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Males in Enabling: Painting a portrait through narrative

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Abstract*

The number of males entering higher education via an enabling pathway is slowly increasing; yet, males still battle with the anti-intellectual attitude that is prevalent in regional areas of Australia. Previous research undertaken by the authors began exploring the factors that inhibited or enhanced the male experience within an enabling course. This paper expands upon this research with a deeper focus on the male experience through personalised accounts derived from individual interviews. Using qualitative methodology and narrative inquiry, the findings provide a deeper understanding of the issues that males of different ages face when creating a new identity as a university student. This paper shares insights into what motivated the male students to enter university via an enabling pathway; the actual personal experiences both positive and negative during this time; and the effect that this commitment to study had on them personally and the people around them. The lens of transformative theory underpins this research through exploring frames of reference that align with the students' experiences. Portraiture prose shares the individual stories which are analysed and the key findings extrapolated.

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Introduction

"I feel that STEPS is like a tunnel and there is light at the end of the tunnel, but I'm not sure if that's a train or the outside."

Enabling programs provide a clear structure focusing on the development of academic skills together with foundation knowledge to assist students with an efficient transition into undergraduate courses. *Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies* (STEPS) is an enabling course that commenced in 1986, is offered across multiple campuses at Central Queensland University (CQUniversity) Australia and is designed as a pathway to prepare prospective students for undergraduate studies. This paper investigates the lived experiences of male students enrolled in this course. Through the sharing of a narrative around their personal experience, these stories allow the researchers to understand the often complex situations that mature-age male students have to juggle whilst entering this unfamiliar environment. The significant factor underpinning this research is that, according to the STEPS Information Database (SID, 2017), fewer males than females enter university via this pathway. In spite of the fact that males are still often considered the main household income earner in Australia, there is a changing landscape with regard to males' attitudes towards study (McGivney, 1999; Raven, 2012). This study was therefore designed to offer insights into what their intentions and motivations were for entering university via an enabling pathway; the actual personal experiences, both positive and negative during this time; and the effect that the commitment to study has had on them personally and the people around them. Furthermore, as these students transition into the enabling course they, in turn, are shaping a new identity for themselves. This change can empower some and yet derail others. In regional areas within Australia, there is a deeply ingrained 'working class' identity that is

embraced by many males; this identity, coupled with the value placed on the male figure to be the breadwinner and provide for his family, means males from low socioeconomic areas are less likely to gain a university degree (Connell, 2005). Raven (2012) found that despite evidence indicating that widening participation is making progress with addressing the male attendance gap, males' access to higher education is still quite low. In addition, widespread assumptions and stereotypes about who belongs, and who is capable of achieving a higher education, can often foster fears of inadequacy and not belonging for many students (Bennett, 2015). However, with a number of programs targeting high school students, and society's perspectives changing, more males are looking at a university degree to get them into a profession that will give them security in life.

Literature Review

Enabling education has a respected and established position within Australian universities: the primary objective of these courses is to provide alternative pathways and open access to students who are frequently from minority and under-represented groups (Baker & Irwin, 2016). The Australian Government uses the term enabling courses; however, they are also known as bridging, university preparation, foundation and pathway courses (Hodges et al., 2013). Enabling programs based in universities, like the STEPS program discussed in this study, are funded by the Australian Government and, at their core, endeavour to widen access to higher education for students from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Subscribing to the goal of social justice, enabling programs serve to reinforce the belief that Australian universities are not simply for the benefit of the affluent. In addition, they provide individuals, who have a goal to study at the university level, with the opportunity to not only establish if they are capable of studying

and succeeding in the tertiary arena, but whether it is the path they want to follow (Hodges et al., 2013).

For many people, enabling courses provide a 'second chance' opportunity with potential life changing consequences (Klinger & Wache, 2009). Hancock (2012, p. 193) highlights five reasons for this return to education: to become a role model; to placate a parent; as an aid to finding employment; renegotiating learner identities; and fulfilling dreams. That said, there is an expectation that when students enter undergraduate study, they will be ready to engage with a vast body of knowledge and use higher-order skills such as analysing, synthesising and evaluating information (James, 2013). With this in mind, the STEPS course aims to equip students with these higher-order academic skills, as well as the confidence and lifelong learning aspirations that will prepare them for the rigour of university life. It should be noted that these skills and aspirations are fostered through a holistic curriculum and a supportive learning environment. The underlying philosophy of STEPS is that of transformational learning (Doyle, 2006). The transformative paradigm is characterised by its central focus on the lives and experiences of marginalised groups (Mezirow, 1997). The vital element in a transformational learning experience allows students to feel liberated from restrictive influences that, in turn, afford them the freedom to learn. Moreover, the students begin to appreciate their own backgrounds and their prior knowledge, allowing themselves to open up to a new world of critical thinking, thus transforming their worldview (James, 2016; McConachie, Seary & Simpson, 2008).

In a recent Australian study that investigated factors that encouraged people to participate in education and training at more mature ages, it was found that the decision to undertake further education differed considerably from those affecting younger students (Coelli, Tabasso, & Zakirova, 2012). However, for many

males, the decision to enrol in higher education was generally related to a weak labour market (Coelli, Tabasso, & Zakirova, 2012; James, Conradie & Armstrong, 2014). This is further supported by Hancock (2012) who describes returning to study by males as revisiting future career opportunities. Moreover, for many who are returning to study after a long break, they enter these courses with lower academic ability and high levels of uncertainty (James, Conradie & Armstrong, 2014). As such, this transition can be challenging. Klinger and Tranter (2009) found that students who entered university through an enabling pathway often presented with family and employment responsibilities, low academic confidence levels, socio-cultural displacement and even lower English language proficiency. Burke's (2007) research into male participation in higher education investigated the impact on human capital and the positive impact that higher educated males have on the economic stability of Australia. Burke defined 'successful students' as being determined enough to overcome obstacles 'through their own motivation, hard work and discipline,' which, in turn, develops the student's personal sense of efficacy and self-worth in handling the rigours of study (p. 418). Corkett, Hatt and Benevides (2011) suggests that enabling educators are in a key position to employ motivational strategies to instil the belief within their students that they have the capacity and capability to succeed in their pursuit of a higher education.

In previous research, James, Conradie and Armstrong (2014) found the three biggest obstacles facing mature-age male students were work commitments, family responsibilities and time management with financial obligations being identified in later research (Armstrong, James, Conradie & Parker, 2016). Furthermore, for the male participants in these research projects, entering STEPS entailed substantial human and financial investment and, for many of them, this decision was not taken lightly. Another

factor was that many of these students were the first in their family to attend university. These students demonstrated resilience and determination to succeed in this journey, and without this changed mindset, might still be located on the perimeter of higher education (Armstrong et al., 2016). These men, although positioned across different and competing formations of identity, aspire towards an idealised future and they each acknowledge that it is only through their hard work and determination that they will achieve the end goal.

Research addressing non-traditional male students entering university via a non-traditional pathway such as enabling courses, however, is limited. Existing enabling programs' research reflects that for both genders "students who complete their enabling education and transition to undergraduate-level studies, often against considerable odds, are manifestly resilient and typically display considerable independence, skill and savvy in their determination to succeed" (Klinger & Wache, 2009, p. 5). Within the first term of STEPS, many students are carving a new identity and learning to adopt a new student mentality. Armstrong, et al. (2016) found that the males within their research all aspired towards an idealised identity, even when it was at odds with their lived realities. Research has highlighted that in rural communities, sociocultural expectations tend to encourage employment over tertiary studies, where males gravitate towards apprenticeships and females favour post-school employment and marriage (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Cullity, 2006). In regard to the former, Connolly (2004) discovered that the rigidity and formality of academia do not align with working class boys' habitus which, in part, can be explained by the mind-body dichotomy where working class boys tend to favour physical rather than mental pursuits. Further to this, Connolly found that embedded within the identities of British working class males was the belief that they embodied authentic manhood, whereas

middle and upper-class masculinity is deemed to be feminised, weaker, and less physically capable. In Australia, as Scalmer (1999) asserted, the working-class identity, or the "little Aussie battler" as it is affectionately known, is rich in meaning as it depicts an image of "ordinary", blue-collar individuals, who persevere and work tenaciously, oftentimes with little reward (p.9).

For many males in Australia, particularly those from regional areas, intellectual pursuits are considered pretentious or feminine and with prevalent anti-elitist views aimed at academia, transitioning from one's working-class identity to an academic identity can be seen as a rejection of one's core values (Skeggs, 2004). Moreover, Connell's (2005, p. 1811) research into social and economic pressures for males highlighted that where unemployment is high, the lack of paid work can place additional pressure on men who had grown up with the expectation of being breadwinners. This psychological barrier precludes a high proportion of males from pursuing a higher education. Kahn, Brett and Holmesch (2011) found that students from underrepresented areas in society, who were able to follow this trajectory, were often overrepresented in problem areas such as underperformance with academic studies and a higher chance of being disillusioned. In addition, Raven (2012) stated that males from low socioeconomic backgrounds often experienced low expectations from family to see it through to completion. As McGivney (1999, as cited in Golding, 2005, p. 265) stated, there is still credence in the old saying that while men tend to earn, women tend to learn, and this has formed a belief that for some men, learning is seen as an unacceptable form of vulnerability. To illustrate, from 2012 to 2017, there has been a gradual increase of males entering the STEPS enabling course at CQUniversity, yet males still only comprise an average of 38 per cent of total enrolments (SID, 2017) (see Figure 1).

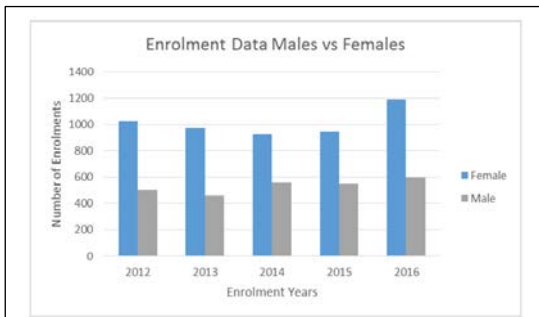


Figure 1: STEPS enrolments 2012-2016

Methodology

The primary concern of this paper is to explore why fewer males than females gain admission to CQUniversity via the STEPS enabling pathway (SID, 2017). This study was designed to offer insights into what male students' intentions and motivations were for entering university via the enabling course: their personal experiences, both positive and negative during this time; and, the effect that the commitment to study has had on them personally and the people around them. In order to capture the personal experiences of these male students, the methodology of narrative inquiry was used. Narrative Inquiry is a form of qualitative research that involves the gathering of stories that focus on the meanings that people ascribe to their lived experiences. It seeks to provide "insight that (befits) the complexity of human lives" (Josselson, 2006, p. 4). This research approach is based on the premise that humans search for understanding and meaning through telling their story about a lived experience (Creswell, 2008). It is particularly useful when studying a phenomenon that relates to the person concerning their identity, intimate relationships and family. However, Narrative Inquiry is more than the uncritical gathering of stories from the student's perspective. It strives to view the way their stories are constructed with reference to cultural

discourses that impact on their journey. Narrative Inquiry is characterised by the personal reflections of the students through the theoretical lens of transformation. Mezirow (1996) and Cranton (1996) describe transformative learning as the process of affecting change through ascribing frames of reference. Frames of reference form the structures through which people understand their experiences and these are formed from previous associations, concepts, values, feelings and conditioned responses from past experience (Mezirow, 1997). Furthermore, Mezirow (1997) sees frames of reference as responsible factors in shaping and delimiting expectations, perceptions, cognition and feelings. The frames of reference, drawn from previous research undertaken by the authors, guided the interviews and the analysis of the narrative (Armstrong, et al., 2016). These included: reasons for returning to study, motivation, confidence, support structures, identity, disruptions and obstacles.

Data was collected through the process of guided interviews. The participants involved were current STEPS students who had completed a full term and were nearing the end of their remaining units of study. This timing was instrumental as the researchers wanted to capture the lived experiences whilst fresh in the participants' minds. Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately one hour. The interviews were semi structured in order to allow the participants to share openly their experiences and the interviewers would prompt in order to guide a continual flow of conversation. Eisner (1998) describes interviews as a "powerful resource for learning how people perceive the situation in which they work" and this was the goal of the interviews to allow the participants to share their personal lived experiences (p.81). The interviews were undertaken within the university environment in a space that was suitable for both the participant and interviewer. The interviews were recorded on a handset and each one transcribed verbatim.

Participants were provided an assurance of anonymity through an informed consent of confidentiality. Through their interactions with the students, the researchers also endeavoured to establish a relationship with the participants that was based on mutual respect and trust, making it easier to emphasise the importance of their story to society as a whole. Students were then encouraged to share the story of their personal journey through the STEPS course. The researchers conducting the semi-structured interviews were guided by prompts that encouraged the interviewees to share their individual narratives around the frames of reference. The expectation was that different stories would emerge, add depth, and enhance understanding around each of these frames of reference. The goal was to create a holistic view of the way in which their experiences shaped their self-efficacy, expectations, perceptions, barriers, and personal and societal identity. The transcripts were analysed by coding relevant elements of the stories to the identified frames of reference. The words, nuances and phrases used by the participants were viewed parallel to their shared stories. Two of the researchers partnered to complete this part of the analysis so they could fully immerse themselves in the stories of the participants. The full research team met to discuss the findings in order to confirm and validate the interpretation of the analysis. The limitations of Narrative Analysis are the subjective nature of interpretation as each researcher has personal biases that may dictate the flow of coding. In addition, it is also known as linguistically subjective as each researcher assigns personal meaning to their personal interpretation. For the purpose of this research, the researchers have tried to present a 'faithful' account of the stories shared by the participants (Josselson, 2006).

Using portraiture prose to present the data assists with gaining a deeper understanding of how the males described their experiences as they studied in the enabling course. Portraiture "seeks to record and interpret the perspectives

and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 188). Portraits were created for each of the participants and tapestries of words were woven to share their lived experiences, particularly as they pertained to their perceptions, identity, and the social construction of the reality, beliefs and views of this new world that they have engaged in. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis describe how portraiture emphasises the "flexibility of research design and iterative process of data collection and thematic development" in order to expose a fresh perspective on the personal experiences shared by the participants (p.188). Each participant's portrait is a snapshot of their experience.

Participants

There were six male participants who responded to an open invitation to be a part of this research project. The males ranged in age from 17 to 53 years and all presented with vastly different backgrounds, cultures and personal identities. Each student was enrolled in the STEPS Enabling Course. The researchers regard the six participants who engaged in the interviews as knowledge bearers, valued resources and the best authorities on their own experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The interviews were transcribed and each participant was allocated a pseudonym in order to preserve their anonymity.

Findings

Aiden, 25, entered STEPS following poor performance in high school. He realised that he *didn't want a dead end job all his life* and the only way to ensure that did not happen *was to get that piece of paper* and complete a degree. He realised that STEPS would prepare him better for undergraduate study and wanted to see if he could handle the rigours of university by entering via STEPS without the worry of failing university and accumulating a debt. He

acknowledged that motivation was a problem, especially due to procrastination and felt that *some of the subjects are kind of dull* but that he would endure because of his end goal. Aiden's confidence in his ability was quite low as he lost confidence at high school because he never handed in assessments which affected his grades severely. He shared that he was not interested in studying at high school and *it's hard to make people learn when they don't want to be there*. He has, however, enjoyed learning at STEPS and has found that he has more confidence in the foundational academic skills he will need in university. Unfortunately, there are still seeds of doubt that keep plaguing him. Aiden found there were plenty of support structures that assisted him in his journey. Although he utilised lecturers, he was conscious that they were busy so he did not take up too much of their time. He found that other male students were willing to help and support him, mentioning that he could grasp certain concepts after they had been explained in layman's terms. He acknowledged that support was integral to his success: *I think I need it because eventually I will stumble and if I'm left with my own devices I probably just keep focussing on where I tripped up*. For Aiden, external support was mainly from his family and, although they understood and appreciated what he was attempting to achieve, he did not find their support very helpful. He shared that when he stayed home and studied, they accused him of being lazy and berated him for not doing household tasks. Aiden has definitely experienced a shift in his personal identity as a student. He felt that he was achieving something of value and enjoyed the experience, but he still had seeds of doubt and felt he was a fraud in the university environment.

Max recently retired from the armed forces at the age of 40. He felt he had achieved everything he could in that role and it was time for him to look into a different career. He had not studied for over a decade and knew that he wanted to be well prepared as he embarked on an undergraduate journey. Financially, he was

in a good position and was able to self-fund as he started the enabling course. He entered STEPS confident that he could undertake study but knew that he needed to prepare himself for the rigours of what was to come. He had strong support from his partner and family and they understood the commitment he was about to make and supported him when he needed time to study. The transition into the STEPS course was made with no issues as he believed it was all about the mindset that you have when you enter. Max shared that *technically, you haven't started your degree yet, you're an apprentice student and when you complete STEPS you're a tradesman you've got all the tools to go and do your undergrad*. He believed that his identity was now being reshaped as he transitioned from a defence force position to one that involved getting a degree. He found the transition into civilian life frustrating. He also found himself getting annoyed at slovenly behaviour and students who arrived late for class. Max found that he learnt a lot from the units' content. In one class he said *I've learnt more about myself in that in 3 months than my entire life*.

Daniel, an 18-year-old male, recently completed Year 12. Although a bright and intelligent young man, the loss of his family home due to a natural disaster and the separation of his parents in his final year of high school left him feeling confused and uncertain. He acknowledged that he did not do well in his last year of high school due to attendance issues which, combined with leaving assessments until the last minute, set himself up for failure. His confidence in his intelligence wavered as it did in his self-esteem. However, he always wanted to gain a degree and STEPS gave him a second chance to go to university: *I choose to be here. It's my decision to be here and to learn and honestly, as long as I don't fail, I'm happy just to have learnt what I could*. Daniel wanted stability in life. His father was always telling him that he needed to get that piece of paper [degree] in order to get anywhere in life and Daniel agreed that he

wanted a stable job that brought him enjoyment. However, as a student, he identified as a procrastinator and this was a problematic area that needed improvement. Daniel shared that he came in a *little bit over confident because at high school the problem wasn't the education, it was more the people. But here it is the opposite problem; everyone here is great but I'm struggling a bit with the academic side of it.* Daniel enjoyed the atmosphere and sense of community within the STEPS course as he connected with other students who were at similar levels. He did, however, recognise the difference between students supporting each other and the higher level support given by academic staff. He likened it to getting unqualified mates to do work on a house as opposed to hiring professional tradesmen. The final product would be better if the correct techniques were used. Daniel was finally excited about this journey and related it to when he was younger and enjoyed school. *It's a good feeling. It's not that I'm smart now, it's just that I can see I'm going to develop.* Daniel shared that although the initial value in STEPS was the guaranteed entry into university on successful completion of the course, he now believed *the real value is being given the ability to learn how to succeed in university.* His initial motivation was getting *into university*, but now he realised that STEPS will help him to *get through university.*

John, 52, a qualified tradesman, had reached a point where he was looking for a career change. His current work was very physical and employment opportunities around town were diminishing. With a grown family and a supportive wife, this career change was possible. Early on, John found motivation a problem when it came to study and felt that he was not as highly motivated as he should have been. *I can do it in other areas but transferring it into education, it's unnatural to me at the moment.* In his early days with the course, John did not have a lot of confidence in his ability to study because it had been many years since he had studied or completed *any real book work.*

Because he had grown up with very little exposure to computers, and his work was more manual based, he was very apprehensive. Fortunately, he had the attitude of giving *everything a go, so from that point of view I was willing to give it a go without it being life or death to me.* He valued the support that lecturers provided but, because of his age and perceived ability, he hired a tutor for additional support. His family were all very supportive from a social, emotional and financial perspective; however, they could not help him academically. Initially, John did not notice any changes in his identity but, over time, it became evident to him that he was viewing the world through a critical lens; he was becoming a critical thinker. His family could see positive changes in his ability and the self-confidence that was manifesting within him. *I think differently now and I've got more computer skills and I don't have to ask for as much help.* One obstacle that John had to overcome was time management; trying to balance study when work was a priority. However, during a period where his work commitments subsided, he was able to allocate more time towards study and he found it was *easier to do and I had a lot more time. My mind was clearer and it was just easy compared to when I had to work and I'm rushing from study to work and then from work back to study.* He compared his STEPS journey to playing golf, which helped him gain a better appreciation for the level of determination that was required. *I'm a golfer and you have to practice and if you apply those strategies to STEPS and your study you will get the same results.*

Alan, aged 52, lived by himself and was not in a relationship. He worked in the real estate industry, supported the disadvantaged in a voluntary capacity, and expressed his desire to investigate a religious pathway. As a result of a downturn in the real estate market, Alan wanted to upgrade his literacy skills with the aim of redefining a new path towards a degree. Alan felt that *if you have a clear goal and a clear path and you have that single focus goal, change*

is possible. He shared that he was highly motivated if he had a passion for the task at hand; however, he did mention he lost a lot of confidence at the start of STEPS as he felt overwhelmed. Internal support was very important and useful to him, and he valued lecturer support, Moodle and the forums. Unfortunately, external support was limited. Because he lived alone and his family did not live close, *they are not really involved in that and they do not necessarily get it, but they respect what I am doing.* There had been disruptions to his study; however, they were related to external factors. Ultimately, he attributed his success and improvement to *keeping an eye on the prize, chunking it down to bite size pieces and celebrating every assignment.*

Robert, a 21-year-old male, failed an attempt at university the previous year. He decided to enrol in STEPS in order to rebuild his foundational knowledge and relearn the tools to help him succeed at university. Personal motivation was something he claimed he had to *re-commit to everyday because there are days that you just wake up and don't want to do anything.* He declared that STEPS had been a great opportunity to refine and enhance his study skills, identify areas of weakness, and strengthen the areas he excelled in, all of which would maximise his chances of success in the future. His belief in self had grown and through this, he had *started to accept myself and I've started to like myself.* His self-belief prior to STEPS was extremely low and he was also suffering depression. In fact, he disclosed that he used to mentally berate himself on a daily basis. His family had also commented that he was much more positive since returning to study. *They just said that I am so much more positive now and I'm coming into my element in regards to realising that I can actually help people.* He felt that the internal support that was offered by both lecturers and administration staff had further increased his confidence. Through high school, he found that his parents did not value education *as they both*

left school very early and didn't understand the complexities of study and they didn't get how personally hard it was to do. However, his mother completed STEPS as a mature-age student and, from this point, Robert had an advocate who understood what he was going through. *I would tell her that I was struggling and she knew exactly what I was talking about. This brought us closer and she could see what is happening and because she's been there I take the advice because I need it.* STEPS had helped him to redefine his expectations and aspirations and figure out what he really wanted to do. To illustrate, he acknowledged that *it has helped me align my priorities and build a foundation of my study tools for one, and allowed me to prove to myself that I can actually study at University.* He believed that what he had experienced in STEPS had been very positive and he believed that as he entered into his undergraduate degree, he would have the skills to succeed.

Discussion

Reasons for study

For many males who are from low socioeconomic areas, the opportunity to gain a higher education degree is a “luxury that many can't afford” and this is evident in the findings of this study (Raven, 2012, p. 60). With the exception of one of the participants, all these male students were working whilst studying or receiving a social security payment. The younger participants claimed that poor performance in high school led them to having to enter university via an enabling pathway. Although one did enter university straight from school, he failed a number of units in that degree and realised he did not have the skills nor the mindset required to be successful. For the younger participants, they all indicated that they wanted a degree to elevate themselves from the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder; furthermore, it would maximise their chances of attaining a professional career,

which would provide them with a comfortable life. Weaver-Hightower (2010) found that higher education “provides the credentials by which individuals differentiate themselves in the workforce”, and this is clearly the goal for the younger participants in this study (p.31). They aspire to be a person that they can be proud of. Klinger and Murray (2009) found that an education “represents a means of social mobility – a vehicle through which to improve and assert one’s place in society” (p.8). On the other hand, the older participants were all looking at a change in career path and held no illusions that they were yet academically ready to enter into undergraduate study. For these older males, they realised that they had a gap in their skills and knowledge and enabling was filling that need (Armstrong, et al., 2016). Connell (2005) claims that males are truly disadvantaged and “need supported programs in education”; however, this research suggests that the males in this study were entering via an enabling course because they actually “wanted” the guidance that an enabling program offers (p.1805).

Intrinsic Motivation

This study found that the younger males all entered with lowered self-confidence in their ability to successfully complete STEPS. They had all experienced failure at various levels, either at high school or in university. They all doubted their ability to succeed. Bean (1983) found that beliefs and attitudes, which were affected by student experiences with schools, shape behaviour related to persistence. All of these students had to initially overcome the fear of failure, due in part to their most recent experience of education. The older participants, however, all shared that they entered with confidence knowing that they would engage with the course to the best of their abilities, and their results would be the best way to calibrate whether or not they had the capacity to study at this level. Each had already carved a career in life and had successes in their past; however, they all

recognised that their confidence did not hinge on their skill level in academia. That said, they did acknowledge that taking a risk of this kind and being open to this new challenge was quite foreign to them. For the one participant who was transitioning from manual labour into academia, he had concerns about his cognitive abilities and whether they would be sufficient to cope with the rigours of study. Armstrong, et al. (2016) found that in order for the males to develop a stronger sense of confidence and efficacy in their new identity as university students, they needed to allow themselves the opportunity to carve a new identity and endure the process that can often be emotionally painful.

For all the younger participants, motivation was where they struggled the most. They all cited procrastination as their major roadblock as well as the motivation to get out of bed. Each shared that they experienced varied levels of depression that seemed to impact on their motivation in general. For the older participants, they all shared that they were highly motivated. The only variance was in relation to transferring their ability to be motivated in an academic context. One stated that the transition to education was unnatural due to the type of manual labour he was accustomed to, whilst another found that he had to use his motivation while balancing study and work. Armstrong, et al. (2016) found that the males who were successful in their studies had the capacity to be resilient and draw on an inner fortitude during difficult times, persisting even though they were not confident in their ability to handle study. Moreover, “it was through perseverance and letting go of annoyances” that allowed them to overcome negative influences that could have become obstacles (p. 12). This is further supported by Burke (2007) who defines ‘successful students’ as being determined enough to overcome obstacles “through their own motivation, hard work and discipline” (p.418). Bakioglu and Hacifazlioglu (2010) claim that high levels of motivation had a

substantial influence in overcoming the potential problems faced by the students at risk of withdrawal. This is further supported by Stone (2008) who identified that determination was a significant factor for males in their persistence with their studies.

Within this study, changes in the participant’s personal identity were evident in their stories but, again, there was a clear distinction between how the younger participants identified this change compared with the older participants. The younger ones used words such as *achievement*, *accomplishment* and *confidence in ability* when they discussed how they witnessed a change in their identity. For each of these younger males, it was by overcoming the initial fear around their ability to study that they found a heightened sense of accomplishment that, in turn, gave them internal confidence. It was through these successes that transformation occurred within their personal identity. For the older participants, their transformation was slightly different. Their new and acceptable identity came in the form of learning more about themselves, their mindsets, their worldviews, and their capacity to engage with academic

studies. In turn, they recognised the transformative power that education had over their lives, not just through the acquisition of new skills, but within their internal locus of control. This is in keeping with findings by Weaver-Hightower (2010) who reports that higher education has a “positive impact on the personal, intellectual, and civic development of individuals (p.32)”. Further to this, self-efficacy was developing in both generations through successful mastery of skills, lecturer support, peer interaction and encouragement, alongside changing mindsets (Bandura, 1995) (see Figure 2). For all of these participants, not only has this experience been a major instrument of change in their lives (Stone, 2008) but has the potential to be an agent of generational change.

Support structures

Family support was mentioned by all participants but, again, there was a clear distinction between the older and younger participants. The older participants stated that close family were all very supportive of them getting an education and respected their decision to re-enter via the enabling pathway.

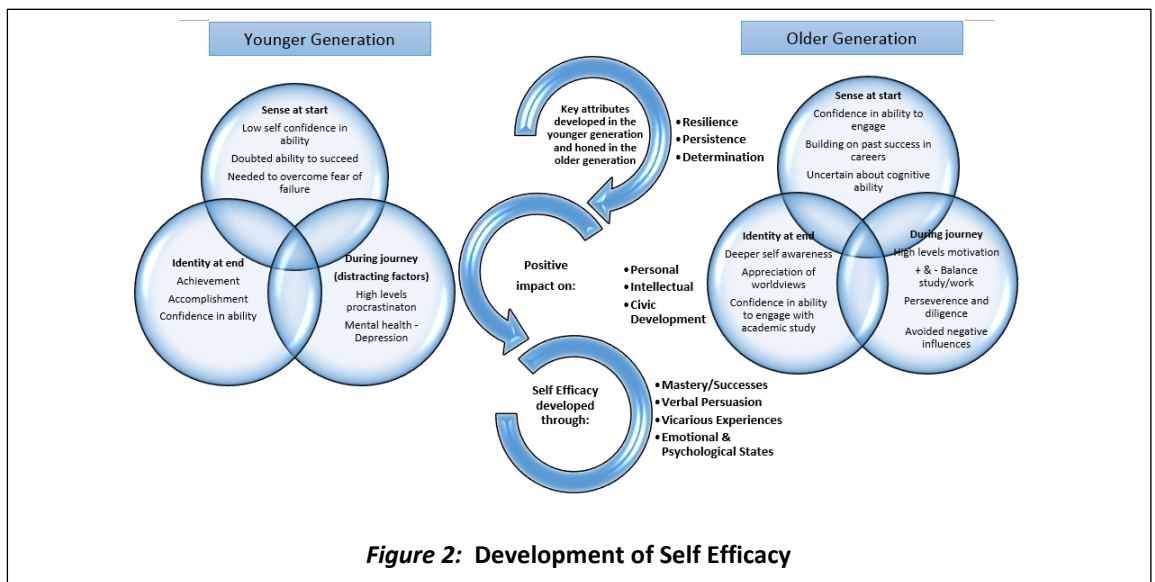


Figure 2: Development of Self Efficacy

Hancock (2012) reinforces this claim, positing that family often act in more of a supportive capacity. However, it was mentioned that family members were unable to assist them with any form of support around academia, though it was not highlighted as a major issue. All of the younger males stated that their family supported them in their academic endeavours but there was still an expectation for them to help around the house, which they felt negated the positive support their parents may have been giving, as it placed more pressure on them. Ewert (2010) highlights the importance of factors outside of the institution that facilitate persistence, suggesting that encouragement from family and friends can be instrumental in students feeling a sense of rightness with entering university.

Internal support within the university was valued by all the participants. They found that the support given by lecturers, and through the online platforms, were highly supportive and engaging. The participants felt that they could ask questions and never felt alone on the journey. Most mentioned that the support received from their peers was a motivational factor whereas the lecturers gave them academic support. Similarly, James (2013) found that the support required of lecturers within enabling was not just academic. Pastoral care and psychological persuasion were also elements of support that needed to be recognised as highly valuable to the student cohort. Bakioglu and Hacifazlioglu (2010) suggest that with support comes motivation, which reduces the chances of withdrawal. Tinto (1997) argues that students who are more socially and academically integrated into the university community are more likely to persist through to obtaining their degree. The goal of STEPS is to not only teach academic skills but to also nurture the students and guide them as they become part of the academic community. In turn, the students become emotionally invested in their study and find that university becomes an 'anchor' (James, 2016).

Conclusion

This study found that the male participants all appreciated how the enabling course was preparing them for what an undergraduate degree requires, and it was through their personal experiences, both positive and negative, that they felt a sense of certainty around their decision to study. Additionally, although they all entered with an element of fear regarding the unknown, as successes were experienced, they became more personally invested in their study. In turn, they found that university became an anchor, a place where they felt they were accomplishing a goal that at one point, prior to entry into the enabling course, was not within their grasp. What was evident within the stories were the differing content responses based on age differences. Although the stories and experiences had threads of similarity, in each key area, the younger males' experiences were different to the older males' which could be attributed to different degrees of life experiences and expectations. Despite these differences, all the males interviewed entered with aspirations towards an idealised future and they all acknowledged that their vision for an improved future would only transpire through demonstrated determination and sacrifice to achieve the end goal.

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