

Enabling Education: Adding Value and Transforming Lives

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Abstract

Students who undertake enabling education are richly diverse in terms of age and social, cultural, ethnic and educational backgrounds. In many cases, they are the first in their family to seek to enter university and they do so often in the face of considerable sociological and socio-economic obstacles. Given the increasing profile of enabling programs, particularly in the context of the recent Bradley Review, and recognizing that they entail substantial human and financial investment, this paper reports on an ongoing research project that explores the views and value of challenges and opportunities offered by non-traditional pathways into higher education. In particular, via focus groups and a thematic analysis protocol we report on students' perceptions concerning intellectual and personal dimensions that include the influences of age, gender, family, socio-economic factors, life-experience, and prior educational circumstance. Initial findings provide strong indications that the process of undertaking enabling education adds value in terms of human, social and identity capital; moreover, for those who succeed in realizing their goals, the transformation in their lives, and in the lives of those they influence, can be profound.

Introduction/background

The term, 'enabling education' can, and does, mean many things to many people, coming as it does in numerous flavours. The lack of a standard model perhaps reflects the dearth of empirical research within the literature and, more importantly, that lack is generally not evinced within the literature that does exist, making it difficult to interpret reported findings. That is, one cannot readily generalize from one setting to another as they may be very different. For the present purposes, we use the term in the sense of bridging or foundational programs that provide opportunities to undertake higher education for those who lack the usual or traditional prerequisites for university entry and which enable them, not just by providing access but by actively preparing them for success in their future undergraduate studies.

In recent years, enabling education has developed something of a burgeoning profile in Australia and indeed elsewhere, assuming as it has unprecedented prominence on the political agenda and serving as a catalyst through which universities have been encouraged to reflect on their role as educational institutions of higher learning and to review their approaches both to recruitment and, some would argue, pedagogy also. It has become part of the political and educational landscape and, perhaps most significantly in Australia, it has been officially underwritten by government discourse in the form of the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, the Executive Summary of which states:

As the world becomes more interconnected and global markets for skills and innovation develop even further, it will be crucial for Australia to have enough highly skilled people able to adapt to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing future. Higher education will clearly be a major contributor to the development of a skilled workforce but, as never before, we must address the rights of all citizens to share in its benefits... To increase the numbers participating [in university degree programs] we must also look to members of groups currently under-represented within the system, that is, those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas (Bradley, 2008 p. xi).

The report goes on to say that, by 2020, twenty per cent of undergraduate enrolments in higher education should be students from low socio-economic backgrounds and that this target and individual institutional initiatives will be linked to financial incentives both for the enrolling university as well as the student. Clearly, this Government-led initiative promotes enabling pathways into higher education and is both driving and complementing the changing profile of universities from institutions of relative privilege to institutions that accommodate a broader range of needs and interests, including the economic and social imperatives to produce skilled, work-ready professionals. The enabling education 'mission' has brought a moral dimension to the education enterprise, one based on notions of equity, social justice and equal opportunity; however, these have been accompanied by more pragmatic forces to do with a productive and fulfilled workforce able to contribute to the socio-economic fabric of the country, as well as financial imperatives around meeting intake quotas and improving retention and attrition rates. In observing what he describes as "a mass and increasingly marketised higher education system", Haggis makes reference to such forces, claiming that they have "encouraged the idea that 'meeting learner needs' should be a key focus for institutional attention" (Haggis, 2006 p. 521).

From the students' point of view, enabling education offers new horizons, new possibilities and new opportunities for personal development and fulfilment. It has the potential to appeal

to the aspirations of those seeking to enhance the quality of their lives and the lives of those around them, and it represents a means of social mobility – a vehicle through which to improve and assert one's place in society. However, enabling education also entails substantial human and financial investment, and for many, therefore, it is not undertaken lightly. Those who choose to tread its path are richly diverse in terms of age and social, cultural, ethnic and educational backgrounds. In many cases, they are the first in their family to seek to enter university and they do so often in the face of considerable sociological and socio-economic obstacles (see, for instance: Kinnear, 2009; Ferrier, 2006, citing Ferrier and Heagney (1999); James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause and McInnis, 2004; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert and Muspratt, 2004; IAS, 2003; Elliot, 2002).

Enabling education comes in numerous 'flavours', and while this means that there is no standard model, there are, nonetheless, notions of 'value' associated at personal, institutional and social levels that have been largely assumed to exist but for which there is little direct empirical evidence. It was against this backdrop that the research project reported here was undertaken with a view to establishing whether and how enabling education, specifically in the form of the University of South Australia's Foundation Studies enabling program, adds value in terms of human, social and identity capital. Any such added value needs to be viewed in the context of the challenges studying in enabling programmes presents for students many of whom have to balance their studies with other significant commitments around such areas as work and the family (see, for example, Curtis & Shani, 2002 and Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). How these and other factors impact on students' ability to reap the potential rewards of enabling education also constitute an important focus of the project.

In what follows, we describe our methodology and present our initial findings, which reveal the presence of dominant constructs, in large part irrespective of the diverse backgrounds typical of enabling education participants. These provide interesting insights into what motivates them and impacts upon their experience, both during and after their involvement with the Foundation Studies program. Furthermore, they offer a framework that will serve as a scaffold for further investigation.

Methodology

The fundamental hypothesis is that enabling education represents an investment in social capital for the benefit of participating individuals, higher education institutions, and society as a whole. This is an assumption inherent in the public funding directed towards enabling education programs; that is, that such initiatives are regarded as 'adding value' in various ways. A key aspect of the research process was (and is, since the project is ongoing) the

exploration of factors relevant to that assumption, without holding preconceived ideas about what will be found, in order to identify dominant emerging themes. For this reason, the use of focus groups, unstructured interviews, and thematic analysis were judged to be appropriate protocols for the research as they offer the best opportunities to elicit spontaneous responses from participants without imposing preconceptions that might otherwise lead the data.

'Thematic analysis' is a qualitative research approach that is similar to interpretive content analysis – Aronson (1994) describes 'the pragmatic process' of the technique. Earlier discussion of this research methodology may be found in the work of Benner (1985), Leininger (1985), Taylor and Bogdan (1984). In essence, the method is a means of dealing with qualitative data in a variety of forms (here, the video footage, recorded audio, and transcripts of the recordings), whereby the subjects' accounts are regarded as a resource that provides a window to their experiences. It is a form of grounded theory, in which one seeks to elicit understanding and development of theory from data rather than imposing possible constraints on the acquisition of data as a consequence of the researcher's theoretical, intellectual, and experiential background. That is, themes are considered emergent constructs rather than pre-determined classifications. The identification of themes relies on a coding scheme that utilises syntactic and semantic analysis of raw materials, including observations of frequency. In the case of video images, corresponding non-verbal and non-vocal 'language' may also be analysed analogously. 'Coding' means the categorization of the data so as to group together instances that are regarded as being of the same 'type'. While this is necessarily subject to the researcher's interpretation (and hence socio-cultural bias), we regard the approach as the most 'open' means to explore concepts of value in the present context.

The overall research design for this work consists of three phases of data collection. The first phase comprises comparative focus group studies, using a thematic analysis protocol, with two student cohorts – the first being those who are current students undertaking the University of South Australia's Foundation Studies program; and the second being former Foundation Studies students who recently completed the program and who are now in their first year of undergraduate degree studies. The second phase is a longitudinal case study involving individual meetings, again employing a thematic analysis protocol, with four student subjects – two from each cohort. The third phase involves a two-stage study with academic staff across the University community. In Stage 1, subjects are surveyed using a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire; Stage 2 comprises unstructured interviews with the same subjects, again using the thematic analysis protocol.

As with all human subject research, the project required, and gained, approval from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (UniSA HREC). To recruit subjects for Phase 1, which is the focus of the present work, randomly selected students from each cohort were contacted by email and invited to participate in the study. This resulted in a total of eight focus groups (four for each cohort), each with two or three subjects who together attended a single session lasting some 75 minutes. Each session commenced with a general 'warm-up' question: "Having just started Foundation Studies/undergraduate study [as appropriate to the cohort], how do you feel on a scale of one to ten, say? Do you feel better in general now than before you started the course?" Our intention in asking this initial question was to ease the subjects into conversation and get an overall sense – without too much introspection – of how positively or otherwise they feel about their situations, rather than to elicit detailed responses at this stage. All sessions were conducted over a period of five days and were recorded using a digital video camcorder and separate audio recorder, with the audio recordings professionally transcribed for later analysis in conjunction with the source materials. To facilitate coding and interpretation, we employed NVivo software (version 8).

Results and Discussion

It was apparent during the conduct of the focus groups, and before any formal analysis, that the discourse could be readily partitioned into two primary categories: intellectual dimensions and personal dimensions. This is not to say that this is an immutable divide – there were clearly many areas of overlap where specific remarks or observations possessed a duality at such a coarse level of interpretation. Included in the intellectual domain were such areas as (i) *suitability* or *preparedness* for the challenges of study; and (ii) *life experience*. The former was revealed through discourse relating to previous study experiences (often relating to school days) and perceptions of ability, including changes in such perceptions; how previous experiences and perceptions influence current expectations; observations about the level of ease or difficulty associated with the current work in comparison with other learning activities, both formal and informal; and related self-efficacy beliefs. This last aspect was often reflected through comparison with perceptions of other students in the subjects' classes/cohort and their description of interactions with their peers – some younger, some older, and some with very different and varied backgrounds and experience. For example, Bob (age 19 and a current Foundation Studies student) said, "...well I've just come out of school, I've got an advantage back on him [the mature student], the fact that I've been studying for twelve years straight and then I go straight back into studying. I sort of feel like I can get a lot more motivated than maybe he might. He's got family to deal with, you know, other people to think about...". In contrast, Ann (age 50 and a recently transitioned

undergraduate student) commented, "...all the new students [young school leavers] have been stressing about you know, their assignments and submitting guidelines and how to write an essay and referencing. It's just we have covered all that last year [in Foundation Studies], so you feel a lot more confident."

The second area, life experience, was revealed through discourse around 'real world' experiences that the subjects felt had in some way prepared them to be successful at university (or otherwise), in terms of specific, transferable skills and personal qualities such as persistence, problem solving, and managing complex situations or change. A particularly interesting viewpoint was the expression of maturity, motivation, and commitment to engage, along with the articulation of determination to rise to the intellectual challenges, much of which derived from concrete instances of dissatisfaction with past circumstances and/or the desire to achieve more – a sense of unrealised potential. Sally (age 24) provides an example: "...I have set out goals for myself, I'm 24, I worked in the supermarket since I left high school and I didn't have the fulfillment that I would have wanted out of my career being in a supermarket, so I decided to put some goals into play of where I want to be in the future...".

Generally, subjects expressed notions that their life experiences gave them a perspective that they regarded as advantageous to their academic aspirations, giving them an 'edge' in a relatively broad sense: "Just from the way I worked for six years, I'm pretty comfortable with the age gap with everyone who's in the course... not being afraid to ask questions in lectures... yes, because you're not so self-conscious of yourself. You've got over all of that by now." (Mark, age 24, current Foundation Studies student). In some, there was a rising awareness of more specific aspects whereby they were beginning to see connections between what they were learning and what they already knew (in altogether different contexts), so that life knowledge provides leverage to new learning activities. It is worth noting that a strong affective element is present throughout these data, notwithstanding that the primary focus driving specific remarks centred on the intellectual, indicating that the subjects' engagement with, and commitment to, their respective learning environments and endeavours, whether as current or former enabling students, is a very personal affair that appears to be central to their sense of identity and place.

In the personal domain, a term which we use here in its domestic sense rather than that of *id* or *ego*, thematic constructs that emerged were concerned primarily with three mostly distinct areas: (i) *family situation*; (ii) *work*; and (iii) *culture (or cultural background)*. We say 'mostly distinct' because in the complexity of real lives, the lines are frequently blurred and any one area can impact upon, or influence, any or all of the others. We proceed cautiously, with that

caveat. A fourth region, though not surfacing quite so readily, is that which we venture to term '*aspirational*' – that is, relating to notions of 'higher purpose', ideals, and desire to 'make a difference'.

Family concerns involved a range of factors reflecting aspects of family that influenced subjects' decision to study and/or which impact (either negatively or positively) on their ability to study. These include marital status, having children, family health, caring for others in a domestic situation or other family commitments or pressures, and extend to the perceptions of significant others concerning subjects' educational aspirations and the extent to which the family situation supports or detracts from being an effective student. The dichotomy of this latter aspect is illustrated by the following contrasting statements:

"I have to say that with three children, doing the Foundation Program was a big benefit to show us what life was going to be like to study, that's what I found was really good, because they didn't all toe themselves into line for that year. There were lots of - nobody really took my studies seriously in the family at the beginning." (Ann)

"They're great, they think that I'm up to that stage of starting to better my life and they're very supportive. My sisters joke about it all. They think that deep down I *do* have the intelligence to do it, I just have to find it a bit..." (Sally)

Concerning 'work', related factors included the need to work in support of self or others while studying (which was not a universal imperative for our subjects), the impact of work on the ability to attend classes and undertake coursework, encouragement and support (or otherwise) of employers and co-workers, and the notion of whether subjects who worked did so to support their studies or the corollary that study was being undertaken to promote career advancement or as a means to new opportunities.

'Culture' and cultural background factors pertain to discourse involving parental and familial expectations in the context of the subjects' cultural and/or socio-economic situation, particularly during earlier formative years, whether parents or siblings had experienced higher education or whether the subjects are the first in their family to seek to gain a university degree. Closely related aspects were the influences and views of friends and others within social networks. A somewhat surprising non-result was the general absence of reports of negative or derogatory reactions, which might have been expected given that non-traditional students are often in the situation of 'breaking the mould' – their ambition to effect change in their situation being potentially or actually threatening to significant relationships.

While we have provided a 'taste' of those themes that have arisen more overtly in the personal domain (not surprisingly, perhaps, relating to family), space constraints obviate a

fuller treatment here, particularly in relation to the other emergent themes concerning 'work' and 'culture'. However, it behoves us to share a final comment that reveals something of the powerful, often implicit or covert aspirational theme:

"I don't know if this is normal, but I want to get fulfilment out of my life. I want to feel like I'm making an impact on something and for what my goals are in my career, that's going to give me fulfilment and it's going to make me enjoy what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life and I'm going to need that, as opposed to, like I said, working in a supermarket gives you nothing, like you just... if you have got a career where you're helping people, in putting your input in and in a way changing their life in a way, then that's going to make me enjoy what I do every day more than standing at the checkout at the supermarket." (Sally)

Conclusion

In this present work we have endeavoured to provide the reader with some sense of the background, motivation, and methodology that provide the framework for this research project. The notion of 'value' has a self-referential quality and is itself a value-laden construct. One might well ask: value to whom, in what sense, and at what cost? These are aspects that we have just begun to explore and this paper is the first step in reporting our observations. What is immediately apparent to us, as investigators, is that we have already (having concluded Phase 1 interviews) acquired a very rich collection of data – the open methodology of thematic analysis elicits responses from our subjects that, on the one hand carry overtly direct information in isolation yet, on the other hand, also contain covert and indirect messages that need careful consideration both in isolation and in a collective sense, where we begin to see connecting threads.

Such connections are hardly apparent in the reading of individual quotes and it would have been cavalier of us to seek to report on such subtleties without first laying the groundwork, which we have sought to do here. However, it is evident even at this stage that 'value' attaches in multiple senses – there is the value related to human capital as our subjects talk about their skills, knowledge, education and experience (particularly as dynamic constructs); there is the value related to social capital, since their endeavours and aspirations do not exist in a vacuum but rather reside in a metaphorical web of interpersonal relationships; and, perhaps most of all, there is the value of *identity* capital, in which fundamental aspects of self-definition appear as our subjects talk about their self-image, motivation, hopes, expectations, and fears. Education is a powerful force in transforming lives and societies; aspirations to attain it at a higher level and the success or failure of endeavours to that end are surely powerful influences in transforming personal identity and this is revealed and affirmed by our investigations. Even at this stage of the project, then, we have found evidence of the value-

added transformative influence of our subjects' enabling education experience and we anticipate that our further work on this project will be increasingly revealing.

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