

Insights into attrition from university-based enabling programs

Cheryl Bookallil and Bobby Harreveld

CQUniversity, Australia

High attrition rates from university-based enabling programs continue to be the subject of much research and administrative effort. Understanding the factors behind decisions to withdraw from such programs is difficult since those who do not successfully complete an enabling program may not readily agree to participate in research into their motivations for enrolling, and reasons for withdrawal, leaving them silent in the literature. Students who are relatively successful with enabling study have ‘insider’ perceptions to share concerning the motivations of their fellow students, and the barriers some face. They can provide unique insights into factors behind the intractable problem of high attrition from enabling programs and the low rates of articulation into university study.

Keywords: *University-based enabling programs, attrition, articulation, barriers*

Introduction

University-based enabling programs provide both a social justice strategy for addressing equity in access to higher education and a strategy for increasing the economic efficiency of the nation. Building productive capabilities is an important recognition that in the 21st century accumulation of human capital has superseded physical capital as the “prime mover of economic growth” (Galor, 2011: 466). In higher education globally, “human capital derives from the credentialing power of degrees in the labour market” (Marginson, 2011: 31). However, high attrition from enabling programs and low rates of articulation between enabling and undergraduate study continue to occur thereby frustrating efforts to widen participation in university study (Ramsay, 2004; Silburn & Box, 2008; Orth & Robinson, 2013).

In Australia, this form of enabling education has a 40-year history. When the first enabling program commenced at the University of Newcastle, NSW in 1974 with an average student age of 36 it was an innovation expected to “drain its market” within five years, yet in 2012 a total of 2,000 people were enrolled (May & Bunn, 2015: 1). By 2013 there were 35 Australian universities funded to offer enabling education (Hodges et al., 2013). In addition these programs, that were initially designed to assist mature-aged students to prepare for university study, are now enrolling ever-larger proportions of recent school leavers (Silburn & Box, 2008; Hodges et al., 2013; Bookallil 2014). These younger students either did not gain the required tertiary entry score or had made study choices in senior secondary school that meant they completed without eligibility for university entrance.

Therefore many student cohorts in enabling programs have evolved to include both mature age and young adults as learners. As this previously unforeseen demographic change has emerged, attrition from these programs has come onto the radar of university administrators and researchers. This paper first examines attrition through a necessarily very brief overview of enabling programs that now encompass learners of all ages. This is followed by methodology and methods of data collection and analysis for the first-phase of a mixed methods study exploring this problem. Findings and discussion are then provided, followed by a conclusion with some recommendations for future administrative and academic practice.

Enabling university for all ages

Since 2005 universities have received specific funding for enabling programs, including an additional ‘Enabling Loading’, from the Australian Government so that programs may be offered free of tuition charges to participants (Higher Education Support Act, 2012). A benefit to the university supplying the enabling program is a potential increase in undergraduate enrolments as those who are successful tend to transition within the same institution. This is evidenced by the marketing agenda of enabling programs that are used as a recruitment strategy for university enrolments (Clarke et al., 2004). Furthermore, there is the argument that socio-economic benefits may accrue to individuals and communities through higher rates of workforce participation, particularly for women, as a result of higher levels of education (Karmel, 2014).

Between 2004 and 2014 enrolments in Australian university-based enabling programs expanded from 4,784 to 20,087, an increase of almost 320% (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015). During that period, the age of the student cohort declined and Hodges *et al.* (2013: 16) report: “secondary students appear to be becoming somewhat strategic and selecting enabling programs as a legitimate pathway for higher education”. Such a strategy by recent school leavers could be viewed as a ‘double dip’ into the public purse for education services that have been already provided during their compulsory schooling years. However, a similar argument could be levelled at applicants of any age because all would have been the recipients of publicly funded compulsory education at some time in their lives whether that was directly via State schools or indirectly via independent or faith-based schools.

While much literature covers motivations for mature aged, defined as greater than 21 years, to re-engage with education (see for example Cullity, 2005; Bennett *et al.*, 2012) the declining age of enabling program students requires further investigation into motivations. According to Boyle (2015: 170), “understanding of motivating factors to re-engage with education is still limited”. In addition, research is limited by the fact that only successful students tend to participate in research projects so we know very little about the motivations of

students who are not retained because they do not engage with research projects (Orth & Robinson, 2013). While provision of enabling education has expanded “there remains concern about its level of effectiveness, particularly relative to other transition pathways into higher education” (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014: 51) such as direct entry from secondary schooling and/or via technical and vocational training.

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger, exploratory sequential, mixed methods research design where the qualitative results from a series of focus groups informed the development of a survey instrument. Data were gathered about how and why students make decisions concerning enrolment in university-based enabling programs and their continuation into undergraduate study. The objective was to understand whether there is a link between students’ motivation to enrol and the high attrition and low articulation rates.

Methodology and methods

Methodologically, the complex nature of individuals’ choices made in respect to education services as public and/or quasi-public goods results from a range of causal factors and requires a judicious mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods to bring clarity to the findings. Mixed methods research presents a methodological framework based upon the primary philosophy of pragmatism (Alise & Teddlie, 2010). In this worldview, researchers “exhibit a clear pragmatism in their work” (Bryman 2007: 17). From a different worldview, Mertens (2010: 469) argues that mixed methods research may reflect more a transformative paradigm for researchers who “place a priority on social justice and the furtherance of human rights”. The research problem addressed in this study has both a pragmatic and a transformative purpose. Accordingly, mixed methods are appropriate for its investigation.

The larger study comprises a three-phase sequential mixed methods process that incorporated first focus group interviews, then development and dissemination of an online survey questionnaire, followed by a choice modelling analytic processing of results. This paper reports on findings from the first-phase scoping activities. Thus what counted as data in this first-phase were these participants’ values and beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, interpretations, and representations of others as well as representations of themselves as learners (Harreveld, 2002).

These dialogic data depicted conversational language patterns of social interactions and were consequentially descriptive in nature.

Focus groups were a strategic data collection method for this first-phase because they enabled the collection of otherwise inaccessible data (Punch, 2009). Insights into attrition from enabling programs are difficult to access because

Once students have made up their mind to discontinue their studies, they have diminished interest in responding to research that reviews their attitude, motivation and their reasons to drop out of the program. (Orth & Robinson, 2013: 1)

The researcher conducting the focus groups was also an insider to the lived experience of transition from enabling program to undergraduate and further to postgraduate studies. The first named author was a mature age learner with personal experience of having disrupted education before re-engaging with learning as a mature aged student together with many years of employment as a Student Equity Practitioner assisting other second-chance learners¹. This background, together with employment at the time as a Careers Counsellor at the university, helped to build rapport with participants that evoked very candid responses to the questions that may not have been forthcoming to an outsider. Insider-researchers may choose to conceptualise themselves as co-investigators (Breen, 2007) to establish a cooperative environment for data collection with the participants. The researcher utilised this conceptualisation in relation to herself and also encouraged the focus group participants to conceptualise themselves as co-investigators with 'insider' knowledge to contribute to the study.

The focus group discussions were digitally recorded and then transcribed. These texts were treated as data and analysed thematically (Guest, Macqueen & Namey, 2011). Open codes were assigned to inductively develop *in vivo* data that were key words and phrases used

¹ Second-chance learning is providing education opportunities for individuals who are past the normal age to attend basic or secondary education and organised in accordance with an adjusted study plan. 'Second chance education offers a number of possibilities to help adults either improve their low levels of education or change careers' (OECD 2005 p. 76).

by the participants to describe and explain the transition experience (Creswell, 2014). An axial coding process was then undertaken in which the relationships between these open codes were constantly compared in terms of the patterns of responses among the data and published scholarly literature. The significance of patterns emerging was qualitatively determined according to their insights offered about the transition experience from enrolment and completion of enabling program to enrolment (and in some cases completion) in an undergraduate program. These constituted the themes with sub-themes as some codes were collapsed as subsidiary to others. Opler's (1945) seminal work on thematic development guided this process in which a theme denoted "a postulate or position, declared or implied, and usually controlling behaviour or stimulating activity" (p. 198).

After gaining ethical clearance, invitations were sent to all past and present enabling program students. Only the relatively successful students who were gaining good grades in their enabling study or had articulated to university and/or those who had subsequently graduated expressed interest in taking part in the semi-structured group discussions.

Research location and participants

The research was conducted at a regional multi-campus university that has been offering enabling education since 1986. In an earlier archival study of enabling programs at this university, Bookallil (2014: 78) found that,

Completion rates were highest in the year 2005 at 52.9%. However, as enrolments escalated from 2006 onwards the completion rates did not experience the same proportional increase, dipping to a low of 30% in 2008 and although recovering slightly were still only 39.1% in 2011.

Trend data from the enabling program to undergraduate enrolments over the decade in which these completion rates were collected indicate a low transition rate of only 39% to the host University. Additionally, the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre advised that between 2001 and 2011 there were only 241 students who received an offer to study at other Queensland universities based upon their results from this enabling program; and that represented only 2.5% of the 9,101 enabling students

enrolled during that time frame (Bookallil, 2014).

In 2013, a total of 72 past and present enabling program students participated in the focus groups at five campuses in regional centres (Refer Table 1). Of those, the majority (50) were current undergraduate students who had commenced their study with an enabling program; two of whom had completed all requirements of their degree program and were ready for graduation. There were 22 enabling program students, two of whom had completed the enabling program and were intending to enrol in undergraduate in the coming year.

Table 1: Focus group participants

Location	Enabling	Undergraduate	Male	Female	Total
1	4	5	0	9	9
2	4	17	1	22	23
3	5	5	2	8	10
4	5	16	6	13	19
5	4	7	3	8	11
	22	50	12	60	72

The smallest focus group had only two of the respondents actually attend on the day. The largest focus group comprised 11 people. Some of the participants had travelled between 45 and 130 kilometres to attend. The ratio of females to males within the focus groups of 80:20 reflected the statistical gender ratio of enabling programs at this university over the years 2001-2011 (Bookallil, 2014).

Most of the focus group participants were mature aged (>21 years) with the average age being 37 years. Only three attendees could be identified as recent or relatively recent school leavers. One location included a student who was just 19 and another location included two who were under 25 years. This particular enabling program is one of the 24 programs that are open to all ages enrolling students from 17 years upward; as long as they are turning 18 in the first term of their enrolment. Learning is provided by both internal study and distance

education. Learning cohorts are not divided according to age. This is in contrast to the University of Newcastle enabling program, which accepts mature aged students into their Open Foundation Program while recent, or relatively recent school leavers enrol in Newstep (Hodges *et al.*, 2013: 138).

The same semi-structured questions concerning motivations for enrolling in enabling and any barriers faced with continuing to undergraduate study, were posed to each group. Responses ranged across the spectrum of student experience generating additional factors not directly presented by the questions. Findings reported in this paper depict the participants' perceptions of, assumptions about and representations of other students, their fellow enabling program learners, many of whom did not complete the program or did not go on to enrol in an undergraduate program. A positivist critique of this process may deem it to be merely students' opinions; however, the "epistemic vigilance" of an interpretive lens incorporates such subjectivities because "in general, they [other people] are mistaken no more often than we are...and they know things that we don't know" (Sperber *et al.*, 2010: 359).

Findings

Three themes were constructed through this analytical process: mutual obligation, maturity matters, and spousal fear. Individually and collectively they provide unique insights into the transition experience of motivations and barriers faced with completion of an enabling program and articulation into undergraduate study. The naming of these themes is significant. "Mutual obligation" is an *a priori* term from the literature that emerged through the axial coding processes as initial findings were submitted to constant comparison with the literature. "Maturity matters" is a partially *in vivo* term that reflects the participants' proposition that transition is achieved when learners want to succeed for themselves, not just to fulfil contractual agreements for financial income supplements; and when of a mature age, learners have an intrinsic motivation to achieve at least completion of the enabling program. "Spousal fear" is an *in vivo* term that emerged from the data analysis. It remained consistent through open and axial coding processes and thus strengthened as a dominant theme in the first-phase findings.

1. Mutual obligation

This theme was linked to the extrinsic motivation prompted by the ‘mutual obligation’ requirements to qualify for welfare benefits from Centrelink. Enabling program students may be eligible for Youth Allowance (16 years–24 years), Austudy (25 years and older) or Pensioner Education Supplement (if already receiving a pension) through the Australian Government agency Centrelink while they are studying full time, which equates to 18 study hours per week.

This theme emerged organically during discussions in six of the ten focus groups. It was characterised by claims that free tuition coupled with receipt of “Centrelink benefits” is an incentive for enrolment but not enough of an incentive for continued learning and completion of the program. Furthermore, the enabling program itself was not perceived to be difficult – at least initially:

[Male] *I thought it sounded to me from the [young] ones that I associated with when I was doing [enabling program] was I don't wanta [sic] get a job...I want benefits so I'll go do a really easy coasting course at uni* (Focus group transcript).

Mutual obligation is a requirement on those who receive welfare benefits from the Australian Government to provide evidence of being either actively engaged in job search or enrolled in a study program (Australian Government Department of Human Services, 2015). These obligations were tightened after 2005 to heighten the degree of observation and surveillance of welfare recipients’ amid growing concerns about ‘welfare dependency’ (Parker & Fopp, 2006).

[Female] *Our local Centrelink office will say ...if you go and do this [enabling program] then you can just stay on your benefit* (Focus group transcript).

Yet some of the relatively successful students who had attended the focus groups perceived that such an extrinsic motivator as eligibility for Centrelink benefits, coupled with little or no explicit costs to the student, did not provide a strong enough incentive for academic success in the

enabling program for some students.

[Female] *My experience too with some of the younger ones who seemed to be motivated by their benefit payments is that it didn't bother them whether they failed a subject or a course or not because they would just do that again because at the moment [the enabling program] is still a free program to enrol in so ... there was no financial disadvantage to them to fail a subject because as long as they were enrolled for next term they would continue to get their benefits and not have to [provide evidence of job search]... hasn't fazed them that they've failed a subject* (Focus group transcript).

However, as “education is a precursor to informed choice” (James, 2007: 11) it can change perspectives. Such a perspective transformation can produce “a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships” (Mezirow, 1978: 100). Some responses in the focus groups indicated that, while eligibility for Centrelink benefits may have been the initial motivation for enrolling in the enabling program, increased self-confidence generated through study transformed their motivations enthusing them to complete the enabling program and even consider continuing their education into an undergraduate degree.

[Female] *It may start out as... I don't know any different. I've been on welfare ... I'm gonna [sic] stay on welfare and then you get through the program and you realise that it is actually ... it's something to build your confidence...you find out whether you have the capabilities to go on and do a bachelor degree or not* (Focus group transcript).

Participants at one campus claimed that their local Centrelink office actively encouraged applicants for welfare benefits to consider the enabling program as a means of satisfying eligibility requirements. The focus group participants perceived this effect to be more prevalent, although not solely, in the younger cohort. It was also reported in the focus groups that the perceived extrinsic motivator of eligibility for Centrelink benefits did not result in academic success within the enabling program for some students.

[Male] *The ones that drop out don't ...they don't care ...that's the*

sort of attitude ...they're not doing an opportunity assessment of further education they just said ...oh I've done [enabling program]...I've managed to avoid [having to provide evidence of job search to] Centrelink for a year...I'm off. ...get out of here before it gets too hard (Focus group transcript).

The mutual obligation theme thus depicted several levels of obligation (1) to the taxpayers funding the programs, (2) to themselves, and (3) to the other students in the class. Welfare recipients have an obligation to the taxpayers funding their income to either engage in active job search or to engage in learning that would enhance their future employment prospects. They would also have an obligation to themselves to make the most of the learning opportunity the enabling program provided. Additionally, those who chose the learn option in 'earn or learn' would also have a mutual obligation to their fellow classmates to behave in a way that does not disrupt other students' learning and the responses from focus group participants suggested that disruption did sometimes occur.

[Researcher] "Do you think they're a distraction to the other students?"[Male] "...yes they do. I mean we have chaps with their feet up on the desk and carrying on down the back. (Focus Group transcripts)

The preceding analysis suggests that perhaps, from the perspective of some of their fellow-students, there were those enrolled who were just 'going through the motions'. The average age of focus group participants was 37 years and it was the perception across all focus group locations that this effect was more prevalent in the younger cohort of recent school leavers. It needs to be considered whether encouraging welfare recipients to enrol in university-based enabling programs in order to satisfy their mutual obligation requirements for Centrelink payments provides sufficient incentive for successful learning outcomes. Research into the outcomes of those who choose the 'learn' option under mutual obligation provisions for welfare payments may be instructive in this matter.

2. Maturity matters

The second dominant theme constructed "maturity" as being important

for success. A number of participants were of the view that the younger cohort enrolled in enabling programs were not as motivated as the more mature students – that is, themselves. This is an important factor since the average age of enabling program students has been falling since 2005 and recent school leavers are becoming the dominant cohort (Hodges *et al.*, 2013; Bookallil 2014). Statistical analysis of archival data also revealed an association between age and completion of enabling programs at this University. After 2006, as the average age of students fell, the mean rate of completion also declined (Bookallil, 2014: 73).

One person suggested that some of the younger students were “time wasters” [and] “They’re there but they’re not really there” (Focus group transcripts). Another expressed a desire for unmotivated students to be removed from the class indicating they were not fulfilling their obligation to the other class members.

[Male] *They sit at the back and they’re on their [device] tweeting and carrying on ... their mobile phones and they’ve got their laptops open doing things... you know you just think ... just go home* (Focus group transcripts)

[Male] *I’d just like to see them removed from the class room.* (Focus group transcripts)

However, although removing students who were perceived to lack motivation would have the potential to improve attrition rates, it was also acknowledged that it would be difficult to identify or exclude them. The current application processes for the enabling program involves both an intake test and a personal interview.

[Male] *You can’t filter them out with an exam ‘cause some of them are smart. They just don’t wanna [sic] work* (Focus group transcripts).

[Female] *You have your one-on-one interviews [prior to enrolment in enabling program] and everyone can put on an act for that* (Focus group transcripts).

An issue that emerged was the feeling that younger students may not have the same impetus as the mature aged students concerning the

opportunity of a 'second chance' to prepare for university since they were young enough to come back again later. Mature students perceived they were more committed to the completion of enabling study as well as articulation to undergraduate study than the younger cohort. Some had longed for such an opportunity to complete the "unfinished business" as identified in the literature (see for example Munns & McFadden, 2000; Green & Web, 2003), and also to improve their financial security with professional employment.

[Female] *As a mature aged student. You're there... I mean you really want this ... it's something that you've wanted for a long time. So you know... you're giving it your all. The difference in the motivation between mature aged students and the younger students is just incredible* (Focus group transcripts).

It was also suggested by some participants that the decision to be in ongoing education may not have been the choice of the younger students but was a manifestation of parental pressure.

[Female] *If you come in as a mature aged student you're there because you choose to be there ...you're not there because mum and dad said or somebody else said that you have to be there. We're here because we wanta [sic] be here* (Focus group transcripts).

However, one participant voiced an opinion that it was not just the young students who exhibited lack of motivation.

[Female] *I wouldn't say they were all of the young demographic ... there was some older ...more mature age people who should have known better and this was their chance and they were blowing it* (Focus group transcripts).

Their perception that maturity matters in relation to insights into attrition and/or progression to undergraduate study is important given the rise in enrolments in enabling programs by recent school leavers evidenced in the past decade. Decreasing age at enrolment in enabling programs has also coincided with increasing attrition rates and falling articulation rates. At this university enrolments from those aged 21 years and younger had been steady between 2001 and 2005, but rose

by 288% from 105 in 2005 to 407 by 2011. During the same time frame completion rates declined and a statistical association between maturity and successful completion of enabling programs was established (Bookallil 2014: 66).

3. Spousal fear

This theme of spousal fear encapsulated the perception that there was pressure placed upon some women by their male partners which resulted in these women leaving the enabling program; or, if they did complete, having a deleterious effect upon their decision to articulate to undergraduate study. The massification of higher education, as witnessed in recent decades, has offered many women the transformative experience of being a student. This in turn has impacted on their identity, their visions for the future and their job opportunities (Stone & O'Shea 2012).

There were some very personal stories articulated concerning women and the pressure placed upon them by their spouses that had caused them enough anxiety that they discontinued their studies. Other stories related to marriage breakdowns in order for the women to continue to educate themselves. When relating stories of women they knew who were pressured by their male partners to discontinue their enabling studies, the term “spousal fear” was raised by several of the males to identify this phenomenon of the male partner being afraid of being left behind by the female.

[Male] *I think it was a sense of ...if you do that and you're successful you won't need me anymore. So there was a certain level of spousal fear* (Focus group transcripts).

[Researcher] *So do you think that impacts on any people to stop them from completing their Enabling program?* [Male] *Oh hell yeah.* (Focus group transcripts).

[Male] *Two of the people ...last term they left... they stopped coming because their husbands threatened divorce if they kept going. I think [they were] scared of being left behind if she [spouse] got a degree and then got a better job than he's got [that] she's gonna [sic] walk away from him* (Focus group

transcripts).

Even if the women had successfully completed the enabling program, then decisions to articulate to undergraduate study may also be influenced by deontological reasons or “pervasive interdependence” (Ng 1979: 7). Enabling programs typically involve short term study of between 13 and 26 weeks. However, degree programs require a commitment of between three to eight years depending upon the discipline chosen and whether the student undertakes study by full-time or part-time mode.

[Female] Not only do you have the stress of the studying and having to balance those other responsibilities in your life, but there's also the stress associated with having to deal with other people's emotions in relation to your study. And I think that particularly for women because generally we are the nurturing ...you know self-sacrificing for our families... I think that does influence a lot of women in particular to walk away from their studies. While they might complete [the enabling program] that may then become a barrier to them continuing on because ...well gee can I put the rest of the family through this for another 3, 4, 5, 6 years ...however long it's going to take me to complete that program (Focus group transcripts).

In this study ‘spousal fear’ emerged as a gendered phenomenon, which was perceived to be affecting exclusively females with male partners. Not only did pressure from their male partners present a barrier to the women’s learning in the enabling program, it was also perceived as a reason for some women not articulating into undergraduate study even if they had successfully completed the enabling program. It was predominately the males in the focus groups who articulated this issue and named it ‘spousal fear’. However, both male and female participants indicated a perception that pressure from male partners for women to end their studies, combined with the women’s increasing confidence through learning, were contributing factors in the marriage breakdowns of some of their classmates.

Discussion

The three emergent themes of mutual obligation, maturity matters and

spousal fear are all linked through the broader concept of the students' personal obligations to the taxpayers funding their welfare payments, to their learning cohorts not to be disruptive in the classroom, and to themselves not to allow the manifestation of 'spousal fear' to negatively impact their education aspirations. Anderson (2007: 16) stresses the importance of students making a proactive choice to participate in study as a significant factor in retention. However, encouraging welfare recipients to undertake study as an alternative to providing evidence of work search or participation in 'work for the dole' schemes, under the mutual obligation requirements to qualify for income support payments from Centrelink, may not provide a strong enough incentive for academic success.

Focus group discussions suggest a perception of exploitation of government policies that provide income benefits for learning or job search by some people who choose to enrol in an education program without actively engaging with the learning opportunity offered. However, active epistemic vigilance (Sperber, et al. 2010) demands recognition that some comments from focus groups might be generated out of envy or some other undisclosed motivation. Although focus group participants were not directly asked to disclose if they were themselves recipients of Centrelink payments, some participants voluntarily revealed that they were or were not receiving Centrelink benefits while they studied claiming it was because their partners earned too much money for them to qualify.

Research on enabling programs has identified important outcomes such as increased self-confidence and self-esteem (see for example Cullity 2005; Willans & Seary 2011; Hodges *et al.* 2013). Soft skills such as self-confidence and self-esteem can also be improved by other means as demonstrated in an evaluation of 'Work for the dole' schemes by Kellard et al. (2015:8) where two thirds of survey participants felt that not only had their 'soft' skills increased, such as their ability to work with others (72%) and self-confidence (69%), but also their general work skills (65%). Government policy places benefit recipients in what Molander & Torsvik (2015: 1) describe as a 'throtter' situation that combines an offer and a threat where they are obliged to demonstrate job search or participate in training schemes in order to receive welfare benefits. To evaluate the effectiveness of such a policy there is a need to assess the

outcomes of education and training programs, including university enabling programs, against alternative 'mutual obligation' provisions.

If outcomes for successful enabling students are improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence then the opposite may be experienced in connection to attrition. It remains important to consider the effect of attrition upon individuals regardless of whether they made a proactive choice or were encouraged to undertake education as part of their 'mutual obligation' requirements for welfare payments. However, students who have discontinued their studies have diminished interest in responding to any research concerning their attitude, motivation or reasons to drop out of the enabling program (Orth & Robinson 2013) leaving them silent in the literature.

A great deal of teaching and research effort by institutions is going towards understanding the learning needs of enabling program students and developing strategies to educate those at the margins (see for example O'Donnell & Tobbell 2007; Willans & Seary 2011). Institutional resources devoted to the education of students who do not complete their program of study are not recouped (Hodges et al. 2013) in any way that has been measured. Enabling program students incur minimal, if any, explicit costs and, for some, enrolment fulfils their 'mutual obligation' requirements to qualify for welfare benefits from Centrelink, providing a financial incentive to enrol (Willans 2010). These factors combined may result in little reason for those enrolling for Centrelink purposes to 'buy in' and also perhaps a good reason for these students not to officially discontinue their enrolment even if they have disengaged with the program (Hodges et al. 2013; Orth & Robinson 2013).

The opportunity for mature-aged students to complete the unfinished business identified by both Munns and McFadden (2000) and Green and Web (2003) provided an important motivator for the participants in this study to complete an enabling program and articulate to undergraduate study. However, some in the focus groups were of the opinion that younger students do not feel the same imperative to maximise the 'second-chance' afforded to them by university-based enabling programs. It is possible that being in the same classes with older students may encourage the younger ones to feel they are young enough for a third or even fourth chance. Statistical analysis by Bookallil (2014: 65-66) demonstrated a positive effect between maturity and completion of enabling programs at this university indicating that,

“older students were more likely than the younger ones to complete their enabling program”.

Consideration might be given to providing separate classes, particularly for internal students, based upon students' age. Comments from focus groups' such as “there's a lot of 18 year olds who couldn't handle people who are the same age as their parents” (Focus group transcripts) suggest those under 21 years might be more comfortable in classes with students closer to their own ages. Such a strategy might also allow the mature aged to progress their studies without the distractions alleged by focus group participants. Alternatively, implementing a 'provisional enrolment' system, where enrolment is 'confirmed' by the end of week three, might encourage the early engagement identified by Hodges *et al.* (2013) that is required for persistence in an enabling program from students of all ages.

The phenomenon of 'spousal fear' identified from this study as a gendered issue, mainly affecting women, has not been reported in the literature on attrition from enabling programs. However, this concept may be masked within responses to exit surveys such as 'personal reasons'. Additionally, those who do not complete enabling or do not articulate to undergraduate study rarely engage in research to understand their reasons for dropping out. Little is known about Australian women's experiences as they transition into higher education and whether their decisions to continue might be taken out of consideration for others, or in response to relationship pressures. Individuals' actions do not always appear rational to the observer as they may be based upon deontological reasons or be influenced by “pervasive interdependence” (Ng 1979: 7).

This finding suggests that women experience unique relationship complications when they attempt to re-engage with education giving rise to “spousal fear” that may manifest as threats to their marriages. Recognising this issue and, where appropriate, increasing provision of counselling services, and/or developing processes to facilitate student access to existing counselling services, would meet one of the key recommendations made by Hodges *et al.* (2013). The university might also consider providing functions during the term that include spouses and other family members so they do not feel isolated from what the student is achieving.

Conclusion

The ‘insider researcher’ in this study utilised a pragmatic approach of drawing the focus group participants into the research space as ‘co-investigators’ to gather data on their perceptions of their fellow enabling program classmates’ motivations and the barriers they faced in their learning journeys. Thus valuable insights have been gained into attrition from university-based enabling programs through the perceptions of relatively successful students.

Although relying on ‘insider’ accounts is a contestable strategy, this pragmatic approach even if unorthodox, has provided unique insights that have been useful in refining the survey instrument to be used in the second stage of this project. In addition, such knowledge is important because it is implicated in curriculum (re)design, pedagogical frameworks for teaching and learning, and institutional infrastructure investment that enhance opportunity to achieve successful enabling program completion and progression through to undergraduate study.

While education may indeed be a “precursor to informed choice” (James 2007: 11) that can change perspectives, these results suggest that compulsion cannot substitute for the “proactive choice” proposed by Anderson (2007: 16) as an important factor in generating successful academic outcomes. Enrolment of recent school leavers, evidenced since 2005, may be related to the ‘mutual obligation’ provisions compelling welfare recipients to ‘earn or learn’. However, the increase in recent school leavers enrolling in university-based enabling programs also coincides with increasing attrition rates suggesting such compulsion may not provide sufficient incentive for academic success and may even leave these students vulnerable to negative psychological consequences.

Evidence has been provided that the majority of mature aged students are very serious about making the most of the ‘second-chance’ that university-based enabling programs provide, whether by proactive choice or initially compelled under mutual obligation requirements, indicating that maturity matters with respect to success in enabling study. Conversely there are indications that younger cohorts in enabling programs may not feel the same imperative as the more mature cohorts to maximise the opportunity as a ‘second-chance’ but rather viewing the program as an alternative to searching for jobs that may not be readily

available in their local area or simply ‘filling in time’.

While including younger students in classes with mature aged may in some cases provide positive role models, it may also have a negative effect of signifying that their youth gives them time to re-engage with education later in life rather than making the most of current opportunities. This was the perception of the mature aged concerning the younger cohorts in enabling programs. However, only three participants who were within five years of completing secondary school responded to the invitation to attend the focus groups in this study mostly leaving younger voices unheard and no counterbalancing contribution suggesting the need for further research into the rapidly declining age demographic.

The gendered nature of difficulties faced by mature-aged women as they negotiate the study environment has previously been identified (See for example Scott, Burns & Cooney (1998); Tett (2000); Stone & O’shea (2013). However, explaining and naming the negative pressure placed upon women undertaking enabling programs by their male partners as ‘spousal fear’ is a unique finding in this instance given that the impact of this pressure was perceived by focus group participants to be strong enough to cause some females to discontinue their study. Thereby, blocking development of human capital that can provide significant social benefits to the economy through higher rates of workforce participation resulting from higher levels of education for women (Karmel 2014). The importance of this finding is further emphasised when considering the gender balance in the enabling program where females make up the majority of enrolments with only 20% being male (Bookallil 2014: 70).

The second-hand nature of the ‘insider’ comments reported in this paper must be acknowledged as only the other students’ perceptions and may not necessarily reflect the multiple realities of the individuals’ situations. It will be from analysis of the survey in the second stage of this project that direct information from those who discontinued may be captured. However, there were enough recurring views that arose organically across different focus groups and locations to consider that these perceptions may provide insights into the under-researched area of attrition from this particular enabling program.

As with most case studies there is no claim to generalisability of these findings for all enabling programs, nor indeed for all students of this enabling program. Rather, the analysis and findings suggest issues for further consideration within the program in this specific institution; while others may interpret this as worthy of further consideration for their own administrative and academic contexts offering enabling programs. The concepts of mutual obligation, maturity matters and spousal fear deduced from the thematic analysis presented in this paper suggest areas for further research, either individually or in combination with each other.

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About the Authors

Cheryl Bookallil is a PhD student at CQUniversity, School of Business and Law. Cheryl has worked in the Australian higher education sector for over 25 years as a Student Equity practitioner, a Careers Educator and as an academic. Her research interests include Economics of education and social economics including: value adding by regional universities, career planning and social mobility, widening participation in higher education, underdevelopment and social equity. The work for this paper was completed as part of a Doctoral study currently being undertaken at CQUniversity.

Bobby Harreveld is a professor of Education with CQUniversity and a supervisor for the doctoral research project. Bobby's staff profile that lists all affiliations and expertise can be located at <https://handbook.cqu.edu.au/profiles/view/475>

Contact details

Cheryl Bookallil
School of Business and Law
CQUniversity

Bruce Highway, Queensland Rockhampton 4702

Email: c.bookallil@cqu.edu.au
b.harreveld@cqu.edu.au