

Guest Editorial

Enabling Excellence Through Equity

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2020 Special Issue: Enabling Excellence through Equity

The *Enabling Excellence through Equity Conference 2019* was held at the University of Wollongong, Australia from 24th to 27th November 2019. This was a combined biennial conference for the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) and the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education in Australasia (EPHEA). The Conference attracted higher education educators, practitioners and researchers from around the world involved in enabling education, widening participation and pathways to higher education, and equity initiatives that promote access to higher education.

All these programs are focused on providing opportunities for students from disadvantaged and marginalised groups to participate more effectively in higher education. It is widely recognised that higher education studies contribute to better living standards, and for people from equity groups, an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Unfortunately, not everyone in our society is able to gain direct access to higher education due to a number of factors including financial disadvantage, lack of aspirations, geographic location, as well as social, community and family obligations. Initiatives by the NAEEA and EPHEA increase awareness about the need for more equitable access to education and supportive educational environments. Recognising the challenges faced by high education practitioners in this space, both the NAEEA and EPHEA conferences bring practitioners together to share their challenges, opportunities and successes, as well as to develop productive relationships to promote long-term collaborations and research initiatives around enabling and equity education.

The theme of the 2019 conference was 'Enabling Excellence Through Equity' and it was deliberately chosen to showcase how the various initiatives can help towards excellent outcomes for students and the communities.

The conference invited practitioners to submit their research as papers for potential publication in this special issue. This special issue contains a selection of the papers as selected by the guest editors and journal editors. This issue also contains a feature article by **Professor Liz Thomas** from Edge Hill University, United Kingdom (UK). Professor Thomas outlined her work and research with commuter students. Although this work is located in the UK, the findings will be informative in many other countries. This invited feature also highlights the importance of taking a whole of institution approach to improving access and participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The article provides a great insight into work being done in increasing access to higher education from disadvantaged and marginalised communities in the UK and enables a good comparison to the work done in Australia.

Many students in enabling programs tend to struggle with their higher education studies, often due to unfamiliarity about the expectations and other outside class obligations. The authors of the first article, **Karen Seary and Julie Willans**, argue that



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the role of an enabling education teacher goes beyond the traditional role of a higher education teacher. Their article reports on the results of their research where they studied a group of students in their enabling classes using Motta and Bennett's (2018) pedagogies of care to suggest that the supportive learning environment created by these 'pastoral care' teachers leads to better outcomes for students. They further conclude that students in enabling programs require much more pastoral care type support than in other higher education settings.

Anne Braund, Trixie James, Katrina Johnston and Louise Mullaney identify the importance of addressing the unique learning needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Although many previous studies have rightfully identified and discussed at length who these non-traditional students are, little attention has been paid to looking at the learning needs and support for young mothers when they choose to enter higher education via an enabling education pathway program. Using Duckworth's (2007) grit framework, the authors were able to identify the common grit characteristics that were most useful in supporting these young mothers' engagement with their studies.

The next article by **Nadine Zacharias and Geoffrey Mitchell** looks at the Australian government's Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) policy implications on improving aspirations of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds to apply to attend university. Policy initiatives are important to increase the participation rates for students from non-traditional backgrounds. It is through these initiatives that many of these students are able to enter university in the first place. This study used large data sets from their mixed method research to conclude that HEPPP initiatives are making a positive impact for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

In the next article, authors **Vikki Walters and Trixie James**, highlight the importance of a range of different strategies to ensure successful outcomes for enabling and equity students. They argue for the significance of positive psychology for students in enabling programs. All too often students fail to continue with their studies due to self-doubt and fear of failure. Positive psychology provides students with appropriate psychological skills to deal with negative thoughts. This article discusses that by embedding the development of these skills through a dedicated unit of study, students in their courses tend to stay the course and achieve better outcomes.

Many students in higher education also find a number of the STEM subjects challenging. Thus, it is not surprising that the next article by **Gemma Mann and Julie Willans** also suggests that students from non-traditional backgrounds in enabling programs are just as likely, and perhaps even more likely, to struggle with mathematics. The article argues that one of the aims of mathematics teachers, especially in enabling programs, is to help students develop self-directed learning skills. Using data from one of their classes, they conclude that students can develop their self-directed learning skills when their learning activities are structured to cater for their learning styles, state of mind, their ability to plan and the adaptation to engage with mathematics.

Another enabling Tertiary Preparation Pathway (TPP) study program called the Supporting Teenagers with Education, Mothering and Mentoring (STEMM) was studied in the next article by authors **Lilliemay Cheung, Emma Kill and Janet Turley**, at an Australian regional university to evaluate how the course supports teen mothers who become pregnant while in high school, before entry to university. The STEMM course allows teen mothers to continue or re-engage with education during and beyond pregnancy. The research highlights the importance of recognising the educational aspirations of teen mothers, developing their agency and independence, and promoting a strong sense of self. Although the study and conclusions are aimed at teen mothers, the findings are just as relevant for other enabling programs.

We conclude this special issue with an article by **Heath Jones** about using data to evaluate and better understand student participation and engagement in a course. This article is timely given the various discussions around retention and attrition, and the related policy implications of these. Often policy and funding initiatives are based on the final retention and progression numbers of students from enabling programs. The findings and discussion in this article will provide useful input into various learning analytics initiatives in enabling programs but also in higher education more widely.

Conclusion

The guest editors of this special issue would like to thank the conference organisers, the reviewers and all authors who submitted their articles for consideration for this special issue. They would also like to congratulate the authors whose papers have been

selected for this special issue. We hope the articles presented in this special issue are informative and highlight not only the amazing work that is going on in enabling and equity education, but also in higher education more broadly.

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