transition of an increasingly diverse group of students aspiring to university study. The paper explores the ways in which the courses effectively assist preparatory students develop a foundational student identity which is crucial to successful study in higher education, particularly in the initial stages of engagement. In doing so, it positions the philosophical underpinnings and the pedagogical practices currently adopted by both the STEPS and LEAPS courses as successfully embracing the tenets proposed within the framework.

Practitioner Notes

1. Support students as they navigate from 'their' world to the new world of academia and conquer the fear of the unknown
2. Provide an inclusive engaged environment where students can develop a sense of belonging and a feeling of worth
3. Guide students to acquire academic skills and develop independent learning skills
4. Support students to develop a sense of capability
5. Assist students to build resourcefulness and manage the non-academic factors associated with study

Keywords

Introduction

Opening a channel of communication between two research teams located more than 16,000 kilometres apart has proven beneficial in understanding the nature of two preparatory courses with different pedagogical approaches but similar missions. Despite the geographical distance and the cultural and historical differences of the Scottish and Australian educational contexts, an initial conversation revealed a common focus of academic endeavour on pre-university transition education and a clear intent to discuss what constitutes *success* for students in both preparatory courses. In partnering across international borders, the teams connected and embarked on a fascinating dialogue about the two courses, each having felt the impact of COVID-19. The comparison of offerings elucidated the contextual and structural differences of the two courses, but more importantly, it highlighted a shared aim: creating opportunities for traditionally under-represented groups to access and succeed in higher education. A strikingly similar mission underpinning the development of core preparatory skills and student identity was brought to light early on during the reflective conversations. An exploration into the ways the offerings strive to achieve similar objectives resulted in a selection by the authors of the key ingredients that preparatory courses should include to ensure students are equipped with the skills, knowledge and self-confidence required to cope with the demands of undergraduate study. A five-tenet framework is proposed as a recipe for success to ensure pre-university preparatory courses provide a solid platform from which transition students can step/leap into award study. This international perspective on transition pedagogy and widening participation in higher education derives from collaborative conversations and reflections. New knowledge gained by each author during the research meetings is shared with the reader to provide opportunities to answer the what, why and how for each of the courses. Table 1 provided in the Appendix identifies similarities and differences across key features of both courses. The paper specifically highlights the potential for further consideration of the newly conceived notion of mattering (Flett et al., 2019; Weston et al., 2021) as it relates to preparatory students. The authors were prompted to reflect upon its connection with transition pedagogy and were subsequently called upon to focus on past and current practice. They concluded that there is potential for further collaborative work specifically focusing on how mattering as a concept relates to both preparatory courses.

Context

Overview of the STEPS Course

Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) is a pre-university preparatory course designed to provide mature-age learners with the knowledge, skills and confidence to embark on and succeed in higher education studies. STEPS was first offered in 1986 on CQUniversity's Rockhampton campus in Central Queensland, Australia, to a group of 22 students who were representative of the six governmental targeted equity groups (see Table 1). Acknowledged as an effective pathway for traditionally marginalised groups to pursue further education, STEPS has grown in strength owing to consistently high student demand and strong institutional support. Over its 35-year history, STEPS has provided over 25,000 students with the opportunity to access higher education. Along with being under-prepared for what university asks of first-year students academically, many STEPS students lack confidence in themselves and their ability to successfully navigate a degree course. Many embark on their initial tertiary study carrying with them the remnants of often negative past educational experiences. Others, however, embark with the goal of improving their future employment opportunities without the intention of articulating to an award level course.

STEPS offers learners who have not achieved the required Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank or who lack the required pre-requisite or assumed knowledge and subsequent confidence a chance to gain entry to university or to achieve academically. Upon successful completion, students progress to CQUniversity diploma or degree courses in accordance with specific undergraduate course entry requirements and successful completion of units applicable to the course of their choice. The expectation is that, on completion of their STEPS study, students would have achieved the course learning outcomes and be capable of demonstrating the generic skills appropriate for academic purposes as well as acting in accordance with the university policies and protocols required of an undergraduate student. Students would be able to communicate effectively in a range of academic and non-academic contexts, develop an appropriate study plan that aligns with their personal and career aspirations, and reflect on their performance and feedback received to develop self-management and lifelong learning skills in individual and collaborative contexts. STEPS students articulating to undergraduate study at CQUniversity would be expected to demonstrate an ability in all common learning outcomes established by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (2021).

Overview of LEAPS, and the LEAPS Transitions Course

LEAPS is a widening participation programme designed to encourage, advise and support students throughout south-east Scotland who are traditionally under-represented in higher education. Its core activities cover three broad areas: school outreach to inspire and guide students about higher education opportunities; pre-entry impartial information, advice and guidance; and transition and preparation support for students entering higher education. Formed after successful pilots in the mid-1990s, LEAPS is a partnership of Edinburgh-based universities (Edinburgh Napier, Heriot-Watt, Scotland's Rural College, Queen Margaret and the University of Edinburgh) and local authorities in the south-east. Now further supported by additional funding from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to deliver their National Schools Programme (NSP), LEAPS has expanded to support students in 73 secondary schools.

Since the partnership was formalised in 1996, LEAPS has provided transition and preparation support for its students, and this continues to be a key objective of the programme. This took the form of the LEAPS Summer School; a course for school-leavers which remained in place for 22 years, and generated 2095 graduates. In 2019, a research and development project focussed on the remodelling of the Summer School concluded with a *Preparation and Transitions Framework* which identified the core elements any future LEAPS transitions activity should include. After the formation of an Academic Advisory Group in 2020, a pilot course was designed along these guidelines, and the LEAPS Transitions Course began to be offered in schools from the Midlothian Local Authority before expanding to other authorities in 2021. The new course was credit-rated by the Centre for Open Learning at the University of Edinburgh in 2021 as 20 credits at Level 7 on the Scottish Credits and Qualifications Framework (SCQF); that is, the equivalent of first-year undergraduate study. After the 2020-21 pilot year, admissions agreements were put in place with most Scottish universities, securing future students who complete the course recognition in entry requirements.

Whilst the model of delivery has changed, the target group has not. The course is now taught and timetabled throughout students' final year of school (known as S6), adding new complexities, but also a much longer timeframe within which to support students in their transition. School teachers timetable LEAPS-eligible students into the course carefully, ensuring selected students have, or are sitting, the national qualifications required for university entry in school, and that they have the potential to progress to higher education level study. Central to the new Transitions Course, and

previous incarnations, was experiential academic skills preparation and an immersive on-campus experience. As with the Summer School, the course is multi-exit, whereby students go on to a variety of higher education destinations.

The impact of COVID-19

The researchers' conversations occurred when COVID-19 was causing significant disruption to learning environments, with schools and universities closing and national examinations and assessments cancelled or postponed. STEPS staff were required to deliver classes fully online via Zoom creating new challenges by working from home and increasing screen-time for staff and students (James et al., 2021). For LEAPS, being fully online for the first pilot year, and partially in the second, the pandemic undermined the potential for the immersive on-campus experience previously offered and deemed through literature to be important in developing a sense of belonging and a positive learning identity (MacFarlane, 2018; Thomas, 2012).

Providing space, flexibility and emotional support became prime concerns for both STEPS and LEAPS. Regardless of the intensive support for STEPS students, withdrawals were more frequent; however, from those retained, student feedback remained very positive with many attributing their persistence and achievements to the support of their lecturers (James et al., 2021, p.6). On a positive note, online delivery for LEAPS allowed some students to find a space online and created opportunities for rural students where face-to-face learning was previously geographically challenging or impossible (Lasselle, 2016).

Despite the COVID-19 challenges, possibilities to engage meaningfully online with a new generation of learners now appear feasible. STEPS students are choosing to enrol online in greater numbers than ever before (STEPS Annual Course Enhancement Review, 2021) prompting a course review of delivery modes and reallocation of resources. LEAPS will continue a blended model and trial hybrid sessions to reach rural students. As COVID-19 continues to impact educational institutions, courses such as STEPS and LEAPS are mindful of the need to respond to the continually changing higher education landscape to which students articulate.

Theoretical framework

This paper explores how the courses being considered assist students to develop a foundational student identity. Drawing on the vast literature on student identity, this paper delves into the concept of student sense of belonging, the existence of which has been recognised as being key to the development of student identity, particularly in the initial stages of engagement in higher education. The paper also includes references to the literature on the newly articulated concept of mattering.

Student identity

Students commence university with an established self-identity founded in the various identities reflected in their prior social roles (Terry et al., 1999) and in the possible selves constructed within their sociocultural context (Marcus & Nurius, 1986, cited in Harrison, 2018). This self-identity closely aligns with the behaviours evident in the student's social context, which can either support or challenge the development of identity and the student's perception of the quality of their performance of their role (Whannell & Whannell, 2015). Whannell and Whannell, (2015) claim the interplay of previous roles and experiences may result in a conflict of identity for the new university student. Willans (2019) suggests role and identity conflicts most likely occur for students who have had negative school learning experiences or who have been disengaged from education for a

substantial period. As they attempt to engage with a role with possibly significant negative emotional associations, these students may have difficulty conceiving of themselves as successful university students (Willans, 2019).

The transition from a student's pre-university world to a new academic world requires substantial adjustment. Willans (2019) describes the students' transition to tertiary study as a 'borderland' between their everyday world and the unknown world of university. To acquire a student identity in this higher education context, students need to successfully navigate this borderland, learning how to relate to themselves as students, how to interact with peers and lecturers and how to understand the many and varied expectations characteristic of a university landscape. Whilst in this borderland, students often feel, as Ramsay and Brown (2017) suggest, their presence at university is fraudulent, their achievements unfounded, or they will be further disenfranchised if their true self is discovered. McFarlane (2018) contends this is more keenly felt by marginalized and widening participation students who "can experience significant disequilibrium in their notion of self when faced with such periods of change" (p.1203). Often, students are hindered by what Ramsay and Brown (2017) define as the imposter syndrome, which undermines students' ability to negotiate a resilient academic identity and impedes the growth of a sense of belonging. However, 'self-imposed' imposter syndrome can be addressed through assisting students to renegotiate their self-image and develop a self-belief that they do belong and are worthy of the place they have been allocated within the course, and that they, with determination, have every chance to achieve their academic goals. This sense of fraudulence can also be countered through the philosophical framing of the course and pedagogical practices that assist students to fight feelings of inadequacy and not belonging (Knights & Clarke, 2013).

Lizzio's (2006) senses of success model provides an insight into the evolving identities of students as they progress through a university course. This model highlights four phases of identity during a student's learning journey: (a) a potential student identity, (b) a student identity, (c) a graduate identity and (d) a professional identity. The model is premised on a student experiencing different feelings, having different needs and purposes that emerge at each phase of the student lifecycle. Students studying within access programs initially seek connection, belonging and inclusion. Lizzio suggests a student's sense of positive student identity evolves from a sense of potential student identity and associates with a sense of connection, capability, resourcefulness and purpose. He proposes that for university students, a sense of connection develops from a sense of possible inclusion as a potential student and that connection strengthens as a result of quality relationships with peers and university staff. He claims that when university students have realistic understandings of the student role, they develop feelings of self-efficacy and a sense of capability. Lizzio says purpose is subsequent to a potential student forming a sense of aspiration and that a sense of purpose motivates students to persist in their role when challenges arise. Finally, Lizzio proposes resourcefulness builds on a potential student's sense of feasibility concerning their studies and enables university students to manage aspects of their university experience.

MacFarlane (2018) identifies six broad and overlapping factors that facilitate the development of a higher education learner identity. These include academic skills, independent learning, social relations, personal and social skills, engaged learning and the development of a sense of belonging. MacFarlane (2018) claims it is the impact of these six key factors that promote a "transformational intellectual transition from school pupil to university student" (p.1211) and without the formation of a higher education learner identity, the transition to university would be a much bigger leap. MacFarlane contends the development of a student identity is a "social as opposed to a personal phenomenon and it is the immersive experience in higher education constituted by new social

relations with like-minded peers" (p.1210) that has the most significant influence on the establishment of a student identity.

Belonging and mattering

Developing a sense of belonging is widely considered key to transition and success in higher education and the formation of a positive academic identity. Belonging is variously described as feeling at home, being accepted, and being connected to a community or institution (Ahn & Davis, 2020a; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Van Herpen et al., 2020; Tinto, 2017a). There is widespread agreement in the literature that academic engagement, retention, and success are positively associated with students' sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020b; Naylor, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 2017a). Tinto (2017a) claims the greater the students' sense of belonging to a learning community which values their membership, the more likely it is they will persist and complete their studies, even in the face of challenges. Conversely, a sense of being out of place can lead to withdrawal from learning and teaching, diminishing the student's motivation to persist and weaken academic performance (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 2017a). More recently, Gravett and Ajjawi (2021) argue that belonging is now dominant in policy papers and pedagogical models and "has become a fundamental thread within higher education practice and research" (pp. 2 & 3).

In the context of higher education literature, mattering as distinct from belonging has emerged as an important way to understand the experience of traditionally marginalised students in the United States (Cole et al., 2020; Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Mattering can be defined as "the feeling of being significant and important to other people" (Flett et al., 2019, p.667). Students feel they matter when they are taken seriously, when they have a voice and when someone demonstrates an interest in them (Weston et al., 2021). Whereas a student can feel a sense of belonging to a group, institution or community, they may also feel invisible and irrelevant (Flett et al., 2019). In this sense, mattering can co-exist with belonging or exist without it. Cole et al. (2020) argue that belonging "does not account for the importance of personal recognition and attention that students may require, especially in their first year" (p. 278). Mattering has the potential to address this concern by shifting the focus to how much a student feels they matter to other individuals or the university community. Mattering does not require sameness in the way that belonging often infers with an assimilation to a particular culture or ways of being, of *fitting in.* Recent criticism of the discourse and practice of promoting belonging has raised questions about whether it is exclusionary to traditionally under-represented groups (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Thomas, 2015) as much of it is framed on normative ideas of privileged students. Studies from the United States show that students of colour (Cole et al., 2020) and *Latinx* students (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020) often report a lower sense of belonging than White students. In their critique, Gravett and Ajjawi (2021) claim the experiences of those students who may not wish to, or are not able to belong, and may identify as "outside of the bubble", should be considered (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021, p.4). Therefore, mattering provides a space for difference, and is more ethical in its inclusiveness (Weston et al., 2021).

Data collection

Cross-national collaboration presented some challenges; namely, initial unfamiliarity of the researchers, limited time available to meet, and scheduling of conversations when distanced by 11 or 12 hours. Online platforms allowed the collaboration to succeed. The authors commenced a series of firstly professional and cordial introductory conversations, followed by those of a more relaxed nature. Using Zoom to enable live discussion and file-sharing, the authors quickly established an ease of connection and a suitable conversational rapport (Archibald et al., 2019). Microsoft Teams was utilized to share conversation notes, experiences, reflections, and data as they emerged.

Feldman (1999, p.126) points to the use of conversation not only as a research method but also as a research methodology in collaborative action research "in which the sharing of knowledge and growth of understanding occurs through meaning making processes". The suggestion is that "collaborative conversations" (Hollingsworth, cited in Feldman, 1999, p.128) can move past the pleasantries of the day, and in the case of this research team, lead each author to become familiar with the different contexts in which the courses operate. By identifying commonalities and differences, the core factors that point to a successful transition for students into university are established: and thus, the proposed five-tenet framework was developed.

The data used and shared in this paper was collected through these conversations and previously conducted evaluations by each team. Table 1, *STEPS and LEAPS: a comparison of essential features* was collaboratively created over the conversation period and covers those aspects deemed essential for the reader to obtain a basic understanding of the courses. Student feedback has been used to exemplify and illustrate each tenet proposed. A STEPS survey, 'How well did we prepare you for university?' was administered in 2019 to students who had completed their undergraduate degree. Survey data consisted of anonymous responses from students about all component units, comments on what they considered the best aspects of STEPS, and suggestions for improvements. This is supplemented by approximately 2251 end of term STEPS unit evaluations from the period 2018-2021. Responses included from LEAPS students take the form of unsolicited feedback from longitudinal course evaluations. The LEAPS Summer School Futures Consultation (2019) surveyed former students on their experiences and reflections. Fifty-one students completed the survey and respondents included those who had attended from 1998-2017. Additional student feedback was sourced from LEAPS S6 Transitions Course Evaluation Study (2020-ongoing), a longitudinal evaluation project with current and former participants. Whilst the focus in these responses is the LEAPS Transitions Course, the reflections of former students from the Summer School are also drawn upon.

Discussion

Proposing a recipe for success: a 5-tenet framework

This paper draws on Lizzio's (2001) study on positive student identity and MacFarlane's (2018) model to provide a theory-based framework that demonstrates the development of student identity is core to the academic and social learning practices in both the LEAPS and STEPS courses. Examples of learning opportunities that facilitate the development of student capability in the areas identified in MacFarlane's and Lizzio's work are included, as well as student testimonials that illustrate, from their perspective, the positive impact of the transition pedagogies adopted by both courses. Whilst in conversation, the concept of mattering as a new and alternate way to understand how best to support students came into focus and the research team immediately recognised how strongly this notion resonated with the philosophical thinking and pedagogical underpinnings of both STEPS and LEAPS. The research team were drawn to consider whether mattering could be a powerful concept to drive the successful development of a student identity, particularly for those from marginalised or underrepresented groups. Through collaborative discussion of transition pedagogy emerges a recipe for success, which is offered as a 5-tenet framework to guide educators tasked with assisting preparatory students develop a positive student identity as a precursor to success in undergraduate study.

Recipe for success: a 5 -tenet framework

1. Border crossing

2. Engaged learning/sense of belonging/mattering
3. Academic skills and independent learning
4. Self-efficacy
5. Resourcefulness and personal management skills

Border crossing

Support students as they navigate from 'their' world to the new world of academia and conquer the fear of the unknown.

Commencing university can be a "bewildering and dislocating experience, a real rollercoaster of confidence and emotion as the *old certainties* … are lost and the former secure identity is challenged" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 570). New to university students are expected to cross the boundary from one existence to another, a transition referred to as border-crossing (Giroux, 1991) or boundary crossing (Bernstein, 1971). Anzaldúa (1987) conceptualizes this borderland as a space in which multiple identities are at play, and where contradictions and ambiguities arise as "two or more cultures edge each other" (p. 19). Similarly, Akerman and Barker (2011) suggest all learning involves boundaries, reflecting spaces where students feel they do not belong to either world. In this "no man's land" (Ackerman & Barker, 2011, p. 132) students are called upon to negotiate different identities which do not necessarily harmoniously co-exist. As students embark on their higher education experience and are required to learn the rules of the new environment, they often doubt their ability to fit, and grapple with the unfamiliarity of the alien world and its associated demands. Differences in worlds can make it difficult for students to adapt, reorient or integrate experiences (Phelan et al., 1991).

Ramsay and Brown (2018) suggest new to university students experience culture shock on making the transition to higher education. Not having a reservoir of knowledge to draw upon (Christie et al., 2006) and not knowing what to expect at the level of award study can evoke powerful feelings of displacement, anxiety and guilt, and can lead to feelings of psychological vulnerability and insecurity (Griffiths et al., 2005). Lane and Sharp (2014) claim it is not a lack of intellect that hampers students in their quest for new learnings but rather their cultural circumstances where many students have disengaged from education because of past negative experiences, often because of past failures at school. In many cases, students bear deep-seated misgivings about their academic ability and are skeptical about their chance to succeed at university (Seary & Willans, 2020).

Essential to successful border-crossing for preparatory students is the quality of interactions pre-commencement of course where lecturers assist students to recognize and value the knowledge and skills that they bring to their university experience and guide them to challenge any negative perceptions they may hold of themselves as learners and their potential for success. At the outset, it is crucial that communications make students feel safe, that they belong and that they matter. Kift (2015) impresses that at the heart of interactions, the imperative is to normalize the experience of commencing students to reduce the sense of isolation and otherness they may be feeling. Through Orientation activities presented by both STEPS and LEAPS, students are reassured support is readily available if they struggle to balance the competing demands of study, work, and personal commitments, and that there will be scaffolded support to manage assessments.

Institutions can assist students transition from one identity to another by adopting what Morse (2010) terms a border-crossing leadership style which aims to help students manage and integrate multiple discourses across the social boundaries (Walker & Nocon, 2007). Both the STEPS and LEAPS courses are purposefully designed through pedagogic approaches that communicate connection

across both worlds. Employing strengths-based enabling pedagogies, both courses provide dialogical spaces (Bennett et al., 2016) where students' existing knowledge and current lived experiences are valued and where educators guide the development of student narratives of self as capable learners.

To provide a strengths-based pedagogy in a supportive learning environment, STEPS and LEAPS embrace what Motta and Bennett (2018) term pedagogies of care whereby teaching is not reduced to technique only (Seary & Willans, 2020) but is underpinned by a "relational approach to pedagogy that subsumes the privileging of trust, acceptance, diligence and individual attentiveness" (Walker & Gleaves, 2016 p. 65). Pedagogies of care emphasize optimism and empathy as students work towards developing a student identity. Both courses value teaching as a caring profession, one which as Noddings (1992) suggests requires responding to students' emotional experience as well as their experience of concepts taught. Rosiek (2003) impresses this is most important for those students on the cultural margins having found themselves affected by some form of educational disadvantage. Particular attention is paid to challenging deficit frameworks applied by these students to their learning, and strategizing the reframing of existing negative self-narratives. For example, the teaching of academic skills aims to help students succeed in a new academic world, not to fill a deficit in skills or practice. The challenge for educators is to influence the mindset that accompanies the transition from the student's existing world to the new world of academia. Influencing the perception of students in a positive vein is inherent in the preparatory educator's role and requires what Rosiek (2003) terms "emotional scaffolding" where educators seek to support the emotional responses students make to certain aspects of the curriculum.

The following student reflections point to both STEPS and LEAPS successfully creating this supportive environment.

- STEPS: After such a long time from any study the support from staff to re-enter study was superb. STEPS was the most valuable thing I have ever done in my life.
- LEAPS: I now have an actual idea of what will be expected of me in university as I was so clueless previously... I don't feel as scared.

Engaged learning / sense of belonging / mattering

Provide an inclusive engaged environment where students can develop a sense of belonging and a feeling of worth.

Those who develop transition and preparatory courses aspire to provide an inclusive environment where engaged learning can contribute to and enable a sense of belonging and mattering in students. In this conceptual model for student persistence, Tinto (2017a) makes the connection between student goals, the development of a sense of belonging, and a curriculum that is both relevant and engaging. The interaction identified between all three suggests that students' academic engagement and success is positively associated with a sense of belonging. The close relationship between engaged learning and the development of a sense of belonging is aptly described by Tinto (2017b, p.261) when he emphasises students derive their sense of belonging from engagement rather than the act of engagement driving the sense of belonging. Focusing on creating an environment where belonging is seen as more than just a sense of being part of a group but a feeling that the individual student matters to others, with a sense of worth and a voice in the learning community, brings mattering to the fore. Flett et al. (2019) argue that "mattering is best promoted when steps are taken to demonstrate that there is an increasing emphasis on the student's perspective" (p. 675). It is

possible that some of the efforts to create a sense of belonging and embracing pedagogies of care (Motta & Bennett, 2018) can also foster mattering.

Much of this work, as Tinto (2017b) explains, falls to those who are actively involved in the delivery of courses. As a student becomes part of a learning community, the development of relationships with staff and fellow students becomes key to establishing an identity as part of the group or the wider learning community, hence promoting a sense of belonging, and a feeling that they matter. This is especially the case for non-traditional students, many of whom will be first in family to access higher education, who may lack confidence that this is a space for them whether academically able or not, and who seek suitable interactions with staff and fellow students who can empathise with their former and current life experiences. Typically, these interactions will be positive and will occur in the classroom, but as Tinto (2017b, p.261) points out, sometimes it may only take one negative interaction to impel a student to question their perception of their place in this academic space. Educators working on preparatory courses have a heightened sense of values to support those who are underrepresented in society (Motta & Bennett, 2018) and play a pivotal role in developing their students' sense of belonging as they recognize the importance to a person's psychosocial health (Seary & Willans, 2020). Both STEPS and LEAPS set out to develop a sense of belonging by designing opportunities for student interaction with peers, teaching and support staff, whether that be on campus or online. Part of the STEPS and LEAPS ethos is to ingrain in students the certainty that they have earned their place at university, to which they now belong. This is supported by Willans (2019), who emphasises the importance of learning spaces where teachers create a sense of welcome and inclusion, with a focus on cultivating a sense of student belonging in that space. For LEAPS students, the emphasis is on this is a university course, and the student, treated as a university student, is assured of a safe place to try things out and make mistakes. Experiencing the course in a 'university' space, whether physically or online, with the school-leavers treated as adults, differentiates that experience from school, and contributes to fostering this sense of belonging in a university community of practice (MacFarlane, 2018).

Tinto (2017a) also supports the development of a sense of academic and social belonging at the outset of the study journey as it will facilitate other forms of engagement in the first year and motivate students to persist to completion in the years that follow. In STEPS, affirmation of the student identity is embedded in the operational and academic communication and is core to Orientation activities. This message is deemed essential to counteract past negative educational experiences, lack of family support or low aspirations in many commencing students. A sense of purpose is often strengthened when new students hear of the experience, of past students as recounted by them at Orientation and via internal news channels. The realisation that students from similar backgrounds and with similar dreams have been able to achieve their study goals and their validation of the course's worth inspires new students and impacts positively on their sense of belonging.

When we consider that STEPS and LEAPS students may not perceive themselves in the mould of a traditional student, or that others may not consider them in that light, an alternative way to encourage and support students in their transition and to avoid marginalisation is to have them feel they matter. Could it be possible that the care currently extended to students is an implicit promotion of you matter? In both courses, there are regular opportunities for student/staff contact, group projects, discussion, brainstorming, and problem-solving tasks take place in the classroom and outside, and within moderated online discussion forums. LEAPS students, for example, have a voice in designing their own inclusive practice at the start of the course by co-writing a Group Agreement for supportive and participatory tutorials. The tutor team leading weekly tutorials are all PhD students, only recently undergraduates, hired and trained to act as peer guides. The social presence

of the teaching staff may help students to connect with each other, engage with content, and feel part of a learning community where they have a voice and a purpose. Flett et al. (2019) argue that many existing practices for belonging could be easily adapted to support mattering, but the key is to sustain them in the long term and to help students self-generate opportunities to feel they matter. Could reviewing and then extending existing practice promote mattering and in turn support student transition and success?

- STEPS: Having people check on you even if not needed makes you feel they care about your learning... I have learned so much in a very positive and supportive environment... There is always a smile, a helping hand and a feeling that we mattered as people not just students.
- LEAPS: Having a person who was approachable and genuinely interested in us made a huge difference. They were not condescending or patronising but helped to teach us loads ...supporting us with anything we needed.

Academic skills and independent learning

Guide students to acquire academic skills and develop as independent learners.

By its very nature, university study asks much of students who are new to that level of work. School-leavers' academic preparedness for university is also often questioned as many of the skills acquired in school are not considered conducive to success in higher education (Christie et al., 2008; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Wingate, 2007). The level of preparedness of the increasingly diverse student cohort accessing university, many of whom have been traditionally marginalised due to educational disadvantage, is widely recognised (Fomunyam, 2019). It has been demonstrated that preparatory courses are successful as a transition strategy (Cantwell & Grayson, 2002; Croll & Browitt, 2015; Willans et al., 2003), delivering well-prepared students to the first-year undergraduate courses. Preparatory courses provide a well-supported and safe learning environment where students can develop the academic skills and confidence needed to transition.

A core objective of the STEPS and LEAPS courses is the development of key academic skills. All STEPS students complete one core unit centred on generic academic skills, one essay writing unit, and one or more elective units in the areas of mathematics, computing and/or science, depending on their undergraduate course of choice and their diagnostic test results. The LEAPS Transitions Course's focus is academic skills preparedness, with core topics including critical thinking, academic writing, evidence, academic sources, feedback, discussion, and presentation skills and data.

Although each of the two courses follows different teaching or support approaches, both integrate core elements towards the similar goals of academic skills preparedness and independent learning. For example, by teaching students how to approach, plan and write a research-based essay, STEPS provides the key academic writing skills commonly required by undergraduate assessments. Students are taken through the stages of the research-writing cycle to guide their essay planning and writing in a way that mirrors the real-world research and writing process. By guiding students in their search for and evaluation of sources of information, and in the application of referencing principles and conventions, STEPS aims to develop information literacy skills, critical thinking, and academic integrity. Similarly, the LEAPS Transitions Course introduces students to core skills as they work towards a summative writing assessment, all the while building towards developing positive academic practice. Moreover, assessment criteria have been constructively aligned to the course content and explicitly references the skills and concepts covered in the course.

Alongside academic skills preparedness, both courses embed pedagogies aimed to develop independent learning skills and have students become self-directed learners (Candy, 1991). In terms of cognitive ability, independent learning is closely related to self-regulated learning, which helps learners to complete predefined learning goals. However, independent learning can also translate to an attitude towards learning which facilitates goal setting and the management of the learning process (Lloyd-Jones & Hak 2004, cited in van Woezik, 2021). Van Woezik et al. (2021) define this attitude in terms of affect, referred to as the ability to connect to one's emotions; openness, understood as having a growth mindset which fosters self-evaluation; and motivation, which facilitates goal setting. Concerned with cultivating autonomous, and thus lifelong learners, STEPS and LEAPS incorporate opportunities for independent learning to allow students to gradually take responsibility for and have control over their own learning progress and goals, and to help them understand their roles in the learning process. This is achieved by deliberate course design, making independent learning an explicit aim of the course. The importance for students to take responsibility for their own learning is imbued in the courses' resources, instructions, and in the messages included as part of the personalised support offered. Scaffolded content and assessments allow students to reflect on and assess their learning at various stages and adjust their study approach and goals as required. This self-regulation of learning is facilitated by regular feedback provided on formative and summative assessments. As a student's learning autonomy develops over time (Lau, 2017), so does their preparedness and sense of identity (MacFarlane, 2018).

- STEPS: STEPS gave me the confidence to believe that I could go on and complete a degree. I learnt a lot of skills that have helped me to achieve good marks throughout my degree so far. I feel it gave me an edge over other students in the first two years. I still help my peers with referencing questions and setting out of assignments.
- LEAPS: I've learnt a lot about the academic skills I will need for university as well as the standard of work that will be expected of me. I've gained a lot through practicing these skills and being able to practise independent learning and tutorial discussions before going to university.

Self-efficacy

Support students to develop a sense of capability.

The benefits of self-efficacy beliefs in academic contexts have been researched extensively. Self-efficacy, defined as people's perceptions of their ability to succeed in specific domains (Bandura, 1977), influences how a person addresses tasks and challenges, provides motivation to pursue goals and is one of the most crucial determinants of success (Gallagher, 2012). It has been demonstrated that academic self-efficacy beliefs determine academic success by helping students to identify academic options more effectively, harness their natural talents, and persevere through academic difficulties (Gallagher, 2012). A weak sense of self-efficacy tends to undermine achievement (Tinto, 2017a); conversely, a strong self-efficacy belief will lead students to engage more willingly with a task, put forth more effort, and persist longer in the completion of that task even in the face of obstacles and failure (Chemers et al., 2001). When adequate skills, positive outcome expectations, and personally valued outcomes are present, self-efficacy is a major influence on people's choice of activities and effort used (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 1991).

For students who do not begin university confidently, a strong sense of self-efficacy cannot be assumed. Tinto (2017a) argues these students may struggle and become discouraged, especially while trying to adjust to the demands of first year study. During this adjustment period, Usher and Pajares (2008) suggest that identifying, challenging, and altering low self-efficacy is essential. Tinto

(2017a) emphasises that students' belief in their ability to succeed in university is multi-faceted, not just an academic issue, but personal on numerous levels. This is true for many students in both courses who must manage multiple study, work and family commitments. STEPS students sometimes question their ability to succeed as the learning context reminds them of perceived negative stereotypes held of them by others. It is for these reasons that Tinto (2017a) proposes that transition education should not only focus on helping students acquire academic skills; it should also strengthen their students' identity by reshaping the students' belief in their capacity to succeed at university.

Bandura (2012) suggests students most effectively build capability beliefs through mastery experiences**.** The perception of positive outcomes from one's actions tends to boost students' confidence in their abilities, which in turn has a powerful effect on efficacy beliefs (Hutchinson et al., 2013; Gallagher, 2012). The accomplishment of early low-efficacy tasks and assessments has been proven to raise the students' can-do belief and motivate them to invest the necessary attention and effort into future, larger challenges. By scaffolding content, skills and assessments across all units, and by offering both formative and cumulative assessment types, both courses aim to facilitate learning and enable a gradual, attainable completion of tasks. Timely feedback is designed to feed-forward on current assessments, but also into their future undergraduate studies. LEAPS students, for example, are introduced to the concept and practice of feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018) to equip them with strategies for interpreting and applying feedback in their upcoming studies. Research suggests that mastery experiences are the strongest influence on student self-efficacy beliefs; however, self-efficacy can also be shaped by social persuasion (Schunk, 1991) in the form of encouragement to persist in the face of difficulties. STEPS and LEAPS staff are well known for their proactive approach in providing positive feedback on tasks performed successfully. Expectations are set that academic struggles are normal and part of the overall experience, and how to utilise support and strategies is shared and tested.

- STEPS: STEPS provided the confidence to take that leap into the unknown. It encouraged me to feel I could and I was smart enough.
- LEAPS: I could remember things that I had achieved at summer school which were difficult and challenging and used that to push myself at university.

Resourcefulness and personal management skills

Assist students to build resourcefulness and manage the non-academic factors associated with study.

Not only do students need academic skills to be prepared for the demands of university study, they must also develop a sense of resourcefulness to be able to manage the university experience. Student expectations and understanding of higher education prior to entry may have been shaped, not only by prior learning experiences, but by what students have learned from peers, family and teachers (Hockings et al., 2007). Especially for those students who are first in family to attend university or "those who have internalized a sense of themselves as *other*" (Read et al., 2003, p. 270), the new world of academia may seem alien and unsettling.

One of the advantages of both STEPS and LEAPS being delivered within or by a university is that students become familiar with the university systems, resources and processes. STEPS students are also aware of the information and support services available and know who to contact should they need to discuss individual concerns or study plans. LEAPS students are similarly

registered as students with student cards, with access to the library and other university facilities on campus or online. Developing a feel for the game before entering university offers the chance to gain some crucial experience and capital, the lack of which has been identified as likely factors in difficult transitions into university (Farenga, 2018; Reay et al., 2009). This immersive experience can contribute to "a sense of self as *student*" (MacFarlane, 2018, p. 1211) and enable an understanding of the discourses of knowledge, communication and practice which make up the academic culture (Read et al., 2003). By the time they commence their undergraduate studies, STEPS and LEAPS students are experienced users of systems such as online learning platforms and the student portal, and their understanding of assessment requirements and library processes provide them an advantage over new students.

In addition to the development of academic skills and resourcefulness, Tinto (1993) claims students must be able to manage the non-academic factors associated with their study. Competing life demands related to finances, work, family commitments, and health issues may challenge many students to engage, with the resulting time pressures cited as reasons for withdrawal (Burke et al., 2017; Hodges et al., 2013; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Willans, 2019). STEPS and LEAPS both assist students develop personal management skills by setting out clear expectations around study time commitment, and by explicitly including guidelines and support around time management and study skills. STEPS also encourages written reflections and class/forum discussions on learning styles, study strategies, stress management and the causes and consequences of procrastination. The personalised nature of the STEPS enrolment process, and similarly, the relatively small staff to student ratio in the LEAPS course allow for study plan revisions that result in more manageable study loads. The design of the LEAPS Transitions Course deliberately encourages self-management skills by structuring the weekly learning, encouraging positive learning strategies for each topic covered and reflective practice in tutorials and assessments. Tutors also provide individualised time management tasks and lead peer discussions on managing competing demands. As STEPS and LEAPS students are guided and supported in their development of resourcefulness and personal management skills, they acquire behaviours and skills that shape their student identity and autonomy.

- STEPS: STEPS helped me to gain an understanding of how university worked and gave me confidence to enrol in my undergraduate degree. This was important for me as I am the first person in my family to undertake a University degree, so I had no one to ask any questions about how university worked or what to expect.
- LEAPS: Loved every minute. Gave me the confidence to be able to communicate more effectively with lecturers and peers. Gave me the confidence and life skills needed for first year at uni.

Conclusion

In comparing two pre-university preparatory courses delivered in two different countries, the initial motivation and ensuing focal consideration for collaboration was to establish if there was a recipe for success for preparing underrepresented students for higher education, no matter the location. It did not matter to the authors that the two courses at the heart of the discussion were largely different on many levels. What was important was the shared understandings that arose through conversation and how each course can be described and proposed as a pathway to ensure a solid start for transitioning students. Conversations over an extended period evidenced that even though STEPS and LEAPS differ in the cohort, method of delivery and support for students, both courses encapsulate all elements considered essential to the successful preparation of students traditionally

underrepresented in higher education. Careful consideration of all aspects of both courses saw a clear alignment with the five-tenet framework proposed as a roadmap for smooth transition and success. It became clear that both courses provide the vehicle through which students develop a foundational student identity so crucial to successful university study. Reflection on the collaborative experience saw all four authors being confident in students exiting both preparatory courses with the skills, attributes and literacies at varying levels of mastery but all with a foundational level on which to build, essential to navigating the next level of award study. The collaboration clearly identified the value of gaining an international perspective on transition courses and pedagogy and confirmed that, despite the challenges of COVID, these courses continue to provide benefits of a personal/institutional/societal/governmental nature by having more well-prepared students enter higher education courses.

A highlight of the collaboration for the research team was the unexpected engagement with the concept of mattering, consideration of which presents the opportunity for further investigation of mattering as a concept in relation to transition pedagogy, in particular to preparatory course offerings. As such, the intention is to continue dialogue with other preparatory educators within Australia, Scotland and further afield. The express aim is to identify the potential for institutional change in practice that may be possible through engagement with the notion of mattering alongside belonging as an effective way to ensure students feel they are valued, and they have a voice in their learning journey.

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Appendix

Table 1: STEPS and LEAPS: A comparison of essential features

	STEPS	LEAPS
Offering institution or bodies	CQUniversity Australia – self-accrediting institution	Based in Edinburgh LEAPS is a partnership of the 5 Edinburgh-based HEIs and South-East Scotland Local Authorities.
Funding context	Institutional funded Commonwealth Government Supported Places (CSP)	LEAPS Partnership (Edinburgh-based HEIs) and Local Authorities + Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
Eligibility	Australian or New Zealand citizens, Permanent residents or Holders of Humanitarian visa 18 years of age in the year of enrolment	Must meet one LEAPS eligibility criteria. Final year of secondary school; 17-18 years of age
Mission statement	To provide a quality, tailored curriculum within a supportive learning environment that fosters in adult learners the academic and personal skills for progression to, and success in, undergraduate study.	To give students the skills and experience required to make a positive transition from school to university.
Course delivery	National footprint 12-week terms 1-6 terms to complete University setting Delivered across all three academic terms Face-to-face/Online/Multimodal Part /Full time	Work with 73 schools in South-East Scotland across 8 local authorities. School and university setting Duration - 25 weeks split into 2 semesters Blended (Online/ On-campus) Part time as part of school timetable
Component units/ Essential content	One core unit, Preparation Skills for University Nine elective units: Fundamental Mathematics for University; Intermediate Mathematics for	Academic Skills Information literacy, critical thinking, academic writing, academic practice, referencing and use of appropriate sources,

	University; Technical Mathematics for University; Essay Writing for University; Computing Skills for University; Introductory Chemistry; Introductory Biology; and Introductory Physics	presentation and discussion skills, introduction to data and feedback, online learning, note-taking and note-making, time management, academic posters and group work.
Course learning outcomes	Critical thinking; problem-solving; academic practice and information literacy; written and oral communication; self-management skills; and information technology competence	Critical thinking; academic practice and information literacy; written and oral communication; independent learning; groupwork; and confidence with digital applications
Cost	Free tuition All resources available online Students cover printing and incidentals	Free tuition Travel costs covered by LEAPS Students cover printing and incidentals
Average yearly enrolment	2000+ students/academic year	Development stages – approximately 40-70 students /year - expansion year on year
Possible outcomes from successful completion	Study at diploma or degree level Direct entry to selected CQUniversity courses according to stated eligibility requirements Enhanced employment prospects	Multi-exit progression onto HE courses across Scotland/UK Admission agreements in place with Scottish HEIs (as of 2022)
Target group/s	Mature-age learners (18+ in year of enrolment) from all sectors of society Targeted equity groups: people with a disability; from socio-economically or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds; of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent; from non-English speaking backgrounds; from regional, rural and isolated areas; and women in non-traditional areas of study.	Final-year school students (aged16-18) who meet one of LEAPS widening participation criteria: schools with low progression rates to HE; first-in-family; low income; young carers; care experienced; estranged; lives in one of Scotland's 20% most disadvantaged communities as defined by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD20).
Entry requirements	Diagnostic testing and interview	Schools confirm suitability for course. LEAPS determines WP eligibility

Teaching staff	Academics, guest lecturers	Lecturers, postgraduate tutors, guest academics, academic developers, librarians