

The UNE Pathways Enabling Program – a case study

Dr. Robyn Muldoon*; Debby O'Brien; Helen Pendreigh; Ingrid Wijeyewardene

Teaching and Learning Centre, University of New England

*Corresponding author

Abstract

Purpose

This paper describes an activity that attempts to remove barriers to higher education for people affected by previous educational disadvantage. It is the University of New England (UNE)'s recently launched Pathways Enabling Program for people without any other means of entering higher education. UNE is a small university in a regional setting in New South Wales. Educational disadvantage is more prevalent in rural areas of Australia because of distance from metropolitan centres and socio-economic disadvantage. UNE is a pioneer in providing non-traditional entry pathways that are not tied to high school matriculation results. With this program the intention was to provide a pathway that was not dependent on prior education at all. This program has special features that have proven to be very effective in breaking down the barriers that previously prevented people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds from accessing higher education. The paper describes the course, its carefully structured delivery of tertiary literacy development, the student cohort, and the results of its first full year of operation (2008).

Design

Student outcomes, gathered through standard unit evaluation instruments, informal feedback, via a student reflection component of the program and through an examination of subsequent enrolment data, were measured against the initial objectives of the program.

Findings

It appears that this program has removed, to varying degrees, constraints and disadvantages experienced by its participants and has an empowering effect on the majority of participants.

Introduction

The University of New England (UNE), Australia, is situated in a small city in regional New South Wales. UNE has long been committed to a flexible, open access policy which encourages students from diverse backgrounds to participate in higher education. The most recent initiative at UNE aimed at further removing barriers to participation in higher education is the UNE Pathways Enabling Program.

The Pathways Enabling Program, launched in first semester 2008, is available for students with no other pathway into university education. A higher than the national average number of students from rural and isolated backgrounds enrol at UNE (University of New England, 2008). This means that the University already meets the recommendation of the recent Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), which calls for a target of 20 percent of undergraduate enrolments from low socio-economic backgrounds by 2020. Membership of these groups is often an indicator of disadvantaged educational background resulting from isolation or lack of resources or opportunity (Arnison, 2000, 180; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). This in turn often means lower skills levels or cultural capital or 'product of education', as defined by Bourdieu (Brantlinger, 2003, 67; Grenfell & James, 1998, 21-22; Marginson, 1997, xiv).

Objectives of the Program

The Pathways Enabling Program is designed to make the benefits of higher education accessible to people who do not otherwise have the necessary skills and credentials. This is a common goal of enabling educators (Anderson, 2007; Ramsay, 2007). The UNE Pathways Enabling Program aims to do this by offering a combination of tertiary literacy development within the context of real university study. This is supported by a student centred approach responsive to participants' non-cognitive needs and the impact of negative personal histories, key principles of effective teaching in developmental education (Smittle 2003 cited in H. Anderson, 2007; Cantwell, 2007). The one year part-time study is fee exempt. Students who complete the course are eligible for entry to most UNE undergraduate courses. It is taught by distance education, so students do not need to leave their homes or livelihoods to take part in the program, provided they have computer and internet access¹.

¹ Internet access rates of UNE's rural and isolated student cohort have increased dramatically in recent years. In 2008 approximately 400 students (/17,000) applied for exemption from online study because of access problems. In 2009, just 49 exemptions were requested with 32 (/17,000) being because of unreliable internet access.

An analysis of student feedback, outcomes and progression patterns indicates that this program, which has some special features within the national context of enabling programs, has successfully removed, to varying degrees, the constraints and disadvantages experienced by its participants and has an empowering effect on the majority of its students.

Program Design

The Pathways Enabling Course comprises four units of study taken part-time over one year. In each semester students are required to enrol in two units: one Foundation Skills unit (FNDN 101 and FNDN 102) and one faculty-based unit from UNE's core curriculum.

| | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Semester 1 | FNDN 101 | FACULTY UNIT 1 |
| Semester 2 | FNDN 102 | FACULTY UNIT 2 |

Assessment is designed to both support student development and also reflect the style of assessment in destination programs of study.

Foundation Skills units

Enabling students can be said to be taking the first steps into an apprenticeship in an academic discipline or disciplines which adopt particular and often different approaches and conventions for understanding the knowledge of the discipline. The aim of the Foundation Skills units is to guide students through these first steps in their apprenticeship. The two Foundation Skills units are taken sequentially over two semesters. Many of the learning activities are based on the online learning resources made available for all UNE students by UNE's Academic Skills Office and Library. This strategy means that students are inducted into resources and related learning support programs and personnel very early on, and this ensures that they are not only aware of what is available for all UNE students throughout their time at UNE but also able to effectively utilise support materials and services to maximise their skills development and learning outcomes. In addition, at all times students are supported and mentored by academic skills lecturers in the four modules of each Foundation Skills unit. These four modules are outlined below.

Academic writing

The academic context in which Enabling students must become proficient shapes both the texts and the processes by which these texts are produced. The two Foundation Skills units step students through the process of academic writing and the textual features of the main written

genres that students are likely to encounter during their time at university. FNDN 101 takes a 'top-down' approach to academic literacy, focusing on holistic features of written academic texts, the different genres in use in academic contexts, and how to move from descriptive to more analytical writing. Students complete the first unit with an understanding of the macrostructure of an academic essay and the ability to write a short academic essay with a reference list. Through this process students also develop some initial competencies in identifying their problem areas in writing skills. In addition, students must actively participate in an online discussion to introduce them to critical thinking and reflective writing.

FNDN 102 adopts a 'bottom-up' approach to text production, by focusing on grammatical and stylistic features of academic writing that have been identified in the holistic tasks in FNDN 101. Students are assessed on these skills through a series of online quizzes that give them immediate feedback with the opportunity to redo this assessment to a satisfactory mastery level.

The rationale behind the 'top down' approach of FNDN 101 preceding the 'bottom up' approach of FNDN 102 in relation to writing skills is that concurrently with FNDN 101, students are undertaking a 'real' faculty-based unit of study. The majority of the faculty-based study units require students to produce a fully formed piece of academic writing in the first assessment task which usually occurs within the first 6 weeks of semester, so students are applying their skills as they are learning with the support and guidance of their academic skills lecturers.

Information literacy

The information literacy module of the Foundation Skills units covers the research process and academic integrity. Students work through the UNE Library's award winning research training program eSKILLS UNE and eSKILLS Plus online. As information literacy skills are an integral part of the research and writing process, this module and the academic writing module are combined. Students are thus shown not only how to analyse the features of the text, but also how the text is crafted and shaped through the various stages of text production.

Numeracy

This module focuses on basic mathematical problem solving skills and covers a broad range of numeracy and elementary mathematics topics aimed at preparing students for courses of study such as health sciences, education, psychology and commerce. The main approach to learning and assessment is the use of online quizzes and regular online discussion with a mathematics lecturer.

Computer literacy

Students learn their computer literacy skills incidentally as they are exposed to a wide variety of Internet technologies and end user applications in the course of their program. Also, students develop strong competencies and confidence with using the UNE virtual learning environment, such as Blackboard learning management system, eSubmission and TurnItIn, essential training for successful study in destination programs.

Critical thinking and reflective writing

A key focus of Foundation 101 is the critical thinking task in which students are introduced to the concept and process of critical thinking and its importance for academic study. This task comprises several smaller tasks involving reading, critical analysis and discussion postings with fellow students. The first component of this task has students reading articles about critical thinking and posting their comments on what they understand the process of critical thinking involves. The following tasks then require the students to put into practice those skills in a discussion task. Students are given a recent article on climate change and must look at features of the article such as the language used and the effect of this on the readers, the evidence used or ignored, the connections between the information and ideas in the main article and other articles on the same topics. In this way, students are given a comprehensive introduction into the process of critical thinking: distinguishing fact from opinion, basing an argument on evidence, evaluating sources and being aware of how language can be used to engage and persuade readers.

The second Foundation unit, FNDN102, includes a component in which students are asked to reflect on their learning experiences in discussions with other students in the unit. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to make the essential connections between the topics covered in both Foundation Skills units and their faculty-based electives. This exercise highlights the disciplinary conventions in all the units being studied. By sharing their reflections with others, students also come to recognise that there may be significant differences between disciplines in the way that these disciplines understand and deal with knowledge. At the same time it makes clear to the students that for any learning experience, they need to draw on their own knowledge and understandings. Moreover, as the students are composing texts for their reflections, there is also a secondary opportunity for the unit instructor to interact with students' literacy. This may be to formulate the language of reflection as well as to assist them with any incidental literacy issues that arise.

The Foundation units are offered completely online through the Blackboard learning management system. In addition, students are able to attend optional intensive schools which gives them the opportunity to come onto campus and meet with lecturers, support staff and fellow students.

Faculty-based units

The two faculty-based units which are studied concurrently with the Foundation Skills units are drawn from a select group of first year offerings. This comprises 22 units which are either disciplinary foundations units (such as *Foundation Mathematics*, *Foundation Chemistry*; *Foundation Physics*) or broad introductory units across the range of UNE disciplines (such as *Introduction to Financial Accounting*; *Critical and Creative Reasoning*; *Behavioural Foundations of Business*; *Introduction to Live Performance and Presentation*; and *Introduction to Roman History*).

Since the planning stages, the unit coordinators of the faculty-based units have had the assistance of instructional designers to help improve the design of their units, and to assist with aspects of the online delivery of the units to ensure that the Blackboard online learning platform is user friendly and does not present any difficulties for new and inexperienced students. This, of course, benefits not only Enabling students, but also all students enrolled in these improved units. Additionally, the coordinators of these units have been provided with further funding to allow for increased interaction with students and student support throughout the semester. This is delivered to all students enrolled in these units, not just Enabling students, so that no equity issues arise.

Assessment

Assessment with the Foundation Skills units is continuous, and it is formative rather than summative. Successful completion of the Foundations units requires completion of tasks only, irrespective of grades. Students are able to re-submit assignments after feedback from lecturers. While they are encouraged and supported to push their own boundaries, they are not compelled to do so. This ensures that the assessment tasks are non-threatening and the atmosphere friendly and responsive, an important aspect of enabling education (Anderson, 2007). At the same time, students are undergoing university assessment tasks in their faculty-based electives which are marked and graded according to university policy which requires both formative and summative assessment. This mix of assessment approaches means that

students are nurtured in their skills development whilst also, within that supportive environment, preparing for the reality of summative assessment.

Students

The students who have enrolled so far in the Pathways Enabling Program fall into two broad categories. The first group comprises students who have recently completed high school but who did not gain the entry requirements for entry into university. This group may also include students who left school early and spent one or two years in the workforce before deciding to pursue a university education. The other broad group includes mature-aged students who left school a number of years ago, have spent those years since in the workforce or raising children, and who now pursuing a career change or indeed to commence a career that requires higher education. Both these groups often lack the confidence required to undertake university study and also may have little understanding of the processes and practices of academic culture. These students are at first quite dependent and so it has been necessary to develop mentoring strategies to guide these students through their first semesters as well as to facilitate their understanding of the key academic literacies and independent learning skills. Such an approach has helped students to gain the necessary confidence as can be gleaned from their comments.

Special features of the Program

Some special features of this program have added to its appeal to students. It is not unusual for enabling programs to teach tertiary literacy skills within particular disciplinary contexts (The University of Newcastle, 2007). Nor is it unusual for enabling programs to be fee exempt (The University of Newcastle, 2007). It is unusual to include units of study from the university's core curriculum which are able to be accredited to destination courses (Bond University, 2009). These features appeal to students because of the clear benefits they offer. The most obvious benefit to potential students is the ability to gain a free 'headstart' in their destination course, and this has worked as a marketing tool. Another benefit is that some students discover their suitability/unsuitability for certain disciplines, and the structure of the Pathways Program allows them the opportunity to try others without financial or academic penalty. In the process, they gain new knowledge about themselves and are able to challenge previously held assumptions about their abilities and inclinations. Such personal discoveries are important in the light of the literature on retention, which attributes wrong choice of program of study as a common cause of attrition in the first year of higher education in Australia (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes, 2005).

What appears to be unique about the UNE Pathways program is the meshing of Foundation skills units with the core curriculum units. The most important benefit of this is the opportunity that is presented to students for critical reflection on their learning, the value of which is well known in terms of encouraging self-direction and self-knowledge in learning (Anderson, Boud, & Sampson, 1996; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1988; Boud & Walker, 1991). In this case, critical reflection is focussed on the application of foundation skills in context. Students are guided through this process through focused online group discussions with the unit coordinator and fellow classmates. This is reinforced through the reflective component of the second Foundations Skills unit. This aspect of the two Foundation units assists in the development of students' academic knowledge. It also allows students to become aware of possible differences in disciplinary discourses through their discussions with other students in this discussion forum. Thus, while the Foundation Skills units take a rather generic approach to academic literacies, these generic skills are juxtaposed with the disciplinary discourses that students are experiencing in their faculty-based units which Gee considers 'a cognitive necessity if we wish to develop meta-awareness and overt reflective insight on the part of the learners' (Gee, 1996, 141). At the same time students are inducted into the wider University's core support services and resources, which strengthens the 'head start' that participants have when they embark on their destination programs of study.

This is consistent with the social literacies literature which emphasises the importance of the development of social and academic skills through close association with expert participants in the destination course (H. Anderson, 2007). Not only are our Enabling students associating with experts in their destination course, they are actually participating in their destination courses and support programs. These features have assisted in not only breaking down barriers but also building bridges for Enabling students.

Learning outcomes

Student learning outcomes for the first Pathways Enabling cohort were gathered through standard unit evaluation instruments for the Foundations Skills units and informal feedback via the student reflection component of the FNDN 102 described above. These were valuable sources of information from students about particular aspects and aims of the Pathways Enabling Program. The following student quotations were representative of the overall feedback and therefore generalisable. They were chosen for their conciseness.

In relation to the approach taken to teaching and supporting the development of writing skills, students have said:

- It taught me how to write, evaluate, debate, process, set out a structure of ideas, and gave me many useful tools that have benefited me outside university (FNDN 101 Unit evaluation);
- It's great when you can start to see the improvements in your writing. I've noticed a difference not only in my study writing skills, but also my work writing abilities. My employer is extremely happy with my improvement and I am finding my essay marks reflect my learning (student reflection, FNDN 102).

In relation to the development of critical thinking skills, students have said:

- I need be able to successfully apply critical thinking to every aspect of my studies so as not to become sucked into falsified information on Internet searches. This unit requires me to be methodical and logical in my approach to the relevant materials and not to jump in with general assumptions of the subject matter and irrelevant unsourced quotations (Critical thinking component FNDN 101).
- The attributes of critical thinking are fundamental when composing an essay. If you have considered other opinions and can justify your final judgement then you are able to write stronger essays expressing your side of the debate. While studying at university you are encouraged to think for yourself, not everything is black and white, and to be able to come to your own conclusion on different subjects you need to be able to think critically (Critical thinking component FNDN 101).

In relation to confidence building, students have said:

- I am not a very opinionated person and to have an opinion and then back it up with some well researched facts was a great feeling (FNDN 101 unit evaluation).
- I was very worried as to how I would pass in the beginning as it all seemed a little overwhelming, however as time went on and I was able to get help when I needed it from both (unit coordinator) and other students my confidence grew. I have learnt so much in such a small amount of time, and look forward to the next semester (FNDN 101 unit evaluation).
- Overall, Foundation 101 has given me confidence, after being 14 years out of school (FNDN 101 unit evaluation).
- It has been an amazing introduction to Uni life, in fact, I think if I hadn't done it, I would have floundered and possibly given up. It has given me the confidence and skills I am going to need for the next 6 or so years (student reflection, FNDN 102).
- I started the first semester not really knowing whether I would make it through and I have come out of it feeling a lot better about my abilities and what I can achieve when I set my mind to it. I am starting the second semester hopefully a little wiser, a little better prepared and not so terrified!! (student reflection, FNDN 102).

In regard to the aim of the program to mesh the Foundations Skills units with the faculty-based units and to assist students to make connections with expert participants in the academic discourse, students made the following comments:

- The support was very helpful and consistent, the information was applicable to the other subject being studied concurrently (FNDN 102 Unit evaluation).
- This semester I have found the analytical and critical thinking portion of FNDN 101 particularly useful in my other (faculty) unit, SOCY101. This unit has been very different from my other (faculty) unit last semester. I have found the execution of the practical side of SOCY interesting and fun. The lecturer is also quite different, very helpful and professional, just a different style to the lecturer from my last unit. I believe we will come across this on a regular basis, it is to be expected that every lecturer will have their own style of teaching (student reflection FNDN 102).

Enrolment and Progression data

When the Program was launched at the start of 2008, it was hoped it would attract approximately 30 participants. In the event, expectations were vastly exceeded when 214 students enrolled. Of these 107 successfully completed the first Foundations Skills unit (FNDN 101). There were 56 withdrawals from the program before HECS census date and 51 did not complete the unit. Of the 107 who successfully completed FNDN 101, 84 also passed their Faculty unit.

Of 106 students who progressed to the second Foundations Skills unit (FNDN 102), 80 successfully completed the entire Pathways Enabling Program. Of these, 58 commenced degree studies in Semester 1, 2009 (4 subsequently withdrew); 9 commenced degree studies in Semester 2, 2009; 5 have stated their intention to commence degree studies in 2010; 3 applied to other universities; and 5 decided not to pursue further study.

Of the 107 students who did not complete FNDN 101, 56 withdrew from the Program. Personalised follow up by phone of these students ascertained that they withdrew because of time pressure, having miscalculated the amount of time needed to be devoted to study; because they realised that university study was not really an appropriate choice for them; and other personal reasons such as illness and family issues. A further 50 dropped out unofficially. It appears that when there is no financial imperative to officially withdraw, many students simply 'walk away' when they choose not to continue, despite being urged to undertake the withdrawal process. Personalised follow up ascertained that this group dropped out for similar reasons as the withdrawn group. One person who did not successfully complete FNDN 101 because of

illness was allowed to re-enrol the following semester and successfully completed the unit on the second attempt.

The 54 students who completed Semester 1, 2009 of their destination degrees enrolled in a total of 151 units of study between them. Results attained were 3 x High Distinctions; 14 x Distinctions; 49 x Credits; 55 x Passes; 18 x Fails; 4 x Fail Incompletes; and 8 special extensions of time were allowed for which results are not yet available. This means that the students passed 80 percent of the units undertaken with above average results (Distinction or High Distinction) in more than half of these (54%). The most popular degree choices were Bachelor of General Studies/Bachelor of Teaching; Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching.

Discussion

At first glance these data might indicate a high attrition rate in the 2008 cohort but given the reasons for the attrition, and in the light of these students' backgrounds and prior credentials, it is reasonable to conclude that the Pathways Enabling Program did not fail these people but gave them the opportunity to explore possibilities, learn about themselves and their future directions and choices. Those who chose to stay and/or persist succeeded in the first semester of their destination course at a rate surpassing the national average for first year study (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Krause et al., 2005). For these students clear benefits of the Pathways Enabling Program were increased confidence and self esteem and changed perceptions of themselves, important outcomes of enabling education (Willans & Seary, 2007).

Conclusion

The initial aims of the Pathways Enabling program were to enable access to university study for people who otherwise did not possess the necessary credentials, nor possible requisite 'cultural capital', and to prepare them for success in their destination courses through providing tertiary literacy development in a student friendly, responsive, supportive and contextualised learning environment. The enculturation of students into the higher education environment through a managed apprenticeship were core principles underpinning the design of the UNE Pathways Program. It appears that this approach has been successful when measured against these objectives and has removed, for most, the constraints and disadvantages previously experienced by its participants. Judging by the student feedback, this has clearly been for many an empowering experience. For those for whom the program did not achieve this, there were

other positive outcomes resulting from having had the opportunity to taste university study, test themselves and better understand the realistic options available to them.

Transition to destination programs after enabling education does not paint the full picture, however. Graduation from destination programs of study and employment in the field of choice are also important elements in the success of enabling education. Further research therefore needs to be carried out to fully ascertain the full impact of the UNE Pathways Enabling Program.

References

- Anderson, G., Boud, D., & Sampson, J. (1996). *Learning Contracts: A Practical Guide*. London: Kogan Page.
- Anderson, H. (2007). *Bridging to the Future: What works?* Paper presented at the 2nd Annual Conference of Enabling Educators - Enabling Education: What works?, Newcastle.
- Arnison, B. J. (2000). *School Recommendation as a Basis for Undergraduate Admission*. University of New England, Armidale.
- Bond University. (2009). Foundation program. Retrieved from <http://www.bond.edu.au/faculties-colleges/bond-college/foundation-program/index.htm>, July, 2009.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (1988). What is reflection in learning? In D. Boud, R. Keogh & D. Walker (Eds.), *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* (pp. 7-17). London: Kogan Page.
- Boud, D., & Walker, D. (1991). *Experience and Learning: Reflection at Work*. Geelong: Deakin University.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Brantlinger, E. (2003). *Dividing Classes*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Cantwell, R. (2007). *Incorporating Affective Development* Paper presented at the 2nd National Conference of Enabling Educators :Enabling Education - What works?, Newcastle.
- Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs. (2000). *Students 1999: Selected higher education statistics*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social Linguistics and Literacies : Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer press.
- Grenfell, M., & James, D. (1998). *Bourdieu and Education*. London: Falmer Press.
- Krause, K.-L., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnes, C. (2005). *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.
- Marginson, S. (1997). *Educating Australia: Government, economy and citizen since 1960*. Cambridge: CambridgeUniversity Press.
- Ramsay, E. (2007). *Enabling Education: A paradigm shift for the twenty-first century*. Paper presented at the 2nd National Conference of Enabling Educators: Enabling Education - What works? , Newcastle.
- The University of Newcastle. (2007). *Open Foundation (Information Booklet)*. Newcastle: The University of Newcastle.

Trotter, E., & Roberts, C. (2006). Enhancing the early student experience. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25(4), 371-386.

University of New England. (2008). *Planning and Institutional Research, Facts & Figures*, from <http://planning.une.edu.au/Statistics/overview/index.htm>

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2007). *"I'm not stupid after all"- Changing perceptions of self as a tool for transformation*. Paper presented at the 2nd National Conference of Enabling Educators: Enabling Education - What works?, Newcastle.