

Firm Foundations for the Future

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Abstract

UniSA's Foundation Studies program was established in 2006, building on a long history of enabling, preparation and bridging programs at the University. The program prepares students with no formal entry requirements for the full range and rigour of undergraduate study. Uniquely, the program is also delivered via a 'sister' program, UniSA-PAL, conducted at Adult Entry Colleges via a successful collaborative partnership with the SA Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). Here, we outline the development of UniSA's approach and commitment to enabling education and discuss students' participation in terms of access and equity. This leads us to consider the performance of students both during and after their enabling education experience. Those who progress from Foundation Studies and UniSA-PAL gain entry into an impressive array of undergraduate degree programs at UniSA and elsewhere and we show that their performance and retention rates at the undergraduate level compare favourably with those of students who enter university via other means, whether as traditional school-leavers with a Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) or as mature students entering via the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT). Finally, we discuss plans for the future in the post-Bradley era of widening participation.

Introduction

Building on its long history of delivering enabling, preparation and bridging programs, the University of South Australia's Foundation Studies program was established in 2006, with a strong commitment to first-chance opportunities for those who have experienced educational disadvantage and second-chance opportunities for those who made earlier life decisions to not enter Higher Education. The program prepares students with no formal entry requirements for the full range and rigour of undergraduate study and, uniquely, it is also delivered via a 'sister' program, UniSA-PAL conducted at Adult Entry Colleges and Adult Campuses via a highly successful collaborative partnership with the SA Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). These programs demonstrate the effectiveness of UniSA's approach to providing alternate pathways to higher education while preparing

students to be successful once there.

In what follows, we outline the development of UniSA's approach and commitment to enabling education before going on to relate details of the Foundation Studies and UniSA-PAL programs and to consider participation in terms of access and equity. We continue with discussion of students' success rates while undertaking the Foundation Studies program and follow this by considering the performance and retention rates of students who have progressed through the Foundation Studies and UniSA-PAL programs to transition into undergraduate degree programs, comparing these measures with those of undergraduate students who enter university via other means, both as traditional school-leavers with a Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) and as mature students entering via South Australia's Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT). Finally, mindful of the changing nature of higher education, we discuss plans for the future in the post-Bradley era of widening participation.

Enabling education at the University of South Australia, past to present

The University of South Australia's equity mission is unequivocal and embodied in its founding legislation, which carries a mandate 'to provide such tertiary education programmes as the University thinks appropriate to meet the needs of groups within the community that the University considers have suffered disadvantages in education' (Government of South Australia, 1990). Further, the Council of the University is required to be constituted of members who 'have an understanding of, and commitment to, the principles of equal opportunity and social justice and, in particular, to access and equity in education' (Government of South Australia, 1990). This mission is embedded in all aspects of the University's institutional planning, review and quality assurance processes, and within its Teaching and Learning Framework. From its beginnings, the University has been acknowledged for its work in student equity, and particularly for the diversity of its admissions policies and entry pathways (Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner and Barratt, 1996). Recognised nationally and internationally for leadership in distance education and flexible learning, UniSA is the largest provider of distance education in South Australia. It also has a strong history of articulation and credit transfer arrangements with TAFE and other VET providers (Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner and Kain, 1997).

Prior to 2006, the University offered several distinct preparatory programs that included the credit-bearing Diploma in University Studies, two bridging programs that provided entry pathways for students in science, engineering, and information technology disciplines, and a bridging program specifically for regional students at the University's Whyalla campus. The Diploma in University Studies (formerly an Associate Diploma) was a one year full-time (or

part-time equivalent) undergraduate diploma designed to prepare mature-aged students with no prior entry qualifications for degrees in the Division of Education, Arts and the Social Sciences. While graduates could also access degrees in the University's other academic Divisions (or faculties), the course content was not designed to prepare students for science-based degrees and was never intended to provide a University-wide pathway. The program was credit-bearing and HECS-liable and students accrued a debt against their Student Learning Entitlement (SLE). In contrast, the three bridging programs were all funded through enabling load funding, were neither credit-bearing, nor HECS liable and students incurred no SLE debt.

In a unique partnership between UniSA and the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), a 'sister' program to the Diploma in University Studies was introduced at a DECS adult-entry college in 2002. Termed the 'University of South Australia Preparation Program for Adult Learners' (UniSA-PAL), its constituent courses or topics, mirroring those of the Diploma, were developed and moderated by the University but taught by DECS staff at the college. While offering the same curriculum and level of preparation for university entry, UniSA-PAL was not a UniSA award and its students did not accrue a HECS or SLE liability. Following the success of the pilot scheme, UniSA-PAL was subsequently offered at three further adult campuses and continues to have a strong base.

The introduction of the limited Student Learning Entitlement strengthened concerns within the University about the inconsistencies across its range of preparatory programs and the Vice Chancellor initiated a review during 2004. This review determined that the University's equity mission would be better served by a single, institution-wide preparatory program to replace the previous four programs. The result was the establishment of the UniSA Foundation Studies program, which is funded through Commonwealth Enabling load, has no fees attached to it, accrues no credit and does not affect SLE. Importantly, though, for an equity measure, students studying the program full-time are eligible for Centrelink AUSTUDY, ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance payments.

For students who do not meet other entry criteria, Foundation Studies is a pathway to any of UniSA's undergraduate degrees. More than this, it *enables* them, not just by providing access but by actively preparing them for success in their future undergraduate studies. To that end, rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' approach, the program is offered in six strands, five of which correspond to the University's major discipline areas, with the sixth catering to students at regional campuses in Whyalla and Mount Gambier. All students undertake a set of core

courses for the program as a whole, such as 'Introduction to Tertiary Learning', 'Critical Literacy' and 'Introductory Computing'. These reflect a deliberate focus on the development of generic academic and study skills that also anticipate the graduate qualities that the University seeks as outcomes for its undergraduates. In addition, students undertake strand-specific, discipline-related core courses, and elective courses that align with their intended degree-level pursuits. To accommodate this array of options and opportunities, the program consists of a total of seventeen courses that are provided by a number of Schools across the University, with all students required to complete eight courses appropriate to their strand. Where appropriate, they can apply for credit for up to four courses via recognition of prior learning (RPL) for relevant VET studies, partial completion of other enabling programs, or Year 12 studies. Flexible study options are an integral part of UniSA's Teaching and Learning Framework and this extends to the Foundation Studies program, which may be undertaken full- or part-time in internal or external modes of study (or any combination), supported by a suite of on-line learning facilities. Importantly, though, Foundation Studies students are full students of the University in every respect, in what might be regarded as 'Year 0', and have the opportunity to gain an immersive university experience so that they may begin their subsequent undergraduate careers feeling 'at home' in the University culture and its academic, social and geographical landscapes.

Meanwhile, UniSA-PAL has continued to thrive as a 'sister' to the present Foundation Studies program. The chief differences are that UniSA-PAL students are students of the partner institutions, rather than UniSA; each college offers a subset of eight courses from the seventeen available in Foundation Studies itself (these, then, are core courses and there are no electives). The college cohorts are quite small – typically around twenty participants, allowing a closer relationship between staff and students and more 'one-on-one' attention. The colleges are also located in regions at a distance from a UniSA campus, facilitating access for some people who may be initially intimidated by attending a large university campus. Further, whereas Foundation Studies is fee-free, UniSA-PAL is not, with students paying relatively modest fees to their college. In practically every other respect, UniSA-PAL students enjoy the same enabling opportunities as their Foundation Studies counterparts and on completion apply, and are considered, for admission to undergraduate programs on the same basis. While the focus in what follows is on Foundation Studies, most aspects may safely be generalized to include (at least in principle) the UniSA-PAL cohorts.

Participation rates – access and equity

The commencement of Foundation Studies in 2006 saw almost a doubling of enrolments from the combined total of the previous four programs in 2005 with 295 enrolments for an equivalent full time student load (EFTSL) of 194.6 compared to previous averages of 167 enrolments and 78.3 EFTSL over the years 2003-2005. New intakes have subsequently settled somewhat but remain significantly greater than enrolments in the previous programs.

The Foundation Studies program has made a significant contribution to the University's equity mission to provide higher education opportunities for people who have experienced educational disadvantage. A key performance indicator for equity at UniSA is the percentage of Australian students enrolled with one or more equity characteristics. Over 2006-2008, an average of 57.3% of Foundation Studies students came from at least one of nationally defined targeted equity groups, compared to the 42.5% average for the total UniSA student population. As Table 1 (below) illustrates, for most of the designated equity groups (Indigenous (ATSI), Disability, Isolated, Low socioeconomic status (SES), NESB, and Rural), the access and participation rates for Foundation Studies are substantially greater than the corresponding University-wide rates, particularly for students from low SES, rural and non-English speaking backgrounds. The exceptions have been, marginally, for Indigenous and Isolated participants in most years. An anomaly that makes enabling programs ineligible for Federal Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) funds means that the University's Indigenous support staff have been reluctant to advise Indigenous students into Foundation Studies.

While the antecedent programs had strong equity profiles too, representation of most equity groups is generally stronger in Foundation Studies, indicating that the program has been most effective in providing second-chance opportunities to access higher education for people who have experienced educational disadvantage.

Table 1: Access and Participation rates

		Access			Participation		
		2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008
ATSI	<i>Foundation Studies</i>	7.9%	1.0%	1.5%	7.9%	0.8%	1.2%
	<i>University</i>	1.5%	1.1%	1.4%	1.5%	1.4%	1.4%
Disability	<i>Foundation Studies</i>	9.7%	11.6%	10.1%	9.9%	11.8%	13.1%
	<i>University</i>	5.4%	5.5%	5.4%	7.0%	7.1%	7.2%
Isolated	<i>Foundation Studies</i>	1.4%	0.0%	0.5%	1.4%	0.0%	0.4%
	<i>University</i>	1.1%	0.9%	1.0%	1.1%	1.0%	1.0%
LowSES	<i>Foundation Studies</i>	39.7%	43.2%	39.2%	39.4%	41.1%	36.9%
	<i>University</i>	24.2%	25.5%	25.5%	24.2%	24.8%	25.0%
NESB	<i>Foundation Studies</i>	7.6%	8.5%	5.0%	7.5%	11.0%	6.5%
	<i>University</i>	3.0%	3.4%	3.7%	3.0%	3.2%	3.4%
Rural	<i>Foundation Studies</i>	17.2%	23.1%	28.6%	17.1%	20.7%	26.5%
	<i>University</i>	12.9%	13.5%	14.1%	12.7%	12.7%	12.8%

In addition to the DEEWR identified equity groups, analysis of enrolment data from 2006-2009 indicates that Foundation Studies enrolls a similar proportion of males (average 42%) compared to the University's total domestic enrolment (average 42.5% over the same period), although a small trend towards increasing female participation is evident for both enabling and total student enrolments. It is worth noting that the introduction of the program brought about one particularly significant change in enrolment patterns: whereas the superseded Diploma in University Studies had been designed primarily for part-time and external students, the proportions of Foundation Studies cohorts choosing to study internally and full-time (typically 70-75% on both counts) are now similar to those of the overall undergraduate population, suggesting that students generally appreciate the opportunity to have an immersive experience.

Student performance

The performance of students in Foundation Studies, as with its antecedents, reflects the role of the program as both preparatory and exploratory for those without prior qualifications. Across Australia (and elsewhere) success, retention and completion rates for enabling programs have always been well below the sector average (DETYA, 2001; Ramsay, 2004). An early report on the attrition of students in UniSA's Diploma in University Studies found that 80% of those who withdrew did so not because of difficulties with their studies *per se* but because of pressures in trying to combine study with family and employment responsibilities (Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner and Barrett, 1996). On average, in any year some 50% of students in the Foundation Studies program are aged 25 years or older, compared to 31.5% (2008 statistic) of those undertaking bachelor-level degree studies, suggesting that family and

employment commitments are likely to impact on enabling students more than on undergraduate students generally.

Tables 2 and 3 below contrast the success rates of the current Foundation Studies program with those of its antecedents and with all undergraduate and University-wide programs. ('Success rate' here is defined as the proportion of enrolled load for which students achieve passing grades; this means that success rates can be skewed by enrolments for students who disengage without withdrawing and by enrolments of those who do not subsequently participate.)

Table 2: 2005 Success rates for antecedent programs

Program Name	Success
AppSc & Eng Bridging	56%
DipUniversityStudies	67%
Info Tech Bridging	63%
WhyallaBridgingProgram	70%
All Diploma & Bridging	65%
All Undergraduate	87%
University-wide	88%

Table 3: 2006-2008 Success rates for Foundation Studies, by strand

Strand name	Success		
	2006	2007	2008
Applied Science & Eng strand	-	61%	50%
Business strand	-	55%	55%
Edducation, Arts & SocSc strand	-	49%	60%
Health Science strand	-	53%	61%
IT strand	-	29%	70%
Mt Gambier Regional strand	-	36%	45%
Whyalla regional strand	-	67%	36%
All Foundation Studies	51%	50%	55%
All Undergraduate	87%	88%	89%
University-wide	89%	89%	89%

The success rates for Foundation Studies students must be regarded carefully and in context. While the rates are lower than those of the antecedent programs, the program's larger enrolments attract greater student diversity and a broader range of readiness, making direct comparison unreliable. Nor is it possible to make direct comparisons with the success rates for undergraduate programs since the nature and purpose of enabling education is to enable people with no entry qualifications to prepare for university study. Some will find that university study is not for them; others will need additional time to be fully prepared, and still others will find that life will get in the way of study. We have also found that the increased obligation for Centrelink recipients to be 'learning or earning' has meant that a proportion of

students enrol merely to satisfy those requirements, sometimes never attending classes at all. No HECS liability means that there is no incentive for students to withdraw formally. Given this context, due recognition must be given to the proportion of enabling students who *do* successfully complete their programs and transition to undergraduate degree work. These signify a substantial number of new undergraduate students who would not otherwise have gained access to higher education nor have been well prepared to succeed in that further endeavour.

At UniSA, we have found that most students who do not succeed have withdrawn from engagement and participation. As Ramsay and colleagues found (1995), the vast majority of students who withdraw do so for reasons not directly related to study and, where their withdrawal signals an informed, adult decision that university is not for them, we contend that this can be considered as a form of success; the equity objective has been served in that people who otherwise may have been denied the opportunity to attempt university study have now had that chance. Moreover, some of the students who withdraw subsequently return later to make a successful attempt (according to the DEEWR definition of success). Thus, we estimate that of the 45-50% who 'fail to succeed', only around 10% do so after persisting in their efforts to finish the programs. This suggests that the 'actual' failure rate (that is, computed for those who persist to completion) may not be too dissimilar from undergraduate rates.

Further evidence to support the above argument and interpretation is provided by considering how successful Foundation Studies and UniSA-PAL students perform following their transition into undergraduate degree studies. These students gain entry into an impressive array of undergraduate degree programs at UniSA (and at other HE institutions) ranging from a spectrum of Arts and Humanities degrees through to programs in Business, Commerce, Education, Behavioural Science, Medical Radiation, Nursing and Midwifery, Law, and the Sciences – a definitive list is too long to enumerate here. Figure 1 shows distributions of students' undergraduate Grade Point Averages (GPAs) for those who enter via Foundation Studies (MFFS) and UniSA-PAL as well as for those who were admitted by all other entry pathways (GPAs of 1.5 and below were discarded as these outlying values are considered to be due to students who did not persist in their programs and this study is concerned with comparing the performance of continuing/active students). Comparing these distributions, on average those admitted via our enabling programs have a higher mean GPA (4.90) than those admitted by other methods of entry (4.74).

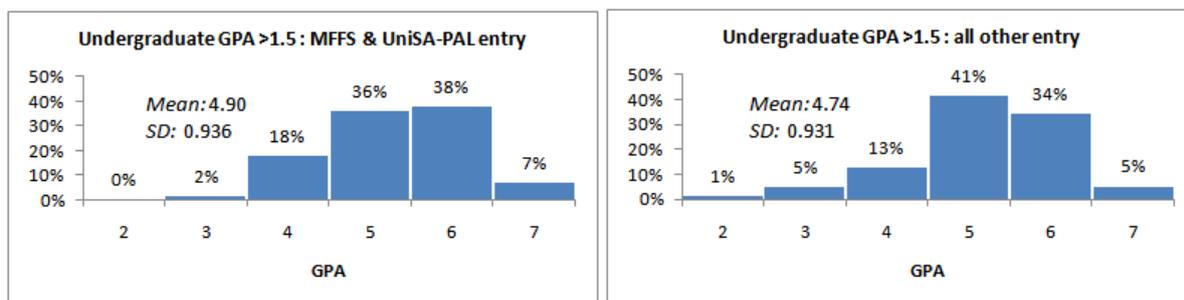


Figure 1: Comparison of undergraduate GPAs by method of entry

Statistical analysis (one-tail *t*-test for significance in mean difference) of the data in Figure 1 reveals that the higher average GPA for former Foundation Studies & UniSA-PAL students in undergraduate programs is statistically significant at a level above the 95% confidence level (see Table 4). This provides very strong evidence that the observed difference in the means is a real effect – that is, transitioned Foundation Studies and UniSA-PAL students are significantly more likely to have a higher undergraduate GPA. No statistical analysis is needed to note the significance of the considerably greater difference in mean GPA found by comparing the performance of enabling students with those admitted via the STAT. The latter have an average undergraduate GPA of 3.8, much lower than the average GPA of 4.9 for enabling students, suggesting that the enabling programs have an important role to play in preparing adult entrants for university. While a greater number of students are currently admitted through the STAT, many of them appear not to be prepared for the challenges of university study.

Table 4: one-tail *t*-test for significance of mean GPA differences

	<i>All entry</i>	<i>Foundation Studies & UniSA-PAL</i>
Mean GPA	4.74	4.90
Std dev	0.9306	0.9362
n	112380	131
Significance (<i>p</i> -value)	0.031 i.e. 3.1%	

This latter observation is reflected in the retention rates: the University-wide retention rate for undergraduates is typically around 85% while for STAT entrants it is about 70%; in contrast, former enabling students tend to have the highest retention rate, at some 90% – more evidence that the enabling education provided by the Foundation Studies and UniSA-PAL programs prepares students effectively for future success at university, going beyond merely providing an alternate pathway.

A Post-Bradley future

The Rudd Government's recent review of Australian Higher Education, chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, the former Vice Chancellor of UniSA, (Bradley, Noonan, Nungent & Scales, 2008) argues that Australia urgently needs to increase the proportion of its population with a university degree. The review highlights the critical importance of widening participation in higher education in order for Australia to remain competitive in a knowledge-based global economy:

Australia needs to harness the potential of all capable students to contribute to society and the economy. Actively encouraging and facilitating entry into higher education for people from groups who are currently under-represented is vital. (Bradley *et al.*, 2008, p. 10.)

Internationally, a well-educated population is now considered 'essential for the social and economic well-being of countries and individuals' (OECD, 2008, p. 30). In order to meet this need there has been a massive expansion in higher education as nations move from an elite to a mass system, or even, in some cases, a near universal system of higher education (Moodie, 2006; Trow, 2006). The Bradley review identified that Australia has fallen behind many other OECD nations in higher education participation levels and recommended a number of targets to increase participation, both in general and specifically for people from lower SES backgrounds. These recommendations have since been taken up by the Federal Government with targets established as follows:

- to increase the proportion of Australian 25 to 34 year olds with a qualification at bachelor degree or above from 32% to 40% by 2025; and
- to increase the proportion of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level by people from low SES backgrounds from 16% to 20% by 2020. (Gillard, 2009.)

Of particular significance is the increased funding allocated in the 2009 Federal Budget to support these targets, especially the latter. A low SES loading of \$325 million has been allocated for the period 2009-2012. This represents 2% of Teaching and Learning funds in 2010, increasing to 4% in 2012, a tenfold increase from the current allocation of approximately \$100 for every low SES student to around \$1,000 per capita in 2012.

The targeted funding, based on actual enrolments of low SES students, confirms the Government's commitments to its new widening participation targets. Importantly, all universities will be required to address these national targets through the new Higher Education Compacts to be negotiated with each university over the next few months. In such a policy context, the role of enabling and other preparatory programs will become increasingly important. While the 40% target focuses on people who will be 25 to 34 in 2025 (currently

aged 9 to 18 years old), many of these people will not qualify for university through the usual pathways and will need to be encouraged to consider university entry as adult entrants, often without Year 12 qualifications. These students are likely to require various forms of enabling education. Of even greater importance to enabling educators is the target to increase the proportion of enrolments from low socioeconomic backgrounds to 20% by 2020. Considering the very low rates of Year 12 completion amongst secondary students from low SES backgrounds, the low levels of achievement amongst far too many of those who do attempt Year 12, and the stubborn persistence of low SES participation rates over the last 20 years (James, 2008), universities will have to work extremely hard in attempting to reach this target. At a time when universities are being asked to increase participation levels while school leaver numbers are stable or declining, building demand for higher education amongst low SES populations will become crucial. The sector will not be able to rely on school leavers alone and 'second chance' opportunities will be increasingly important for those people who have left school in the past (and will do so in the future) without qualifying for university entry. Some of these people may have attempted Year 12 but failed to gain an adequate entry score but many will be several years away from formal education and may have only completed a year or two, or less, of secondary education. Such students will be significantly under-prepared for university study and will need the support of programs such as UniSA's Foundation Studies.

Conclusion

The term, 'enabling education' is used variously in the literature and elsewhere. Here, we have used it in the sense of foundational education that provides 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, as we have shown, by actively preparing them for success in their future undergraduate studies.

The post-Bradley future looks exciting for programs such as ours. It will be important, however for universities to resource such programs adequately. Enabling students, by their very nature, require greater levels of support than students who have completed Year 12. Many will be juggling study with family responsibilities, employment or both. Many will be lacking in confidence, struggling with social and cultural dislocation, some will be new English speakers, some studying at a distance, some Indigenous. It is critical to get the teaching, support and administrative requirements for such students right.

The University of South Australia's Foundation Studies and UniSA-PAL programs are

effective, successful examples of enabling education that serve well the University's equity mission. More than that, they demonstrate clearly that socioeconomic and educational disadvantage can be overcome and that 'second chance' does not in any way imply 'second rate' – quite the reverse: many of those who enter higher education by such non-traditional pathways as ours will go on to become some of their institution's highest achieving students and graduates.

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