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**'I'm not stupid after all' – changing perceptions of self  
as a tool for transformation**

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*'The greatest revolution in our generation is that of human beings, who by changing the inner attitudes of their minds can change the outer aspects of their lives' (Ferguson 2006).*

*When adult learners return to formal education after a period of absence, coping with change is a constant and often omnipresent challenge. As they come to break down previous barriers to success in an educational arena, many adult learners are able to change the perceptions they have of themselves as learners. Previously held assumptions are often challenged and perceptions of how individuals come to hold these views undergo scrutiny. Using Cranton's (2002) phases of perspective transformation as a framework, this paper explores the notion that some learners can and do change their perspectives regarding their abilities as*

learners. This occurs when they are provided with opportunities to reflect critically upon themselves as learners, and deconstruct the origins of past assumptions. Based on data collected during the thirteen week academic writing course within the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at Central Queensland University, evidence suggests that upon critical reflection of previously held assumptions about their learning abilities, many students revise those assumptions and become more empowered individuals.

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## Introduction

Throughout the passage of life, for one reason or another, many individuals come to change some long-held assumptions about themselves and their world. Sometimes this is pre-empted by a significant event or incident that 'casts the individual into the realm of the unknown ... [and which] constitutes a point of demarcation between that which was and that with which one must now contend' (Halstead 2000, p. 3). At this point, one can face confusion, despair, fear or pain, but for those who successfully meet the challenge, new knowledge of the self can be gained and a sense of liberation can occur. One significant event that can precipitate the identification and subsequent examination of long-held assumptions is the adult learner's return to the formal learning context. Such a venture can prove problematic for those who bear emotional scars from long-remembered negative schooling experiences. A negative perception of themselves as learners was, for many, cemented during this period of their life, often a powerful dictator of a self-fulfilled prophesy that directed and clouded many subsequent life choices and pursuits.

Based on research obtained during the autumn of 2003 for a doctoral thesis, this paper seeks to illustrate how members of a small group of adults enrolled in a pre-university, preparatory program known

as STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) came to change their perspective about themselves as learners as they progressed through the program. The research discovered that deconstruction of long-held assumptions can be a vital phase in the process of perspective transformation. Using their words as data, evidence suggests that upon scrutiny of long-held assumptions about self as learner, through critical self-reflection, some of the adult learners engaged in the pre-university preparatory program were able to perceive how these assumptions came to be. Once freed from the chains of these assumptions, the learners became liberated in a sense, and experienced personal change. These assumptions related specifically to perceptions of intelligence, the fear of being ridiculed and hurt, and a perceived inability to succeed in a formal learning context. Using an adapted version of Cranton's (2002) phases of perspective transformation as a conceptual framework, evidence of the process of personal change is presented, as articulated by the participants.

The paper is divided into three sections. First, the context is set by providing a brief background to the pre-university preparatory program known as STEPS, and information about the research project. The second section presents the theoretical framework, namely an adaptation of Cranton's (2002) phases of perspective transformation. The third section presents data as evidence to suggest that the adult learners did experience personal transformation as they first came to articulate assumptions about self as learner, and then came to change those assumptions in some way.

## Setting the context

University can be an overwhelming experience, but when you enter a bridging course believing that you're an academic failure and nearly three years later find yourself with a grade point average of 6.429, you know that you were given more than adequate skills to achieve success. I am grateful that I

was accepted into the STEPS program and that I was taught by people who could see in me what I couldn't see myself. (STEPS student 2003)

Such a reflection, penned by a STEPS graduate on successful completion of two years of an undergraduate program, typifies the lack of self-belief many students have and the insecurity many students feel upon embarking on the STEPS learning journey. These words also highlight the newfound confidence that the experience of success can foster within the learner who bravely steps out of their comfort zone to participate in STEPS, a precursor to undergraduate study. There are countless more inspiring reflections that could be related about a preparatory program that not only prepares students academically for tertiary study, but whose aim is to be truly transformational. Why is it that participants who embark on STEPS as very tentative, unsure and insecure people can, in as little as thirteen weeks, convey such a changed and more positive perception of self?

#### History of STEPS

The STEPS program evolved as an attempt to address the needs of residents within the catchment area serviced by Central Queensland University (CQU), an area that traditionally has not had a high representation of its population involved in higher education. The precursor to STEPS, the Preliminary Studies Program for Disadvantaged Groups, was offered as a pilot program in 1986 at the then Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education in Rockhampton, Queensland. This program reflected the Commonwealth Government's commitment to social, democratic and egalitarian goals by offering people from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to participate in tertiary education. The next year saw the birth of the STEPS program, which, over the next twelve years, was subsequently offered more widely on campuses other than Rockhampton: Gladstone in 1989, Bundaberg and Mackay in 1990, and Emerald in 1998.

Presently, as an AUSTUDY approved program, STEPS is free of charge to its participants, offered face-to-face in both part-time and full-time mode, and available at Central Queensland University's regional campuses in Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone, Mackay and Rockhampton. An external offering was made available in 2006 and the success of this mode over two years ensures a continued future in external offering. Applicants to STEPS must be at least 18 years old, be an Australian or New Zealand citizen or a holder of a permanent resident or humanitarian visa. It is expected that applicants should have completed the equivalent of Year 10, or show that they have the necessary aptitude to succeed at the tertiary level.

STEPS has traditionally targeted people from the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) designated equity areas. It empowers students from socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to eliminate the barriers that locate them outside the tertiary sector. Traditionally, under-represented sub-groups which include people: with a disability; from socio-economically or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds; of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent; from non-English speaking backgrounds; from rural and isolated areas; with educational disadvantage associated with gender (Department of Education, Science & Training 2007), are targeted in an effort to offer them the opportunity to reach their educational potential.

STEPS thus provides a pathway through which a diverse group of mature-aged learners can achieve a university qualification. People presently apply to STEPS for many and varied reasons. Some STEPS students are retrenched workers or long-term unemployed; others simply seek a change in life direction. For some, unsettling or traumatic life circumstances such as divorce, death of a family member, accidents resulting in disabilities and ill health are the catalyst to apply to STEPS. Characteristically, applicants seek access to higher education but find they lack the essential knowledge,

skills and confidence deemed necessary to gain entry to a tertiary institution. Many have been hindered by both their past and present educational, social or cultural circumstances and most doubt their ability to succeed in higher education. Others are merely seeking ways to improve their futures, and refocus their life towards a new goal. Most seek a changed life through education and believe that STEPS as a preparatory program will provide an avenue for this change. STEPS is seen by a many and varied audience as the vehicle through which a changed life may be achieved.

#### The STEPS philosophy

The STEPS program aims to provide a quality curriculum within a supportive learning environment that fosters in adult learners the personal and academic skills for progression to undergraduate study. Steeped in the principles of adult learning (Brookfield 1986, Knowles 1984), the STEPS curriculum draws on the past experience of participants, as STEPS educators acknowledge that prior learning experiences can strongly influence the view students have of themselves as learners. At the same time, strategies are employed in the quest to open minds to greater knowledge and self-discovery. Students are immersed in learning experiences that centre on their understanding of self, in particular their preferred learning style and their personality type, as these influence their view of self, others and the world.

Transformative learning, ‘the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective’ (Mezirow 2000, p. 7) is central to STEPS, and as such, educators within the program are committed to allowing the space and conducive environment whereby students learn to face important life challenges, and learn to overcome personal limitations through new learning. In doing so, they are encouraged to move forward with a deeper knowledge and understanding of themselves, others and the ways of the world (Halstead 2000).

On the completion of STEPS, learners are capable of challenging and changing their worldviews and can confidently embrace new opportunities after addressing personal circumstances that have held them back. This is largely due to the emphasis given to acknowledging that students will experience unsettling periods along the way and other uncertainties that characteristically accompany change. Committed STEPS staff support the needs of students in time of change, in the hope that these students will view change as a positive force in their lives. There is far greater potential for students to realise and accept that uncertainty and confusion is a natural part of growth and learning. Travelling the STEPS journey encourages self-reflection and affords students the opportunity to understand themselves more completely. This then facilitates an acceptance of themselves as capable, intelligent human beings, capable of enduring change and seizing resultant opportunities.

#### The STEPS curriculum

The holistic curriculum allows students not only to learn how to write an academic essay, acquire basic mathematics and computer skills, but also to discover the value of an optimistic outlook on life and learning. Students discover they can discard the sometimes negative thoughts of self that once held them back and created an obstacle to growth, change and success. The curriculum caters for the needs of all cultural and social groups and attempts to develop the ability of its students to acquire the skills that will foster a resilience to study. All four courses employ a student-centred approach and emphasise personal transformation, as well as the acquisition of skills.

*Language and Learning*, the academic writing component of STEPS aims to effectively develop skills such as reading, thinking and writing for academic purposes. Students become familiar with the stages of the writing process and gain practice in writing in a variety of genres. Particular attention is given to reading for, planning and writing the academic essay. Through research, writing and discussion, students

gain an understanding of both past and present social, political and economic influences on Australia as it faces social change in the 21st century. Learners are actively encouraged to critically reflect on their pre-conceived opinions and worldviews, and in doing so, transform long-held perspectives. As such, they are capable of rewriting long-held scripts that often cast them as unworthy and unfortunately often precluded them from accessing new opportunities.

*Transition Mathematics* aims to build both competence and confidence in using basic mathematics. The course consists of arithmetic operations, percentages and applications, elementary algebra, coordinate geometry of the straight line and financial mathematics. Although largely content driven, the confidence gained through successful completion of the course by students who, on entry to STEPS, believe they are “hopeless at maths”, is quite remarkable. To be able to conquer what was once thought to be an insurmountable obstacle, students are psychologically better prepared to face further life and study challenges.

*Computing for Academic Assignment Writing* is a basic computer literacy course that aims to make students aware of the fundamental operations of a computer and to promote familiarity and competency with the essentials of word-processing, report writing, PowerPoint presentation, spreadsheets and the Internet. The reality of this course, however, is that as some mature-age students with limited experience related to computers gain more knowledge and skills, their confidence increases immeasurably, and they are able to consider themselves capable of so much more.

*Tertiary Preparation Skills* aims to introduce students to skills necessary for academic studies. Students are familiarised with the diversity of university programs, courses and procedures. Additionally, students develop oral communication techniques as well as organisational strategies and research skills necessary for academic success. The Tertiary Preparation Skills course focuses

on enabling students to identify their learning preferences and temperament types, information which provides a sound platform on which students can build their learning journeys. They are then given strategies to support their preferred learning styles, as well as encouraged to develop skills in learning in ways that they do not prefer. This course takes students on a journey of self-discovery which, although uncomfortable at times, ensures a more fully developed understanding of self and an acceptance of themselves as capable, intelligent human beings.

#### The research group

The research group used as a focus for this paper comprised a group of nine volunteer participants who were part of a class of twenty-five students engaged in the Language and Learning course of the STEPS pre-university preparatory program. Using data from the research conducted over the 13-week, full-time STEPS program, some significant findings related to the participants' articulation and scrutiny of assumptions emerged. Using the data collected from individual and group interviews conducted at three-weekly intervals, in addition to data from the participants' reflective writing post-program, the words of the participants were transcribed and major emerging themes allowed for categorisation. Data provided a rich account of how, for some adult learners, assumptions about self as learner came to change. Also revealed were the similarities and anomalies in the types of assumptions articulated by the learners.

#### Theoretical background

As well as being cognisant of the principles of adult learning, the STEPS program is underpinned by the tenets of transformative learning, conceptualised as learning that has transformation as its goal. According to Lepani (1995), learning that is transformative empowers learners to challenge and change their worldviews and prepares them to face new opportunities as they overcome their

difficulties and disadvantages. As well as providing them with the thinking and communications skills needed to succeed in a contemporary university environment, many of the activities in Language and Learning, the academic writing course of the STEPS, encourage the students to challenge and change their worldviews. In addition, learners are coaxed to reflect on many assumptions they hold about themselves and others as they take a journey of self-discovery. Through various engagements, discussions and experiences, many come to change their perspectives about various issues in numerous and varied ways. This is known as perspective transformation.

### **Perspective transformation**

Cranton (2003) eloquently describes perspective transformation as ‘an individual’s revision of a meaning perspective or a worldview as a result of critical self-reflection and discourse’. According to Cranton (2002, pp. 65–66), there are seven phases in the perspective transformation process, which are by no means linear, but more progressive and spiral in pattern, and not all necessarily experienced by individuals in the transformation process. Cranton lists these phases as:

1. an activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard or read
2. articulating assumptions, that is, recognising underlying assumptions that have been uncritically assimilated and are largely unconscious
3. critical self-reflection, that is, questioning and examining assumptions in terms of where they came from, the consequences of holding them, and why they are important
4. being open to alternative viewpoints
5. engaging in discourse, where evidence is weighed, arguments assessed, alternative perspectives explored, and knowledge constructed by consensus

6. revising assumptions and perspectives to make them more open and better justified
7. acting on revisions, behaving, talking, and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives.

Indeed, their very inclusion in the STEPS program proved to be an overarching, activating event for all the adult learners, a catalyst that allowed for the perspective transformation process to begin. As the program unfolded, many of the adult learners came to express their thoughts and feelings about prior experiences, and engaged in an atmosphere that was imbued with the tenets of adult learning principles, a brief discussion of which now follows.

### **Adult learning principles**

The STEPS program embraces adult learning principles that espouse the celebration of the strengths and prior experiences of the learner. Educators and learners are encouraged to maintain an open and honest line of communication, each responsible for their own behaviour, commitments to learning and trust of each other. A humanistic orientation to learning is adopted, wherein respect for the adult learner’s individuality is preserved and efforts are directed to help the individual realise her or his potential. In doing so, the learner is generally more responsive to learning, and whilst experiencing some degree of stress and anxiety at the outset of the program, many do come to gain confidence in their own abilities. Adult learners bring to their studies enthusiasm, ambition and life’s rich experiences. The STEPS program builds on these skills, encouraging learners to gain new learning experiences and methods so they can take responsibility for their own learning. As Knowles reminds us, adults learn best when their learning reflects their immediate life needs and they are most motivated when their inner needs are met (Knowles, Holton & Swanson 1998, p. 172).

### Personal experiences of change

This section of the paper uses words of the participants as evidence to suggest that some of the phases of perspective transformation entailing the articulation, examination and revision of assumptions were experienced by some of the participants. It is to be acknowledged that, as the researcher-teacher in this research, it was possible for one of the authors of this paper to become immersed in the lives of the learners, which, due to issues of subjectivities, at times proved both difficult and rewarding. The transformative nature of the Language and Learning curriculum required students to engage actively in discussions and research about contemporary social issues. In addition, activities designed to give more insight into their learning styles and temperament types, in many ways challenged previously-held assumptions that clouded various perspectives they had. Reflections and opinions on such activities were captured in the individual and group interviews and in the self-reflection, based on Vogler's (1996) twelve stages of the 'hero's journey', an adaptation of Campbell's (1993) work, completed by learners at the end of the program (examples are presented shortly).

Many assumptions emerged from the transcribed data, but of special significance were the assumptions that related more specifically to self as a learner. Data revealed that, for three individuals in particular, the unravelling of prior assumptions about their own personal learning potential changed over the period of time of their engagement in the program. These assumptions are quite simply presented as 'too stupid', 'too scared' and 'too old'.

#### Too stupid

In her early days of the program, B's words indicated an assumption she held with regards to her own intelligence, determined largely by the way she perceived herself within her family structure. Comparing herself with her family members' business and educational pursuits,

B assumed it was her lack of education that precluded her from the family's notion of intelligence. As she revealed:

If I was with them [the family], I tended to sit back because I wasn't educated as much as them and they spoke with these big words, sometimes purposefully just to patronise me. (B1)

B alluded to feelings of exclusion and a sense of isolation from her family, but in addition, she assumed that their intellectual conversations, at times, were intended to demean or exclude her. This possibly reinforced B's assumptions about her intelligence and fuelled a self-fulfilled prophesy that her level of intelligence did not equate to others in her family.

B further exemplified an assumption she held about her own intelligence and perceived exclusion from the family, when she described herself as 'the flippety gibbet', alluding to a less than serious person. Perhaps this perception arose as she compared herself with what she persistently referred to as her 'serious' family:

Like I come from a very serious family, mother like way before her time running her own business and also a nursing sister. My father also had a business and they were very serious people. My two sisters have very serious careers. (B1)

B's assumptions about being different from the rest of the family are further reflected in a statement she made relating to her 'fitting' into the family structure. She remarked: "They didn't even know where I came from and I didn't know where I came from with my career in fashion." (B1)

B made the assumption that her career choice alienated her somewhat from her family, appearing as it were from 'left field' and quite incongruous with the more 'serious' pursuits of her family. Overall, B's assumption about herself was that she was less intelligent than other family members. Her perception of intelligence is based on the

achievements and pursuits of her family and their ‘seriousness’, a trait obviously valued by her family.

B therefore held assumptions about her intelligence and her ability to engage in the STEPS program. She questioned her credentials and doubted herself and assumed she would not be able to succeed. However, over a period of time as B engaged in a classroom of individuals with varying types of intelligence, experiences, backgrounds and interests, she came to change her assumption about her own intelligence. More than likely this entailed a degree of critical reflection and it was mid-way through the program when B gave some indication that her assumption had been examined, and a change had occurred. She asserted:

We are all part of something and we all need flippety gibbets just like we need really serious people like my parents were, and my sisters were; and that’s the big thing that I’ve learnt, that’s giving me confidence to go on, to realise that “No, I’m not stupid. They [her family] used to say I was stupid, but I’m not stupid after all”, and I have shocked myself how I’m taking things in and achieving things. (B2)

B re-examined the assumption she held with regard to her intelligence, questioned its origin and as a result, revised the assumption she previously held about her level of intelligence. She came to hold a new perspective, one that enabled her to take the locus of control for her own intelligence. She revealed:

The funny thing is since I’ve been coming here [STEPS] I can look back and see that it was them [the family] that were at fault. They were critical of me, yet I never criticised them. Maybe they were threatened by my openness and my ability to take off and just do anything. (B3)

Thus, for B, intelligence came to be defined in different terms, not by the assumption that had guided her before, but by a more inclusive assumption of intelligence that allowed for her to recognise that, even

though she had always felt she was *different* from her ‘serious’ family, she was none-the-less intelligent in her own right. B is typical of many of the STEPS students who come to the classroom with often skewed assumptions about their own intelligence, and how these assumptions can lead to fear of failure and uncertainty about their likelihood of success. One participant expressed such fear.

Too scared

Bt came to STEPS after a period of unemployment and consequent low self-esteem issues. From the outset of the writing course, Bt indicated that he was too afraid to open up and express his feelings for fear of ridicule or criticism by others. It was not until midway through the writing course that Bt articulated an assumption about his inability to express himself. He revealed:

I’d never really expressed my view and probably that goes back to grade 4 and the humiliation I felt then. I never wanted to go through that again, so I never opened up and gave my views about what I thought about something.

A sense of vulnerability was expressed by Bt, apparently due to a negative incident in his past, but as he came to gain more confidence and exposure to writing activities during the Language and Learning course, as well as listen to and share the written and spoken work of his class colleagues, his confidence increased and Bt’s assumption that he would experience humiliation changed. Bt confided:

I was fearing the writing because I thought I’d be entering areas of my mind that I had blocked off for thirty years. I thought it was going to open something and I don’t want to be embarrassed or ashamed or stuff like that, so that was a big step for me. But I’ve enjoyed it. I’ve felt actually nurtured all along. I’m not so self-conscious about what I write now, and when other people read it.

Bt changed his assumption that if he opened up to others he would risk being hurt, with pain and humiliation sure to follow. Instead, he

came to value the writing experiences, appreciating the supportive environment in which he felt free to ‘test the waters’, and as a result, his fears appeared to abate. He also recognised how past assumptions had held him back:

Coming in and doing *Language and Learning* here to me is challenging my mind and its actually getting me out there and opening up into something I haven’t been doing for many years. I know I can achieve anything now and I am only restricted by me, no one else.

Thus, Bt had allowed a negative experience from the past to guide his assumption that humiliation and embarrassment would surely follow if he opened up and expressed his thoughts and feelings to others. Bt came to change this assumption through the process of questioning and revising that assumption. His words above would seem to indicate that he acted ‘on revisions, behaving, talking, and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives’ (Cranton 2002, p. 66). In doing so, he made possible a new perspective, one that gave him a new realisation of his own potential. Again, Bt typified many of the STEPS students who for many reasons are afraid to express and expose their thoughts, feelings and opinions to others. It may be due to past failures, negative experiences or simply lack of confidence, as was the case with the next participant.

Too hard

R was a participant who for various reasons assumed she would not experience success in the STEPS program. Looking through the data, it became apparent that R did not feel optimistic and confident in her abilities in the early stages of the program. In fact, she made assumptions about her ability to cope with the difficulty level of the STEPS program right from the beginning, and she predicted, ‘I really think I will struggle with all this’.

Interestingly, she articulated that if she did fail, it would cause her no great alarm, for she felt it would be inconsequential to her at that particular point in time. As she claimed, ‘I didn’t have anywhere to fall ‘cause I was way down there anyway’.

R’s assumption hinted of a self-fulfilled prophesy that perhaps may have influenced past pursuits, for in saying she was ‘way down there anyway’, it appeared that she had reconciled herself to failure, because that was what she half expected. A sense of futility appeared evident in R’s words at this time. However, time passed and engagement in the program provided R with many opportunities to reflect critically on her abilities and, in doing so, she revised her assumption about her lack of ability, and could confidently project herself into a future that involved more study:

I am finding that I am doing better than I thought I was capable of and STEPS isn’t my goal any longer. Doing a degree and being positive – that’s my goal. There’s nothing that will stop what I want to do. And I am surprising myself as to how much I like it. I’m much more positive with myself, that I can do it.

By the end of the program, R’s final reflection indicated that her assumption about not being able to experience success in the academic arena had indeed shifted, and she revealed some very personal insight into previous assumptions that related to her lack of confidence and self-esteem. She reflected:

I have obtained results far better than I could ever have imagined. I never thought I would achieve what I have achieved. I have also felt different ... mostly in feeling far more relaxed and happy in myself ... that I can do this! I finally like me!!!

R’s words indicated that her success in the course and overall program was far beyond her own expectations. It appeared that perhaps she had previously under-estimated her own abilities, yet it also appeared that there was a sense of relief for her in successfully

completing the program. It may be the case that, due to her lack of confidence or fear of setting herself up for failure, she was challenging her own assumption that she might fail, but in experiencing success, came to change that assumption and took on a new perspective about herself as a learner. R's assumption that she would not have the ability to succeed is typical of numerous STEPS students, coming as many do from work, life and other environments where they have experienced failure and/or disappointment.

### Conclusion

'Never too old, never too scared and certainly never too stupid' – STEPS as a pre-university, preparatory program offers its participants the avenue for a changed life through education. The STEPS program has proven to be and will continue to be the vehicle through which a many and varied clientele move from a narrow and often distorted view of themselves as learners and people to a more mature and healthy perspective. STEPS is a metaphor for a thirteen or twenty-six week life lived in self-discovery. Students find the inner strength and self-knowledge to cast off the chains that have held them back and discard the distorted assumptions of self as learner that have stifled learning and growth. In doing so, they move forward to a position whereby they are no longer crippled by self-doubt and fear. STEPS is a transformative experience for those who choose this path; one that provides no safe haven for the confusion, fear or pain associated with change but rather provides the breeding ground for new self-knowledge and a sense of liberation achieved through the challenging by learners of long-held assumptions about self, others and the world in general.

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### ~~Bridging to the future: What works?~~

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~~This paper discusses three levels of 'what works' in enabling education – namely, current and successful engagement, transition and future participation, and managing uncertainties. It points to the importance of high quality programs that get the students involved with learning, effectively preparing them for further study and providing the necessary survival skills for an essentially unknown and technology-driven future.~~

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~~Tertiary education in our current world is a significant pathway into employment and its consequent societal benefits. Bridging/enabling education works to make these benefits accessible to people who are undoubtedly talented but who do not have the specific skills and credentials for entry to further study and the workforce. Frequently, those accessing enabling education are also members of minority~~