

## **Opportunities for change: What factors influence non-traditional students to enrol in higher education?**

Deanna McCall  
Deborah Western  
Melissa Petrakis

University of Newcastle  
Monash University

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*In recent years, the Australian federal government has sought to increase the diversity of students attending higher education through supporting students that have traditionally been under represented. This is due to a perception that the attainment of a higher education can enhance a graduate's life as they have greater access to professional positions, which may also lead to higher wages and better career stability. Most of the existing research is focussed on the student's process of deciding to enrol, and how to support students to succeed once they are enrolled, but fails to explore in-depth narratives of students' stated reasons of why they enrol, and if they consider these preconceptions to have been met or challenged.*

*The current research contributes knowledge by investigating factors that lead students to enrol in higher education. The study aimed to examine how the Australian federal government's 'Widening Participation' agenda has affected Australians' perception of higher*

*education. It is important to examine how enrolment of non-traditional students has changed throughout the last fifty years, whether and how the Widening Participation agenda influenced enrolment of students and students' perceptions of the factors that led to their enrolment post completion of an enabling program. The research argues that the concept of a 'traditional' student enrolled in higher education is outdated and that 'non-traditional' students are now the majority.*

**Keywords:** *higher education, widening participation, educational equity, first-in-family, neo-liberalism, gender*

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## **Introduction**

In the Australian higher education sector, there has been an increase in the enrolment of students who have traditionally been under-represented, due to the Rudd and Gillard Governments' adoption of the Bradley Review's Widening Participation recommendations (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Some of the main changes to the enrolment into higher education were the implementation of a demand-driven system; that institutional-specific targets be set and monitoring of low socio-economic students' participation and performance. These targets would then be further monitored through benchmarking them against other OECD countries (Bradley et al., 2008). This significantly impacted upon which students enrolled in higher education, as institutions targeted low socio-economic students. As the sector gained a more diverse student cohort, this led to an increase in knowledge through education across Australia. It is important to understand how this educational shift has impacted upon Australian society, and if it has led to broader social change.

Traditionally the majority of students who enrolled in higher education matriculated straight from high school into their degree of choice. However, over the last 50 years, this demographic has shifted to about 50%, interchangeable between different universities, of student enrolments being derived from alternative pathways programs, previous study (TAFE or workplace) or students who decided to take a career break before enrolling in higher education. This has led to a shift in the student demographic and the researchers are investigating why

these '*non-traditional students*' enrol in higher education. Also, in the research project we seek to explore if the students perceive that higher education has made an impact upon their lives and if so how. Has this increase in their education led to any significant changes in their perception of the benefit of education for future generations?

Under-represented students may be, or are, categorised as having one or more (descriptors) identifying elements, such as low socio-economic status (SES), culturally diverse backgrounds, indigeneity, disability, being the first member of the family to attend university or returning as a mature student. However, I do acknowledge that in recent years the higher education demographics have changed and that this student cohort is no longer a minority but is becoming the 'traditional student'.

### **Widening participation: The changing face of the 'traditional' university student**

The Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) longitudinal study of First Year Experience (FYE) students provides insight into the changing face of the 'traditional' student. Their research informs how the non-traditional student enrolling in higher education increased from 159,000 in 1994 to over 405,000 students in 2014 (p. 91). Baik et al (2015) consider this increase to be closely linked to Rudd and Gillard Government policies focussed on increasing access to under-represented students, particularly low socio-economic students (p. 99). Some of the major trends identified in this research was an increase in societal expectations for students to attend university and how students' reasons for enrolment were characterised by their: interest in the field of study (96%); better job prospects (87%); and creative endeavours (77%) (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015, p. 23). The main findings were that within the last 10 years students have become more diverse and confident in their ability to study, and have developed a clearer sense of purpose than their predecessors.

As the face of the 'traditional student' in higher education has continued to change, there can also be some resistance about how this will impact on the academic rigour of universities. Before the widening of participation agenda, universities were focussed on students that gained a mark that provided them with the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) grade that enabled them to enrol into their degree of choice. Palmer, Bexley and James (2011) aired concern that

as the demand-driven system led to an expansion of university places for students, this could impact on the selection of courses and who seeks enrollment as institutions aim to meet equity targets. Knipe (2013) considers that if universities adapt their enrolment process to suit student demand and equity priorities that this could lead to a dropping in minimum threshold standards, which have been established to support students' potential for success. Pitman (2014) was also concerned about the focus on broadening university enrolments and the 'deployment of fairness through equity' (Pitman, 2014 p. 290). He argued that the ability of universities to maintain their elite status was important and that recent policies need to acknowledge this and consider how they can support disadvantaged students without compromising the status of universities.

The use of a gendered lens to explore equity in participation in higher education provides additional insight into who constituted the 'traditional' student. Some of the concerns about maintaining universities status could be linked to how universities perceive themselves in a traditional sense, and how this is constructed through a traditional lens that focused on ATAR grades and was led by the high rate of male enrollments (80% enrolled compared to females (20%) (in 1949; source: Department of Education and Training). As the traditional students have evolved it is also important to understand what this means for equity students. As many equity students have complex issues that may impact on their ability to succeed or complete their university course, but they also have lived experience and strengths that they may have yet to identify. This does not impact the universities' elite status, but rather provides a chance for non-traditional students to enrol and be provided with an opportunity to attempt university study. This may have been seen as unattainable before the widening of participation. Universities are not eroding their status but rather challenging the perception of universities as being linked to 'high culture' and only suitable for a certain 'academically inclined student'. Instead, universities may be transforming into a place of opportunities for any Australian that seeks to enrol into higher education and will then lead to a more diverse student cohort, which can correlate more closely with the general Australian population and to enhance the broader Australian educational base.

## **Current literature on why students return to study**

Current literature reconfirms the research from seminal texts that indicate an array of reasons why non-traditional students decide to enrol in higher education, such as to be a role model for their children (Passe, 1998); to improve their economic status (Kaziboni, 2000); to stand out in the competitive employment market (Wong, 2018); or to develop personal enrichment (Cantwell & Mulhearn, 1997; Debenham & May, 2005; Fulmer & Jenkins, 1992). However, most of the research has been focussed on how their decision influences their ability to be successful students (Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan 2005). Benson, Heagney, Hewitt, Crosling, and Devos's (2014) recent research was undertaken from a narrative inquiry approach and concluded that students' decisions to enrol were strongly influenced by their family, life events, sense of self and external influences. Other recent research was undertaken by Bunn (2014) in the Open Foundation program indicates that the main response was not related to returning to work and/or career progression, but the students' narratives about self-identity. Bunn does consider the social structure and human agency and argues that educating these students can be difficult as they 'enrol for educative purposes, but are also seeking identity transformation (p. 1)'. Although there exists a large body of work on why non-traditional students return to study, this focusses on the decision-making process, rather than the perception of why they enrolled.

## **A theoretical and conceptual framework for this study**

The study design utilises a systematic steps framework to address a problem area, create a study, analyse data and disseminate findings. As noted by Grinnell and Unrau (2011), there are eight steps to this framework:

Step 1: Problem identification

Step 2: Research questions and formulation

Step 3: Design the study

Step 4: Data collection

Step 5: Data analysis

Step 6: Interpretation of findings

Step 7: Presentations of findings

Step 8: Dissemination of findings.

All these steps stem from existing literature and to add current findings to existing literature.

The current study aimed to explore students' perception of what was happening in their lives before they enrolled and examines if this differs from their decision to enrol. It was undertaken to gain insight into the factors that enable students to enrol in higher education. The Enabling Program is a program that caters for students that have traditionally been under-represented or had a break in their education and are seeking re-entry into higher education. The current study aimed to explore the factors influencing the students' decisions to enrol in higher education and how these correlate with established literature. The objective was to improve the understanding of the factors influencing enabling students to enrol in tertiary education and how these might be related to broader societal, personal or political influences.

### **Study setting**

The university in the current study has one of the largest and oldest enabling programs in Australia. It enrolls some 2200 students per year at the study setting (Study University's Planning and Core Centre Reports, 2014). The university provides three enabling programs, which aim to support people who wish to enrol in higher education through an alternative pathway. About forty per cent of the enabling student population has been identified as low SES, through postcode (Study University's Statistics for Program reports, 2014). For this paper, the authors define these enabling students as non-traditional students, as this cohort did not directly transition from high school into higher education.

### **Aims**

This study aimed to:

1. Investigate non-traditional students' reasons for enrolling in higher education.
2. Examine how the Australian federal government's Widening Participation agenda has affected Australians' perception of higher education.

3. Investigate if students' perceptions are linked to broader societal expectations of success.
4. Examine if students consider the attainment of a higher education award as improving their personal, economic and social status.

## **Methods**

### ***Recruitment***

Students were recruited through a register known as the Potential Enabling Program Participant Research (PEPPR) register. The PEPPR register has a list of names of previous students that have completed an enabling program at the study university and indicated that they would be interested in participating in research.

An email was sent to students, who studied an enabling program between 2005–2015 and are on the PEPPR register, inviting them to participate in the study. Students were recruited through the PEPPRRegister, a record of almost 1,300 students who have completed an enabling program at the study university participated from as far back as 1974. PEPPR was set up over six years ago by Associate Professor Seamus Fagan and Professor Jim Albright to facilitate research in the area of enabling education. A large number of variables have been built into PEPPR to capture a broad range of data including gender, age, language background, area of study, completion, first in family and ethnicity. Researchers can apply to use PEPPR to design a targeted study.

Professor Albright has previously explained the use of the register to be a 'vehicle for facilitating research in an under-researched area' to help lead to high-quality research of scale that speaks to policy. The data records a participant's circumstances before commencing English, Language and Foundation Studies, their experience throughout the program and the outcomes after completion to capture how their life may have been transformed. When interviewed in June 2016, Associate Professor Fagan has stated 'limited research has been conducted into the outcomes of these ground-breaking programs. We hope that the PEPPR Register along with the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education will harness the already existing pockets of excellence in equity research in the University and create awareness of this work both nationally and internationally'.

### **Sampling**

Purposive sampling was applied as the participants have been chosen for a particular purpose and the sample gives insights into particular study areas (Alston & Bowles 2012) and can provide rich information for studies that are seeking in-depth analysis (Liamputtong, 2013). The study was seeking to understand enabling students’ perceptions of why they enrolled in tertiary education. Attaining a sample from the PEPPR register ensures access to the targeted sample group, however, there is a need to consider that data saturation, in that the study has targeted individuals with exposure to enabling programs and are knowledgeable about the area under investigation, which may lead to limitations of new insights (Grinnell & Unrau, 2006; Liamputtong, 2013). Demographical information was also collected to provide a baseline of participants.

### **Survey design**

An online mixed method survey was used. The mixed method survey included basic demographic questions and a 5-point Likert scale with open-ended questions. Using a survey has some benefits such as access to a large number of participants in a short time frame but can have limitations too. Limitations include the lack of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, equity of individuals without access to computers/internet or participants who are computer illiterate and have difficulties in sustaining online interaction over time as well as low response rate due to information overload (Liamputtong, 2013).

**Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of an online survey**

Approach	Helps to gather	Advantages	Disadvantages
Online mixed methods survey	A timely generalisation Test hypotheses Subgroup differences	Generality Quantitative Qualitative Timely replicable	Superficial Obtrusive Structured Self-reporting

The Likert scale is a standardised approach and was used in the survey to measure the participants’ perceptions of the factors that led to their enrolment into tertiary education. The benefit of the Likert Scale was that students are provided with a continuum scale between 1 and 5. This is a commonly used survey approach and has been used purposefully as it is easy for participants to understand, and it is hoped that this has minimised

any issue of response set/bias (Neuman, 2011). The benefit is that the Likert scale can be compiled into an index to support reliability and validity, but the limitation is that it 'can result in the same overall result, and the response rate is a potential danger' (Neuman, 2016 p. 2011).

There were six open-ended questions and a thematic analysis was undertaken to generate themes, as outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006). After undertaking a literature review of relevant research, survey questions were constructed to elucidate the factors that lead to students' enrolment in enabling programs. The questions in the survey align with findings in the literature about students' reasons for enrolling in tertiary education. Content and face validity of the survey was conducted with academic staff in the study University, as they are experts in the enabling education field of study.

### ***Survey implementation***

Students were emailed a Participation Information Statement (PIS) in July 2016 about the project and invited to participate in an online mixed methods survey, via a web link embedded in the email. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they would not be disadvantaged if they chose not to participate. Completion of the survey was accepted as implied consent to participate.

Students who agreed to participate were asked to complete an anonymous online survey asking about the factors behind their decision to enrol in an enabling program. Participation in the research was entirely by choice. The project consisted of an anonymous online survey. Students were asked to tick the box indicating that they had read this Participation Information Statement (PIS) and submit the survey. This indicated that they had provided informed consent and were included in the project.

Whether or not they decided to participate, the decision did not disadvantage them. If they decided to participate, students could withdraw from the project at any time submitting the completed survey. Due to the anonymous nature of the online mixed method survey, they were not able to withdraw their response after submission.

The survey was released with a response required within two weeks to allow time for participants to respond without overly delaying analysis of

data. However, the survey was left open for four weeks. The information provided from the PEPRR Register indicates that approximately 700 students were accessed through the register. Eighty-two responses were received, which means that 11.7% of students participated.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethics approval for this project was attained from the University Human Research Ethics Officer and the second affiliated University for this study. Ethics applications were peer reviewed to ensure cultural competency needs were addressed in survey design and during the analysis of data and dissemination of findings. Recruitment bias was minimal, as only enabling students who registered with the PEPRR register were contacted. This project utilised an online survey. All participants were anonymous, and all Survey Monkey data was downloaded and stored confidentially and securely on a password-protected computer, accessible only to the researchers. Data was deleted from the online service as soon as possible after the data has been collected.

### ***Data analysis: Interpretive Social Science approach***

This study uses an Interpretive Social Science (ISS) approach, a methodology designed specifically to study social science with an action of purpose. This approach seeks to understand what motivates or shapes a person's internal feelings and guides decisions to act in particular ways. It considers how meaning is socially constructed within the context of the social world (Neuman, 2011, p. 87). Neuman (2011, p. 88) describes the approach as 'The systemic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings to arrive at understanding and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social world'. This approach was based on Neuman's (2012) outline of 10 elements that need to be considered in Interpretive Social Science (ISS) approaches to research:

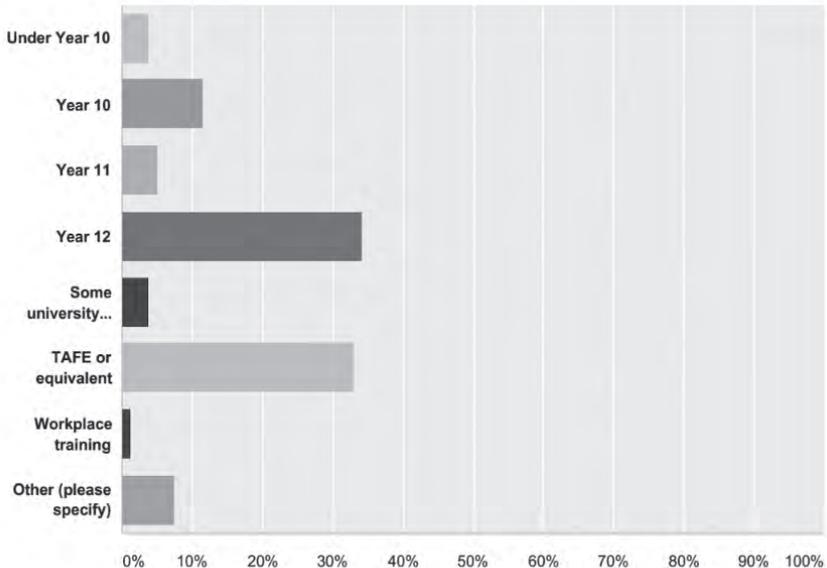
1. Rationale for conducting the research
2. What is the fundamental nature of social reality?
3. Basic nature of human beings
4. Human agency
5. Relationship between science and common sense
6. Theory of social relationships

7. Making of meaning. What is ‘true or false’?
8. Evidence
9. Relevance
10. Social political

## Results

Out of the 82 respondents, 69 identified as female and 13 male. When asked about completion of Open Foundation: 95.12% (78) had completed, 3.66% (3) did not complete and 1.22% (1) indicated it was not applicable. When asked if they continued onto undergraduate study: 88.49% (66) indicated yes and 15.85% (13) indicated no, with 3.66% (3) indicating that it was not applicable. There was a high rate of students that self-identified as being the first member of the family to attend university 41.98% (34), and 58.02% (47) indicated that they were not the first member of the family to attend university; one person skipped the question. When asked: Have any of your siblings, extended family or friends graduated since you have? 42.50% (34) indicated Yes and 53.75% (43) indicated No and 3.75% (3) did not know.

**Figure 1: Highest level of educational attainment prior to enrolment in the Enabling Program.**



This data indicates that many students had not completed their higher school certificate prior to enrolling in an enabling program (20.99%) with many having either TAFE, workplace or other training (41.97%) with 37.03% of respondents having attained the HSC or had some exposure to university. Many of the students with TAFE, workplace, or HSC would most likely have been granted access without completion of an enabling program, which seeks to question why they enrolled into an enabling program instead and if this was linked to broader needs than access into university. This was an unexpected finding and further research into why students choose to undertake an enabling program rather than direct entry into higher education would add another rich layer to the current knowledge base.

**Table 2: Factors that influenced students' decision to enrol in enabling programs**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
Career progression	3.90% 3	10.39% 8	19.48% 15	38.96% 30	27.27% 21	77	3.75
Influential mentor	16.88% 13	22.08% 17	31.17% 24	24.68% 19	5.19% 4	77	2.79
Right time in life	1.28% 1	5.13% 4	3.85% 3	62.82% 49	26.92% 21	78	4.09
Attain or develop knowledge	0.00% 0	2.56% 2	2.56% 2	52.56% 41	42.31% 33	78	4.35
New learning experiences	1.30% 1	2.60% 2	6.49% 5	48.05% 37	41.56% 32	77	4.26
Help to gain employment	5.13% 4	8.97% 7	15.38% 12	35.90% 28	34.62% 27	78	3.86
Entry into University	5.13% 4	3.85% 3	8.97% 7	29.49% 23	52.56% 41	78	4.21
Self-esteem	5.19% 4	12.99% 10	14.29% 11	42.86% 33	24.68% 19	77	3.69
Family	7.79% 6	23.38% 18	23.38% 18	35.06% 27	10.39% 8	77	3.17
Social status	19.48% 15	28.57% 22	25.97% 20	22.08% 17	3.90% 3	77	2.62
Long-term economic benefit	6.41% 5	14.10% 11	12.82% 10	35.90% 28	30.77% 24	78	3.71
Long held ambition to do so	11.54% 9	11.54% 9	8.97% 7	30.77% 24	37.18% 29	78	3.71

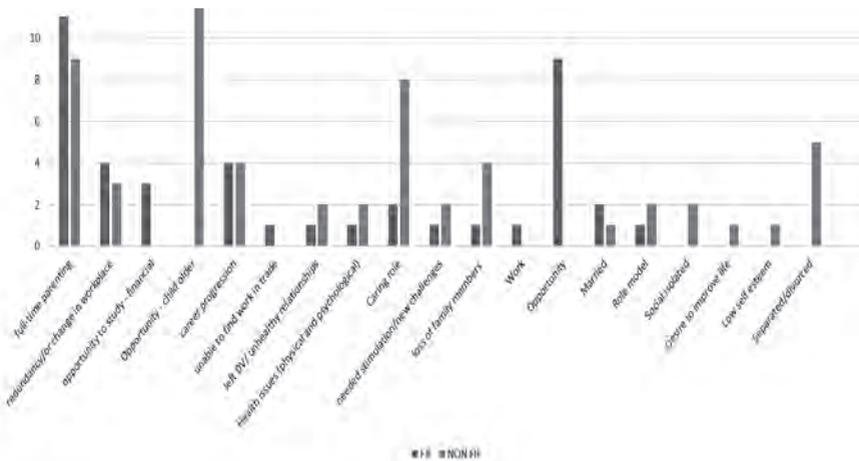
The data indicates that the respondents consider the main three factors that influenced their enrolment into an enabling program to be: to attain/develop knowledge (4.35); and new learning experiences (4.26); entry into university (4.21) followed closely by being the right time in life (4.09). While social status (2.26) and influential mentor were the least likely factors. Other factors, such as help to gain employment (3.86); career progression (3.75); long held ambition (3.71); economic benefit (3.71); self-esteem (3.69); and family (3.17), were also strong but ranked as less important. This indicates that students perceive that they enrolled into an enabling program to develop skills and entry into university rather than to identify transformations.

### ***Life circumstances prior to university***

The short answer data collection was thematically analysed to generate the main themes. The main themes are Question 1. What was happening in students' life before enrolling in higher education (personal, work or at home). The highest theme was opportunity due to full-time parenting (20), followed by children being older (14), caring role (10) opportunity (9), career progression (8), and separated/divorced (5). Other areas were changes in the workplace, health issues, and social isolation; desire to improve life and role model.

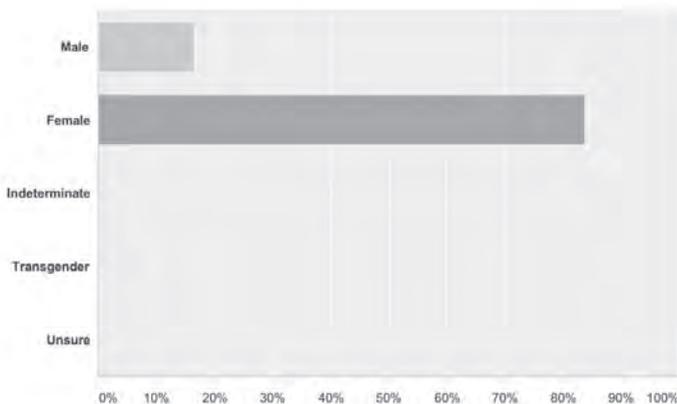
Comparison of students, who are the first member of the family (FIF) to enrol in higher education and students who are not the first member of the family (NON FIF) show differences. With FIF main reason full-time parenting (11) and opportunity (9), while NON FIF the main factor was full-time parenting (9) and opportunity due to children being older (14). Many of the NON FIF life circumstances can be linked to their roles as carers and internal issues such as social isolation, divorce, loss of a family member, low self-esteem, while the FIF was strongly linked to external factors such as opportunities (10) workplace issues (7) financial barriers (3) rather than internal considerations.

**Table 2: Comparison of FIF and NON-FIF responses to What was happening in students' life prior to enrolling in higher education (personal, work or at home)**



The strongest theme to emerge was the need to wait for the ‘right time in life’, which included caring roles and financial barriers. This may be due to the respondents to the survey being predominately female (Out of the 82 respondents, 69 identified as female and 13 male: review figure 3) or how women tend to delay their educational opportunities for an external reason such as caring for children and or family and needing to wait for financial security. Whilst men may consider enrolment into university as career development, women may see it as secondary to their caring role. This asks further questions about how gender plays a role in access to higher education.

**Figure 3: What gender do you best identify with?**

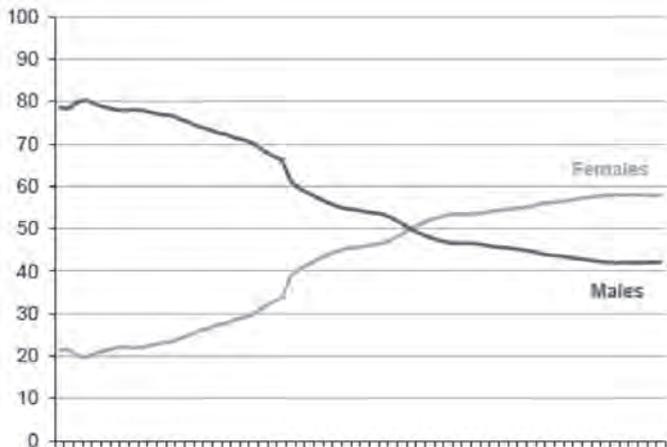


**Table 3: Age of respondents**

Please indicate your age range		
Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
20 years and under	1.3%	1
21–25	7.5%	6
26–30	20.0%	16
31–40	30.0%	24
41–50	26.3%	21
51–60	8.8%	7
61 or older	6.3%	5
	<i>answered question</i>	<b>80</b>
	<i>skipped question</i>	<b>0</b>

The responses might also be related to the age of the participants, as the main range was between 26–50. This may support how many women are the main carers or have parenting responsibilities that once fulfilled enable them to pursue personal goals, such as further education. The stage of life of students can affect the students’ perception of why they enrolled in higher education. In addition, as the Enabling Program is free, and targets equity and mature aged students, there is little risk of students being pressured to have to commit to and pay for a minimum three year degree but rather gain a soft approach to access to higher education, as it enables them to ‘dip their toes’ into higher education and see if it is something they want to pursue.

**Figure 4: Higher educational enrolment of all female and male students 1949–2014.**



Source: Department of Education and Training (2015)

Interestingly, women have slowly overtaken men in enrolling in higher education since about 1985. When considering the courses studied, there are some gender differences. Male dominated areas of study are: information technology, engineering, architecture and building, whilst females dominated enrolment in education, health, society and culture and creative arts courses (Conversation, 2018). Although there has been a significant increase in women gaining access to higher education, in Australia and other developed countries, many women still consider there are barriers that have yet to be renegotiated (Wilkinson, 2014) and significant hurdles in developing countries were gender inequalities and class divisions (Khattak, 2018; Kilango, Qin, Nyoni, & Senguo, 2017; Mollaeva, 2018).

## **Discussion**

### ***Widening participation***

There is a considerable body of research and literature on widening participation and the challenges and strengths that non-traditional students bring to their educational journey (Cuthill & Jansen 2012; Kift, 2009a; 2009b; Tedder, 2007). Devlin & McKay (2012) and the focus predominately is on how to support students (all students traditional and non-traditional) to not only gain access to higher education but also ensure that there are effective practices to enable students to succeed. This is where the widening participation agenda led to a focus on how to support students in the first year of study. The newly emerging field had undertaken significant research into how to support students to succeed during their first year of study (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez 2001; Kift 2009a 2009 b; Devlin & McKay, 2012; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2000; 2003; 2006; Scutter & Wood, 2009). Called First Year Experience (FYE) research, it seeks to develop a framework and strategies to support early student engagement, through orientation and engagement, to enhance student success and retention through developing learning communities and collaborative pedagogies. The research indicates that if students are effectively supported during their first year of study it significantly improves the likelihood of their ability to successfully complete their degree.

## **Widening participation: First Year Experience**

Another essential part of the FYE literature is the holistic approach to all students' educational experience and the assertion that a student's academic journey is perceived through a personal, social and educational lens (Lizzio & Wilson 2004; 2008; 2013), which needs to be considered when seeking to support students during their enrolment. Lizzio's (2006) research revealed how students' motivation for academic achievement can be strongly linked to their perception of their skills and capabilities. He considers the students' identity and how the students are creating 'new professional and personal future identities' (2006, p. 110) and the students' position in self-evaluation and agency in constructed identities or self-markers. Lizzio's (2006) findings showed that there was a need to understand the personal and situational factors that influence students' perception of 'skills' and he uses a conceptual model framework based on five senses of success: Sense-making narratives; Relevance of the course of study; Accessible role models; Meaningful work and contribution; Lifecycle progressive and cumulative activities (Lizzio & Wilson 2013, p. 110). This research is indicative of how students' success and academic achievement is strongly linked to their perception of skills.

## ***Widening participation: Neo-liberal perspective***

Widening participation on face value can seem beneficial to the Australian people as they become more educated and better placed for new emerging workplaces that will be strongly influenced by information technology in a global workforce. Whilst it is essential to be ready for future workplaces, the widening participation agenda is also linked closely to a neo-liberalist focus. The Bradley review (2008) indicates this where he rationales that Australia needs to have a global focus and to seek to ensure that communities are educated and remain internationally competitive. The review reiterates this by highlighting how Australia's status on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, was in decline and would likely continue to decline unless we followed other countries and increased access to and the quality of our higher educational system (Bradley et al., 2008). This is supported in international studies (Griffin & Hu, 2015; Goastellec & Välimaa 2019; Kung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hanson, 2017; Mergner, Leisyte, & Bosse, 2019;) as they consider that the widening participation agenda has

enabled 'non-traditional' students to increase their social mobility, develop resilience whilst also allowing the general population to become more 'up-skilled' for future workplaces, however, also acknowledged that they have encountered many equitable barriers from an early age. Also, you need to ensure that social mobility and a skilled market are not conflated as they are very different perspectives and outcomes. If the higher education sector views enrolment through a neo-liberalist lens it will impact on university policies and the purpose of the higher education sector in Australia. Neo-liberalism is open to many different interpretations, but the main consensus is that it is an economic system in which a 'free' market is seen to as a way in which to create an open market dictated to by competition. This involves the state becoming less involved in public welfare or infrastructure, divestment and selling off of state-owned assets and championing policies that enable a 'free' market to prosper. It is also associated with free trade agreements. The idea is that the public will prosper from increased employment opportunities, cheaper goods and that the market will set the price dependent on needs (competition), however, there are many critiques of the 'free' market driven forces and concern about equity (Conversation, 2019). If the higher education sectors focus is to enable Australia to be prepared for future workplaces then how does that impact on broader Australia and the purpose of the higher education sector in Australia? Is it to educate or prepare for the changing workplace landscape? And are the two exclusive or interchangeable? Also, how do economic incentives impact on education outcomes? Does the focus shift from education to a focus on attrition and completion rates?

Bennett, Hodges, Kavanagh, Fagan, Hartley and Schofield (2012) have explored these concepts and questions whether a focus on attrition and completion rates might dismiss students' exposure to university. Bennett (2012) considers attrition rates in higher education through a neo-liberal lens and explores the concepts of higher education from a 'soft' (attrition based on positive withdrawal from study) and 'hard' (pure attrition rates) perspective. In her research, she argues that students who do not complete their program still benefit from 'a significant shift in aspiration, opportunities and education' (Bennett et al., 2012, p. 144) and also shows how fundamentally the enabling program provides 'the opportunity to 'test the waters' of university study while doing the courses that provide access to university' (Bennett et al., 2012, p. 153). This perspective considers how 'soft' attrition can be positive, even if students do withdraw from their study, as students they have gained exposure to new learning and educational opportunities.

This challenges traditional neo-liberal perspectives that link success solely to student completion rates and the ability for students to economically contribute to society. Further research into this area would enhance our knowledge of the impact of neo-liberalism on the higher education system.

### ***Widening participation: Gender***

The main theme to emerge from the data was how gendered access to higher education can be. Whilst women are enrolling more than ever, the courses that they are predominately enrolled in involve caring roles (nursing, teaching), whilst male enrolments are more aligned with STEM and built environment courses. Another strong theme was that women had to consider many obstacles to their enrolment, such as impact upon family children; what stage in their life that they could enrol in study (after children or when they get the opportunity), and it appeared as if their journey was secondary to many other factors. This indicates that there is still a clear power imbalance, as women have to negotiate many decisions before enrolling in higher education. Women appear to have to consider how their enrolment will impact on their or their family finances, or how they navigate their role as a carer for family and/or children. Whilst the study indicates that the men surveyed were more focussed on enrolling for career progression without as much concern for impact on the family and others, this may allude to the pressure that men have as the 'breadwinners' and therefore have to provide for the family.

### ***Limitations***

There is a plethora of research into the increase of enrolment of females into higher education, and the gender imbalances that still exist. These are important issues however they are outside the scope of this paper; rather we acknowledged that this is an important aspect to be considered and the impact upon access to higher education for women both locally and globally, and their possible future careers.

### **Conclusion**

*What do enabling programs offer in peoples' lives?*

Enabling programs offer students an opportunity to attain a qualification to enrol in higher education, but it does much more than that, it also

provides an opportunity for social change. As more women attend university and diversity increases, it creates better equality across Australian society. As people attain an education, it can enrich a student's life by improving their self-esteem and career prospects; preparing them for new challenges in emerging industries and creating a more educated society. There are political considerations that need to be considered such as neo-liberal perspectives to prepare Australia for changes in the workforce, as technology challenges traditional roles and participation of women in the workplace continues to grow. It becomes important to this agenda to understand how to support programs that target equity groups. This study also paints a picture of the decisions that influence students to return to study and how subliminal gender themes are present and still impact predominately on female students' decisions to enrol. However, programs such as the enabling program ensure that all students are offered the opportunity to enhance their lives, knowledge and self-esteem regardless of their gender or social status.

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## **About the Authors**

**Deanna McCall** is a Social worker who works at the University of Newcastle, in a clinical capacity as a Student Counsellor. She is currently enrolled in a Higher Degree by Research at Monash University and is a member of the Social Work Innovation, Transformation and Collaboration in Health (SWITCH) Research Group. Deanna's interests lay in cultivating equity and diversity in higher education and working with students to develop their emotional and psychological wellbeing to enable them to fulfil their academic aspirations.

**Dr Melissa Petrakis**, Senior Lecturer at Monash University, Department of Social Work, has worked in mental health services for over 20 years as a clinician then practice-based researcher. She has authored over 70 publications; delivered over 80 national/international conference presentations. She is Chief Investigator of a 10-year longitudinal study into evidence-based early psychosis treatment, with St Vincent's Hospital (Melbourne). In 2016 she was awarded The Tom Trauer Evaluation and Research Award, Australian and New Zealand The MHS Awards acknowledging excellence in her approach to research, championing co-design, co-production and co-authorship, with clinicians and people with lived experience of mental illness.

**Dr Deborah Western** has extensive practice experience in the fields of child and family welfare, sexual assault and family violence. She has worked for the peak body for family violence organisations in Victoria (Domestic Violence Victoria) and has researched and published and presented at conferences throughout Australia and internationally concerning practice, management, policy, research and evaluation in the fields of family violence and violence against women. In 2011 she contributed to the review and evaluation of the Gender Justice theme (which included global violence against women programs and strategies) for the Oxfam International Sense-making exercise.

## **Contact details**

*Deanna McCall*

*Email: [deanna.mccall@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:deanna.mccall@newcastle.edu.au)*