Editorial

Emerging Trends and Future Directions of Enabling Education

In this Special Issue …

In December 2017, the 6th *Biennial National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia* (NAEEA) Conference was hosted by Southern Cross University at the Gold Coast, Australia. The Biennial NAEEA Conference brings together educators and practitioners to collaborate on issues of relevance to enabling pathway programs leading to undergraduate university education.

The education pathways of interest to NAEEA members vary in name internationally and are referred to as developmental education in the United States, access education in the United Kingdom, and in other countries, such as the New Zealand and elsewhere, as bridging or foundation education. They hold in common that they are offered to under-prepared domestic students from a diverse range of backgrounds. It is of note that approximately 50 per cent of students enrolled in Australia's enabling programs are identified as being from one or more equity groups, such as: low socioeconomic status, as well as regional and remote students; this compares with 30 per cent of students in Australia's undergraduate programs (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011). The remainder of students in enabling programs are for a variety of reasons unable to enrol directly into undergraduate study or are otherwise unprepared for tertiary study. The aim of these programs is to enable students to gain admission to and prepare them for successful transition through undergraduate education. They do this by developing the discipline knowledge and academic skills required for university level learning. In the Australian context, the value of such programs as expressed in hard outcomes is slowly becoming better understood, with research showing that enabling students who transition to undergraduate study are likely to outperform other equity group students in their first year of study (Pitman et al., 2016).

The NAEEA has grown out of two decades of networking educators from these programs at regular conferences and events in Australia, often in conjunction with the closely affiliated New Zealand organisation FABENZ (Foundation and Bridging Educators of New Zealand). Both the conference and the Association have an evolving history, as they have strived to further research into and the practice of how enabling education is offered across Australia and more widely. In the ever-changing higher education landscape, the Association has also worked to raise the wider community's and national political representatives' awareness of the essential role that such enabling pathways play closing the education gap in an equitable democratic society.

The 2017 conference was held at a time when the Australian Federal Government had tabled the *Higher Education Support Legislation Amendment (A More Sustainable, Responsive and Transparent Higher Education System)* which proposed replacing the government funded loading for enabling courses with a student contribution, albeit one which could be paid through a student loan. NAEEA responded to the proposed legislation by pointing out that the proposed changes to enabling funding would disadvantage society's most vulnerable, those students from the equity groups identified above (Bennett, Harvey, & Fagan, 2017; NAEEA, 2017). The proposed funding change came at a time when globally, many countries were investing heavily in higher education as a means of safeguarding their economies and ultimately communities against profound economic and social inequity (Universities Australia, 2017).

The 2017 conference turned its attention to core elements of enabling education, welcoming participants to submit research and practice papers on themes such as: success in and of enabling programs, academic literacy and academic numeracy, teaching practice and curriculum design for enabling programs, as well as the role of technology and online learning in these programs.

We were joined at the conference by four keynote speakers: **Professor Mike Osborne**, Director of the Centre for Research and Chair of Adult and Lifelong Learning at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom, provided an international overview on access, retention and progression in enabling programs. How engagement works as an enabling mechanism for diverse cohorts at regional universities was the focus the keynote address by **Professor Karen Nelson**, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), Australia. **Professor Norm Sheehan**, a Wiradjuri man and Director of Gnibi College at Southern Cross University, Australia, unpacked and challenged cultural imperatives imbedded in higher education and discussed the importance of connectedness. **Associate Professor Nick Zepke** from Massey University, New Zealand, explored a success framework for enabling programs and how this could be realised in practice through learning with peers, active citizenship and student engagement.

In this special issue of the *Student Success* Journal the 6th Biennial NAEEA conference's top ranked research papers, as selected via a blind peer review process, have been included for publication. The papers selected are described in the section below.

Feature

In addition to the research papers collated here, this edition of the *Student Success* Journal includes a feature article on future directions in enabling education based on the final session of the conference, an interactive panel facilitated by **Karen Seary**, recently elected Chair of the Association and Associate Dean at CQUniversity. The conference's four keynote speakers listed above were joined on the panel by **David Bull**, outgoing Chair of the Association and Director of the University of Southern Queensland's Open Access College. The panellists had 45 minutes to discuss the future of enabling education, locally and globally, following which the audience were invited to ask questions. Highlights from this discussion are presented in part in the feature article.

Articles

Frank Armstrong, **Trixie James**, **Hermina Conradie** and **Shane Parker** from CQUniversity, Mackay, Australia, provide a deep understanding of factors that inhibit and enhance the male student experience in CQUniversity's enabling program, STEPS. In their article *Males in Enabling: Painting a portrait through narrative* the authors employ the lens of transformative theory to analyse personalised study experience accounts (Josselson, 2006). While they note key differences between younger and male participants, such as older students being better at avoiding procrastination and other negative interferences during study, the authors conclude that as both younger and older male students experienced academic success, each of the participants became more invested in their studies and their identity as a student while becoming more attached to the university and program they were studying in.

Researchers from a multi-institutional research group worked together to produce *Emotional labour demands in enabling education: A qualitative exploration of the unique challenges and protective factors.* **Nicole Crawford** and **Lesley Osenieksa** from University of Tasmania; **Anita Olds**, **Megan Jaceglav** and **Joanne Lisciandro** from Murdoch University; and, **Marguerite Westacott** from USC explore academic staff experiences in teaching and supporting students in enabling programs using a collaborative autoethnographical approach. In particular, the authors explore the emotional labour demands (Näring, Vlerick, & Van de Ven, 2012) of teaching enabling cohorts. Drawing on themes such as this and others like the impact on academics of witnessing student transformation, the authors highlight the rewards and protective factors which mitigate stress among enabling educators.

In *Exploring students' uses of and dispositions towards learning technologies in an Australian enabling course* **Rhian Morgan** from James Cook University (JCU) investigates the role of digital literacies in enabling programs. Through a survey adapted from the 2014 EDUCAUSE Centre for Analysis and Research (ECAR) Students and Technology Survey (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014) administered at JCU, Morgan reports on current trends in enabling students' uses of technology, such as preferences for mobile content and blended learning environments, before concluding with a discussion of how these findings can be mobilised in curriculum development.

Attrition is the focus of **Julie Willans** and **Karen Seary**'s CQUniversity based study *"Why did we lose them and*

what could we have done"? Their findings are based on interviews conducted with 23 students who withdrew from STEPS, and 10 program coordinators. The researchers report findings similar to research into first year undergraduate studies (Baik, Naylor, Arkoudis, & Dabrowski, 2017; Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009), that personal issues, such as mental and physical health, financial and time constraints were major factors contributing to attrition. The authors propose a series of recommendations that could potentially mitigate these factors, such as academic support provided at evenings and on weekends; and, follow-up calls at withdrawal.

The special edition of the Journal closes with an article based on the keynote presented by **Nick Zepke**. In his article *Learning with peers, active citizenship and student engagement in Enabling Education*, Zepke sets out to address the question: what support do students in Enabling Education need to learn the behaviours, knowledge and attitudes required to succeed in tertiary education, employment and life? Via a review of the literature, he introduces an enabling program success framework, before exploring two constructs applicable to enabling education taken from research on student engagement, facilitated peer learning and active citizenship.

Conclusion

The Guest Editors of this special edition would like to thank the conference organising committee members Dr Michael Brickhill, Giulie Fowler, Dr Johanna Nieuwoudt, Dr Sue Muloin, Associate Professor Thomas Roche and Dr Suzi Syme led by the Director of SCU College, Professor Janet Taylor.

They would also like to thank all the contributors to this special edition listed above, the Journal's Editor-in-Chief Professor Karen Nelson and Journal Manager Tracy Creagh for their support and guidance in finalising this issue. We hope the articles presented here not only capture the issues and trends currently emerging in the field but also provide insight into the future directions of research and practice of enabling education in Australia and more widely.

Thomas Roche & Suzie Syme
Guest Editors, Special Issue

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