

## **Try before you buy: using enabling programs to negotiate the risks of higher education**

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*For some students, entering higher education entails considerable risk – that is, the potential for harm or uncertainty. This is particularly true for students entering university via an alternative entry, enabling program. This study explored student experiences in Tasmania, Australia, as they progressed through their first semester of study in an enabling program, using the lens of risk to consider the issues and challenges they faced, and the strategies they employed to negotiate these.*

*Qualitative data were collected from both students and staff via semi-structured interviews. A complex and nuanced relationship between risk and opportunity emerged. While considerable risk was clearly evident, students and staff both preferred a narrative of opportunity. However, this narrative did not prevent students from proactively managing risk. In this process, the enabling program emerged as a ‘safe space’ where risk could be unpacked and managed and where they could ‘try out’ university.*

*These findings highlight the considerable strengths enabling-program students bring to their university experience, sitting in opposition to the more common characterisation of such students as disadvantaged and lacking. They also challenge the way in which enabling-program*

*outcomes are measured, particularly in terms of attrition, rendering current understandings of them incomplete.*

**Keywords:** *higher education, enabling program, access, risk, disadvantaged student, opportunity*

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## **Introduction**

The dominant discourse of higher education in Australia is one of opportunity; that is, that education provides a well understood and legitimate pathway to improving one's social position (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). It paves the way to higher incomes, better jobs, better health and better outcomes for one's children. (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Bynner, Dolton, Feinstein, Makepeace, Malmberg & Woods, 2003). Yet, not everyone gets to go to university, and even for those that do, some students are more likely to succeed (complete their course) than others.

Students in enabling programs typically represent those students who struggle to get to university, and those who struggle to stay. Common characteristics of enabling-program students, such as lower levels of education attainment, disrupted educational journeys, coming from low socio-economic (LSES) backgrounds and being mature-aged, (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Kemp & Norton, 2014; Habel et al., 2016; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016) are all indicators of low university engagement and attainment (McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001; Rienks & Taylor, 2009).

While the experience of enabling-program students has begun to attract attention, the focus of research has largely been on how programs impact students, that is, how they support or hinder students to succeed, rather than on how students interact with programs, the strategies students use and develop to negotiate their experiences. This paper explores some of the unique characteristics of enabling-program students and how they manage the risks that they face in entering university.

It outlines the proactive way one cohort of students approached their study, and how this makes enabling programs particularly unique phenomena within university environments. This in turn has important implications for how students are viewed and how success is understood and measured.

## **Background**

University participation, how to increase it and how to make it more equitable are topics which have been on the public and political agenda in Australia for the past 40 years. Starting with the Dawkins White Paper (1988) there have been a number of reports and policy initiatives implemented by successive Australian governments to increase participation, particularly from under-represented groups. One of these initiatives has been the provision of university preparatory, bridging, access or enabling courses (hereafter called enabling programs<sup>1</sup>) to support participation from under-represented groups and to increase participation more broadly. These programs, which facilitate entry into university for domestic students otherwise not eligible for enrolment (Clarke, Bull, Neil & Birney, 2000), are now run in the majority of Australian universities (Pitman, Trinidad, Devlin, Harvey, Brett & McKay, 2016).

The majority of participants in enabling programs are mature-aged students (Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Klinger, Murray, O'Rourke & Schofield, 2013; Pitman et al., 2016). However, as noted by Ross and Gray (2005) some younger students also select enabling programs as an alternative pathway to higher education. Many enabling-program students have previously rejected education or have been rejected by it (Munns, Nanlohy & Thomas, 2000; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). Enabling program students also typically occupy some position of disadvantage (Clarke et al., 2000), either because they belong to an equity group that is under-represented at university, including students from a LSES background, regional and remote students, students with a disability as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Koshy, 2017); or because they belong to a group that has a higher attrition rate than average when they do go to university. These include students who enter with a low Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking (ATAR) score or who have lower levels of educational attainment, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, students from refugee backgrounds and mature-aged students (Rienks & Taylor, 2009; Australian Government, 2010).

The biographical backgrounds of most students in enabling programs puts them at a position of disadvantage relative to other students. A lack of prior knowledge, understanding and resources due to low levels of previous academic attainment, can mean students are under-prepared

and struggle to transition (O'Shea, 2016). First-in-family students can lack access to resources to help them adjust to the demands of the higher education environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Financial stress (Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009; Stone & O'Shea, 2013) and emotional stress, particularly feelings of not belonging and a lack of confidence (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Kasworm, 2010; Reeve, Shumaker, Yearwood, Crowell & Riley, 2013) are common.

Personal circumstances, particularly of mature-aged students, also play a significant role in the lives of enabling-program students. Students are often faced with complex life circumstances (Stone, 2009; Morison & Cowley, 2017), poor health (Crawford & Johns, 2018), work and/or finance stress (Stone, 2009; Hodges, et al., 2013), as well as self-esteem issues and unrealistic expectations of university life (Habel et al., 2016). In all, the challenges faced by students typically found in enabling programs are significant.

### **Theoretical lenses**

Two key theoretical positions were applied to this study. The first of these is risk. Risk in Western societies has become a widely used concept to explain events which occur contrary to expectations, and which frighten or cause harm (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011). A sociocultural approach to risk, commonly found in sociology and political science (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011), was adopted in this study. This sees risk not just as an objective hazard, but as a phenomenon situated in a range of social and cultural contexts and a product of a person's life, history, personality and culture (Douglas, 1985; Lim, 2011).

Ullrich Beck (1992) theorises that the increasing individualism of late modernity has created an increased preoccupation with risk. Beck sees the welfare state, mass education, improved living standards and the second wave of feminism as particularly important in breaking down the structures of traditional roles imposed by class, gender and families. In this state 'class biographies, which are somehow ascribed, become transformed into reflexive biographies, which depend on the decision of the actor' (Beck, 1992, p. 88). Thus, while life choices are more flexible it is now up to the individual to take advantage of them. According to Beck, educational and other 'institutional biographies' (Beck, 1992, p. 131) now play a greater role in determining status than previous class

and gender structures. Here the individual's decision-making becomes paramount, and the individual is required to pay for poor decisions or decisions not taken in these realms. What might previously have been characterised as a 'blow of fate' (Beck, 1992, p. 136) is more likely to be seen now as some kind of personal failure. Thus, the individualisation of choice comes with the individualisation of the responsibility and risk attached to that choice.

The second key theoretical lens applied to this study is Bourdieu's theories (1986) of social reproduction and capital. These theories form a basis for examining the participation and experiences of students hitherto marginalised from higher education. Bourdieu allows us to conceive of higher education as not necessarily an environment which allows each person entering it to operate equally (Habel et al., 2016) but rather one where some people have privileged access to the resources and knowledge (cultural capital) and people (social capital) required to succeed. This privileged access particularly relates to the concept of the 'hidden curriculum', a term coined by Sambell and McDowell to describe, 'What is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curriculum and the surface features of educational interaction.' (1998, pp 391-392). The hidden curriculum accounts for the differences between 'curriculum as designed and curriculum in action' (Semper & Blasco, 2018). In addition, the more overt skills and knowledges embedded in university-level study can be categorised as a specific form of cultural capital, that of 'academic capital' (Roberts, 2011). Thus while, as in Beck's conceptualisation, old boundaries have broken down, barriers attached to class, knowledge and association continue to exert an influence and inhibit the success of students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds such as those typically found in enabling programs.

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital are seen by some as limiting the types of capital available to an individual. Various researchers have argued that by concentrating on the resources available to an individual only in terms of cultural and social capital, important elements are missed (Yosso, 2005; Côté, 2005). Côté (2005), describes one of these missing elements as 'identity' capital. Identity capital represents 'attributes associated with sets of psychosocial skills, largely cognitive in nature, that appear to be necessary for people to intelligently strategize and make decisions affecting their life courses

(i.e., to individualize), especially in the absence of cultural guidance and societal norms, as in the case of de-constructed late-modern societies' (Côté, 2005, p. 225). These strengths and capacities enable individuals to negotiate different circumstances and experiences in their work, educational and social lives. What may be lacking in cultural, social and academic capital can be compensated, in part at least, by identity capital.

## **Methodology**

This research was undertaken with students and staff from the University Preparation Program (UPP) enabling course at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), Australia. UPP has been and remains a key initiative by the University to increase participation from under-represented groups and to address issues related to the low levels of educational attainment in the state. A constructivist epistemology whereby meaning is constructed, not discovered, was adopted. This comes from an understanding that there is no 'single truth' and that 'there are multiple realities and therefore multiple truths' (Wetherall, Taylor & Yates, 2001, p. 12). These 'realities' can be explored and put together to build understanding relevant to a point of time and circumstances. This methodology was useful in exploring a concept such as risk, which is deeply embedded and influenced by an individual's life, history, personality, and culture (Douglas, 1985). What might be one person's risk is not necessarily another's.

A qualitative approach was adopted in the study which allowed for the documenting and interpretation of individuals' experiences and their perceptions of risk (Ezzy, 2000). Within this overall approach, grounded theory was used to enable key concepts to emerge organically from the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students ( $n = 23$ ) and staff ( $n = 6$ ) from the three UPP campuses in Tasmania at Hobart, Launceston and Burnie. Students participated in two interviews, one at the start of their first semester, and one at the end of that semester. Staff participated in one interview at times convenient to them. The student interviews provided a real-time exploration of their journey into higher education, while the interviews with staff provided a longer-term perspective of the UPP program and its participants. Staff interviews were used to expand on, and triangulate results.

The first student interviews took place within the initial 3–5 weeks of students starting their program and the second interviews at the completion of their first semester of study.

All but two participants were mature-aged students, that is, having a gap from the completion of high school (up to year 12) of two or more years; 14 students were first-in-family; 12 students came from LSES backgrounds; and 21 of the 23 participants failed to successfully finish year 12 (that is, the final year of high school). In fact, several left in year 10 (n=7), or year 11 (n=7). Twenty of the 23 participants did not qualify for direct entry into an undergraduate degree and thus needed to complete UPP before gaining admittance to the university.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using an inductive coding methodology to identify emerging themes. Themes were entered into NVivo data analysis software as nodes and continued to be adjusted and changed in response to ongoing analysis of the data. A process of axial coding was applied to identify ‘core phenomena’ (Creswell, 2012) which form the basis of the findings below.

## **Findings and discussion**

A key finding from the data analysis was that entering university via an enabling program entailed significant risk - financial risks, health risks, relationship risks and risks to one sense of identity and self. Students had a clear understanding of these, yet they preferred to downplay the impact and instead concentrated on the opportunity university education promised.

That students understood university was risky was evidenced by the fact that they proactively planned how to manage the risks they faced. In this planning, UPP emerged as an important and intentional ‘risk mitigation’ strategy.

The proactive management of risk showed these students to be thoughtful and strategic, a notion that sits in opposition to more common characterisations of enabling-program students as disadvantaged and lacking.

### ***Emerging notions of risk***

In the interviews held at the beginning of the semester, the students

in this study were able to articulate a range of issues which they felt had the potential to impact on their success and wellbeing as they embarked on university study. These included financial loss or strain; relationships, confidence, identity and health being compromised, changed or negatively impacted; and the prospect of not coping, failing or dropping out, reinforcing a lack of confidence and potential future alienation from education. These issues were a combination of limited social, cultural (Bourdieu, 1986) and academic capital (Roberts, 2011) as well as complex personal and life circumstances.

Many students had already spent considerable time thinking about how their lives might be impacted by attempting university studies and then making significant changes to their personal circumstances before starting. These changes included moving house, changing jobs or work patterns, moving in with parents, negotiating with partners and families, and adjusting their lifestyles and financial habits.

Despite making adjustments, nearly all the students in the study approached their first semester with a sense of self-doubt and fear, encapsulated in the words of Nicky (24) who claimed, ‘I was, excuse the language, I was shit scared. I thought oh, no, what am I doing? ... You idiot, you can’t do this.’

The risk in what they were doing was for most students compounded by the multiple issues and challenges they faced. Participant Lisa (42), for example, was in emergency housing at the start of the semester. She was from a LSES background and left school in year 10, subsequently completing only a Certificate 1 TAFE course<sup>2</sup>. In addition, Lisa was the first in her family to attend university and was a single parent with four children, one of whom had serious health issues and was often unable to attend school. She also managed a serious health condition herself. Despite being highly motivated to change her life circumstances both for herself and her children, Lisa was, not surprisingly, at the time of the first interview feeling extremely overwhelmed by the university environment. Lisa described herself as feeling unprepared and out of place and was fearful and uncertain about surviving the semester.

Several students articulated a sense of shock of what the reality of attending university really meant. Claire (50) explained:

*It was a really big shock to my system. I really didn't realize ... I*



*didn't have any idea as to how much time the University took up study-wise. I didn't realise any of this.*

The term 'juggling' was used repeatedly by participants, with its sense of pressure to keep everything in play, and the possibility of things being dropped or crashing. Hugh (29) mused that it could all 'end in disaster'.

However, despite the clear existence of risk and the fact that students clearly articulated a sense of uncertainty and the possibility for harm, an interesting paradox emerged when students were asked directly if they thought what they were doing was 'risky'. Faced with a direct question about risk, only four students described taking on study in UPP as a risk. Two students were concerned about the stress of study exacerbating existing health issues. One felt it might all just be too much, and another was concerned about the impact on their mental health. Five other students also acknowledged the risk in what they were doing, but more in general terms, that is, in terms of the bigger decision of going to university and completing a degree, rather than enrolling in UPP per se.

By far the greater response to the question of risk was one of denial or a weighing up of risk against opportunity. Debra (58), for example, rejected the notion of risk outright. 'No. I'm not taking a risk. I don't see it as a risk. I just see it as an opportunity, having a go at something. It's not a risk, definitely not a risk.'

Others acknowledged the risk, but discounted it, despite what might seem to an outsider to be quite detrimental outcomes. Hugh (29), in his response to the question of riskiness, for example, talked of the potential for quite serious harm, but then dismissed it:

*I wouldn't say it's a risk because even if I dismally fail at this, then I just have to brush off the dirt and pick something else, start again, or try again. Potentially I could be setting myself up for a bit of a downfall psychologically if I do really make a mess of things. Then I'll need to find another way to re-establish self-confidence and that sort of thing, but really ... no, I don't think it's anything major.*

Other students flipped the question and spoke instead about the risk of not doing UPP.

*Not probably for me, because having recently hit rock bottom,*

*I sort of I ... don't know ... the greater risk is doing nothing, because then I'm at risk of being at that low point indefinitely and ... I'm not really seeing it as a risk, I'm seeing it as one huge positive step forward. (Rachel, 26)*

Thus, while students clearly identified risks they generally preferred not to frame their experience in these terms. Instead, they looked for strategies which would help them negotiate and manage the risks they faced. UPP emerged as a significant strategy in this process.

### **UPP – a ‘risk negotiation’ space**

The way students thought about risk can be further understood by looking at the reasons for enrolling in UPP. As previously outlined, from the University’s perspective one of the primary functions of UPP is to help students, who do not currently qualify for admission into an undergraduate degree, to gain entry. Twenty of the twenty-three students in the study did not meet entry criteria, and a reasonable assumption would have this as a primary motivation for their enrolment. However, in reality, when asked only one of the participants gave this as their reason for enrolling in UPP. Rather, the participants indicated that they were using UPP to negotiate the many challenges and issues, both personal and academic, that they had thought about when deciding to enter the higher education system. This makes it clear that the students understood there was a risk (because they were actively trying to manage it), even though they were generally reluctant to name it as such.

Twelve of the students indicated that they were using UPP to prepare academically for degree-level study. Eva (39) indicated she was, in fact, ‘very scared about’ having to write an essay, and this, plus a desire to learn ‘what’s expected at university’, were the main reasons why she enrolled. There was also an understanding from students that they might need a broader skill-set than any they already possessed. Olivia (36) summarised this idea of needing a broad skillset to undertake university when she said that she had enrolled in UPP to ‘learn how to succeed’.

Beyond these overt roles of UPP, the participants described using the program to assess their own capacity, both intellectually and more generally, to manage university study and life and to negotiate their

futures. For first-in-family students such as Sandra (56), who left school in year 10, UPP allowed her to assess ‘if I can handle it, handle the assignments ... understand the assignments in the first place.’

Other students were assessing more than their academic ability or capacity; they wanted to test how they could manage specific challenges, particularly health issues. For Julie (48), UPP represented the opportunity to see if she could manage her mental illness sufficiently to undertake study. In particular, she wanted to be sure she would be able to transition to a degree without negatively impacting her two children:

*I'm coming to it though because ... I want to see how I go with my depression, how well I can cope, start learning about what's expected of me, and start getting myself in that mindset. If I think I'm comfortable at the end of the UPP, and I can cope without it inflicting on the two people that live with me ... then I'll give it a go.*

Single parents Lisa (42) and Olivia (36) both saw UPP as a supported space to assess their ability to manage their many responsibilities; as Lisa put it, ‘to see if it all fits.’

Another important element of the capacity-testing role of UPP was in helping students come to terms with issues of self-confidence and doubt. As explained by Rachel (26), doing UPP provided her with the chance to see how she measured up to other students, to ensure that, ‘I'm not insane, I'm not the only one, I'm not the oldest.’ She saw this as part of the process of getting some ‘control of the demons of self-doubt’ and also ‘learning that it is possible to belong and to fit in.’

In addition to being a place to prepare academically, and to test one’s ability on a range of fronts including health, responsibilities and self-doubt, UPP was also utilised by students in this study to explore options and possibilities, both for future university study and for their future in general. Several of the participants came into UPP uncertain, not only of what they might study at degree level but whether they would study at all. For these participants, UPP represented a place where they could explore university without making too great a commitment, either financially (by not accumulating HECS debts) or personally.

### ***Student capacity and enablers***

Despite being uncertain about their future, the students were able to articulate a range of personal resources which they brought with them and which they thought would help them succeed. In this way, UPP became a place where self-doubt and personal agency, concepts that are more commonly seen as contradictory (Duggins, 2011), co-existed; where students could use their identity capital (Côté, 2005) to exert agency in the face of the structural impediments created through a lack of cultural, social and academic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Roberts, 2011). They were unsure if or how they would manage higher education, but in the 'try-it-out' space provided by UPP, they felt they could use their own resources to make an attempt.

Of the 23 participants in this study, 20 identified their own determination, persistence and/or desire to succeed as a resource they would rely on to succeed. Jo (19), for example, explained how she had been helped in the past by her persistence: 'I've never missed a day of work. I've never called in sick. I do tend to not slack. If I know I'm supposed to be somewhere I'll be there'. Bradley (48) described himself as 'determined', someone who could carry on despite setbacks, 'I just get up and I fall down. I get up and I fall down.'

Life experiences were also identified as a key resource for succeeding in UPP. For those who had been in the workforce before, the structure and work habits of that environment were resources they felt would be useful as they transition to higher education. Jack (29), for example, described himself as a successful businessperson and a hard worker: 'I know I'm not lazy. I've some decent life experiences ... it's [confidence from previous life experiences] a bit of self-empowerment'. The experience of raising a family, or travelling, were also seen as providing organisational and coping mechanisms. As Olivia describes, 'At home with the kids, everything's just ... it's military, literally military camp at the moment'. For others, managing and coping with negative childhood experiences had required the capacity to adapt to difficult situations. Noah (36) felt that dealing with domestic violence and the divorce of his parents had given him the 'ability to adapt very well' to change and new things.

By relying on these personal attributes, students, who lacked cultural or social capital, instead used their identity capital and the space provided by UPP to proactively manage the experience. They did this by thinking ahead about the issues that might impact them as they embarked on

their studies, and then making significant changes to their personal circumstances before starting UPP. Secondly, they purposefully used UPP to 'try out' university to see how university study could be accommodated into their lives; to see if and how they would cope and fit in intellectually, socially and emotionally and whether or not university study would afford them ultimate benefit.

As predicted by Beck (1992) they were both taking advantage of new opportunities opening up to them, and putting the responsibility for managing the associated risks largely on themselves.

## **Conclusion**

As a relatively small, qualitative study on the experiences of one group of students, this study has a number of limitations. These include that it only looked at on-campus students, it adopted an 'opt-in' recruitment strategy meaning there was no proactive attention to diversity in the student cohort interviewed, and that the diverse nature of enabling programs in Australia always makes conclusions difficult to apply outside of the particular context of the study. However, despite these issues there are some key insights to take away from the study.

While a number of researchers have looked at the issues and challenges students transitioning to university from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds face, only relatively recently have they begun to examine what resources and actions students themselves bring to managing these situations (O'Shea, 2016; McKay & Devlin, 2016). This study adds to this literature by demonstrating that the students were both aware they were entering a space of risk and that they took purposeful and proactive action to address these risks.

Highlighting the proactive ways students negotiated risk and the resources they brought with them to do so is a powerful way of negating some of the unintended consequences of conceptualising students as disadvantaged or at risk. As Lupton (1999, p. 115) notes, associating people with levels of risk '...serves to reinforce the marginalised or the powerless status of individuals'. In the context of higher education, students such as those in this study could be seen as resource intensive; needing extra services and support; as not being quite equal amongst their peers; and having little to contribute to the environment generally (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope, 1998; Lawrence, 2002; Smit, 2012;

O'Shea, 2016). However, the students in this study displayed significant determination, forward thinking, proactiveness and resilience in planning their first semester of study. They also showed significant bravery in entering a world for which they knew they were not well prepared, and which they really had very little information or evidence to guide how they might survive or succeed. What they lacked in cultural and social capital, they made up in identity capital. Their intention to use personal qualities such as persistence and determination as principal weapons in their fight to overcome such hurdles speaks to an underlying acceptance that the path ahead was difficult. The students did not expect to progress without struggle. Rather than just being seen as marginalised and disadvantaged, enabling-program students can be seen as having significant strengths and qualities to bring to their ongoing university studies, and that these should be acknowledged, celebrated and harnessed by universities.

The fact that poorly prepared students, students with a disrupted educational past who do not as yet have an accurate understanding of what university entails, or whether or not they will be able to manage in this environment, are using UPP as a 'try before you buy' space also has significant implications for attrition. In the 'try it out' process, some students will come to understand that university is not the right place for them or not the right place for them at that point in time. In fact, Hodges et al. (2013, p. 5) argue that some 'attrition from an enabling program is actually desirable, as the enabling program is playing the role of a "filter" prior to an undergraduate program'. This type of attrition does not necessarily come with negative outcomes and for some can in fact represent a new and positive experience (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000; Hodges et al., 2013; Merrill, 2015).

Even for students who decide university is the right place for them, the reality of university life, and of managing the many complexities of both background and personal circumstances may prove too difficult and they may either withdraw or simply stop attending (Hodges et al., 2013). Hodges et al. (2013) and Willans and Seary (2018) indicate that complex issues, particularly personal ones (for example, finances, housing, relationships, work, health, juggling responsibilities and confidence and other major 'life events') are important factors in student attrition in enabling programs. With a concentration of students impacted by these factors in the enabling program space, it is not surprising that enabling-

program attrition rates are higher than undergraduate rates (Hodges et al., 2013).

While attrition is always an issue of concern this study provides a case for both better understanding these figures and for accepting a higher attrition rate as a natural by-product of the enabling-program process. Different, more realistic standards, not degree-level standards, should be applied to this sector. Exactly what these standards should be still need further research, but clearly a broader understanding of the impact of attrition, both positive and negative, is required. It is important that outcomes for enabling-program students be measured in more than just retention and attrition statistics, and that a more comprehensive view be taken to acknowledge the significant social, personal and educational outcomes of such programs.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Australia's vocational training framework, as described in the Australian Qualification Framework, starts at Certificate 1 level. A Certificate 1 provides entry level skills and knowledge for work or community participation, and for ongoing training and education (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> There is both a specific and more general understanding of the term 'enabling' program in the Australian higher education environment. The specific understanding relates to eligibility for funding under the Commonwealth Government Grant Scheme (CGS) 'enabling load' banner. In this case courses must be a bridging program offered prior to or concurrently with award study; available to domestic students only; attract no HECS fees; allow students to qualify for university entry; cannot be credited to award study; and supports participation by disadvantaged groups (Clark et al., 2000). A range of other enabling-like courses are offered which may not qualify for federally subsidised funding but are still referred to as 'enabling programs'. Some of these charge fees.

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## About the author

**Lynn** has worked extensively in the field of adult learning at all levels from EAL/adult literacy to higher education both in Australia and overseas. In recent years she worked as the Manager of Pre-degree Programs at the University of Tasmania, supporting students from a variety of backgrounds to enter higher education via enabling programs and other alternative pathways. She now heads up Tasmania's only dedicated LGBTIQ+ service provider (Working It Out) and continues to apply her love of adult learning to building capacity within her own organisation and others.

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