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Unlocking the potential within: A preliminary study of individual and community outcomes from a university enabling program in rural Australia

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Many rural communities have a pool of mature-aged local people seeking a career change or better lifestyle, which inevitably involves reskilling or upskilling. These people have strong local ties and are committed to their community. University enabling programs provide a bridge to higher education. This longitudinal study explores the impact on rural mature-aged people of participation in a university enabling program, in terms of further study and employment outcomes. The benefits of enabling programs extend beyond individuals, to family and friends, and beyond. These broader benefits include an enhanced local skills base in key industry areas,

and an increased awareness of the value of higher education within the community. Enabling programs are a powerful but under-valued tool in helping to unlock and harness the potential within rural communities, both in the medium and longer term.

Keywords: *educational aspirations, enabling program, outcomes of education, rural education, social inclusion*

Introduction

For rural communities, competition in the new globalised economy requires access to a highly skilled, creative and innovative workforce. Rural universities have a key role in rural development in terms of building the capacity of individuals, communities and industries, acting as a catalyst for place-based innovation (Allison & Eversole, 2008), and shaping community educational aspirations (Robinson, 2012). Many communities have a pool of mature-aged people who, for a variety of reasons, are unable or unwilling to leave their community for further study, but who are seeking opportunities for personal development, a better lifestyle or a career change. They are seeking ‘second chance’ learning opportunities that may not have been available when they were younger. Research indicates that educational aspirations and their realisation are linked to previous schooling experiences, and to parental factors such as their educational level, socioeconomic status and cultural capital (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Cullity, 2006; Winterton & Irwin, 2012). Gendered cultural expectations in rural communities, which favour employment over further study, such as apprenticeships for males, and post-school employment and marriage for females, have been found to influence the aspirations and post-school choices of rural students (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Cullity, 2006). Families without a tradition of further education may not have access to the necessary networks and connections that are important in building navigational capacity for higher education access and participation (Bok, 2010; Hawkins, 2014).

Alongside the economic imperative to increase university enrolments is a widening participation agenda designed to increase social inclusion within the higher education sector. The majority of rural

and metropolitan Australian universities offer enabling programs as a component of the widening participation agenda. University enabling programs are a key, but largely under-researched, strategy to facilitate the transition to further study for under-represented or non-traditional learners, including those from rural and remote areas. Such programs have operated in Australia for several decades (James, 2002). They provide a foundation for students who may not have a family tradition of higher education, to gain the skills, knowledge, confidence and connections necessary to succeed in undergraduate studies (McIntyre, Todd, Huijser, & Tehan, 2012). A relatively large proportion of enabling students are mature-aged (Cullity, 2006).

The study reported in this paper examines the impacts of a university enabling program in one rural community.

Literature Review

The published research base on the outcomes or benefits of enabling programs is relatively small. Much of the focus to date has been on retention and academic achievement within enabling programs, and the implications of this for transition to undergraduate study. Research indicates that the attrition rates of those enabling students who continue to undergraduate study are no higher than those of general entry students (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001), and that their academic performance in undergraduate study is similar to or better than general entry undergraduate students (Clarke, Bull, Neil, Turner, & Birney, 2000; Klinger & Tranter, 2009). Other research found that while the academic performance of enabling students was marginally below that of general entry students, the effect of this was mediated by age, in that older enabling students performed better than their younger counterparts (Cantwell et al., 2001). The effect of student age is supported by later research that identified younger enabling students (18-24 years) as being more at risk of poor performance and withdrawal from their enabling program, and more at risk of failure in their first semester of undergraduate study (Whannell, 2013; Whannell & Whannell, 2014). Performance and retention of older enabling students is linked to the perseverance and confidence more typically associated with this age group (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999).

There is a limited body of literature on the further study rates,

destinations and outcomes of enabling students, and of their pathway beyond university. Figures from the University of South Australia (Cocks & Stokes, 2013) and the University of Newcastle (Trounson 2012 cited in Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014) report 50-55% and 70% respectively of their enabling students continuing with undergraduate study. Whannell and Whannell (2014:118) report a 13% failure rate for the 92 regional university enabling students who had commenced undergraduate study, which they describe as a 'remarkable achievement' considering their academic background. A study by Andrewartha and Harvey (2014) reported that 30% of the cohort in the La Trobe University regional enabling program was guaranteed entry into selected undergraduate courses on the basis of their enabling program results.

Cooper, Ellis and Sawyer (2000) noted that just over half the students in their discipline-specific enabling program, which was designed to prepare students for entry into Nursing and Social Work courses, were offered degree places over a five year period. They reported that an unspecified number had gone on to complete a social work degree and commence work as a social worker, and made the point that study outcomes may not be realised in the short term, noting that four of the 20 students completing a social work degree in 1999 had a break of some eight years between their enabling and undergraduate courses. A recent study of 340 former Open Foundation Program students from 1995-2011 by Bunn (2013) reported that 45.6% had an improved economic status as a result of doing the program, and were engaged in a wide range of careers, largely in teaching, health, caring, management and public service professions. Preliminary findings from Albright and Fagan's (2014) study of a similar but smaller cohort also report improved employment opportunities, with a large percentage (71%) of former enabling students now working in a professional capacity.

In terms of continuation with postgraduate study, Cooper, Ellis and Sawyer (2000) reported that one former student in their enabling program delivered in a regional campus of the University of South Australia was about to complete their PhD, while Bunn (2013) also reported that a number (not specified) of former Open Foundation Program students from the University of Newcastle were engaged in postgraduate study at Honours, Masters and PhD level.

A small body of literature considers the benefits of enabling programs beyond further study and employment, exploring the transformative effect on individuals in terms of increased self-confidence and self-esteem, changes in attitudes and beliefs, greater tolerance of diversity, enhanced self-reflective capabilities and a valuing of knowledge (Crawford, 2014; Debenham & May, 2005; Ellis, Cooper, & Sawyer, 2001). Crawford (2014) interviewed nine former enabling students in their first semester of undergraduate study, and identified some of the more profound effects of enabling programs that enhance social inclusion. This included attitudinal change resulting in increased levels of intercultural understanding, which impacts on campus culture as well as on families and communities, and the development of academic leadership potential amongst former students, who organise study groups and mentor their undergraduate peers. Tolerance of diversity and the positive impacts of former enabling students in undergraduate classes have been touched on elsewhere in the literature (Cooper, Ellis, & Sawyer, 2000; Ellis et al., 2001). The potential leadership role of enabling students in terms of reproducing and generating knowledge was identified by Debenham and May (2005), whilst other literature reports the impacts on the children and families of enabling students in terms of better educational outcomes and study habits (Cooper et al., 2000) and continuation with further study (Albright & Fagan, 2014). Albright and Fagan's preliminary findings represent the most comprehensive coverage of Australian enabling program outcomes to date, identifying the ripple effect on individuals, families and communities.

The Study Site and the University Preparation Program (UPP)

The study is centred in North Western and Western Tasmania in a region known as Cradle Coast. The two main population centres are Devonport (population 24,615) and Burnie (population 19,329). More than one third of the population within the region has an educational level of Year 10 or equivalent (Institute for Regional Development, 2009). Labour force participation in the region is low, and the 8.3% unemployment rate is higher than the national average of 6.3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). In terms of higher education the region is served by the University of Tasmania's Cradle Coast Campus in Burnie. At 8.7%, University participation rates for the Cradle Coast

are significantly lower than state (14.3%) and national (18.8%) averages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Key industries in the region are manufacturing, retail, health care, agriculture, tourism and education and training (Institute for Regional Development, 2009; Tasmanian Government, 2012). While the local workforce has informal, on-the-job skills, the level of formal and professional-level skills is low (Institute for Regional Development, 2009). In the northern part of Tasmania, including Cradle Coast, 70% of managers have vocational education and training (VET) qualifications but no university qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

The University Preparation Program (UPP) was introduced by the University of Tasmania in 1996, with the aim of providing access to higher education for mature-aged people on the Cradle Coast, in order to address low levels of educational attainment within the region. The launch of UPP coincided with the opening of the Cradle Coast Campus in Burnie. UPP has since been extended to the Launceston and Hobart campuses. This study focuses only on UPP delivered at Cradle Coast. UPP runs for two semesters, however enabling students with good academic results can transition to undergraduate study without completing both semesters. The program delivers on-campus and distance units that focus on academic skills, such as written and oral communication, critical thinking and numeracy. Students become familiar with the university academic culture, and adept at navigating the physical and online environments. The course prepares students to make a smooth transition to undergraduate studies. Like most enabling programs the course is open access and fosters a supportive environment and the development of strong relationships between staff and students, and amongst students (Dawson, Charman, & Kilpatrick, 2013; Klinger & Wache, 2009). The University also offers an enabling program for Aboriginal students, called Murina. The findings reported in this study do not include Murina students.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to explore the medium to longer-term outcomes of participation in UPP for Cradle Coast students, in terms of study, employment and geographic mobility. Adopting an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2014), the study used

both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to explore the phenomenon. Qualitative data were used to illustrate and further explain the quantitative data. The mixed methods approach assisted in triangulation of data (Creswell, 2014).

Past cohorts of successful UPP students from 1996 to 2007 were targeted. Successful students were defined as those who had successfully completed at least one UPP unit. A range of strategies were used to contact former students, including mail, email, radio and print media, social media and university websites. Former UPP students were surveyed in order to understand what they had done since they completed UPP, in terms of further study and employment, community involvement, geographic mobility and future intentions. A total of 614 surveys were distributed, of which 126 were unable to be delivered. Fifty six surveys were completed, representing an 11.5% response rate. Survey data were entered into IBM SPSS version 21 for analysis. Frequencies were run to describe the data. Pearson's Chi-square tests were used to investigate associations between categorical variables, and Fisher's exact tests were used where all expected cell counts were less than 5.

Following completion of the survey, 25 respondents self-selected to participate in a semi-structured interview. Interview data were also collected from two key stakeholders: the former UPP coordinator and the former Cradle Coast Campus manager. Semi-structured interviews provide a depth of data that are difficult to gather by other means (Fontana & Frey, 2003) and allow for the collection of thick, rich data in order to better understand the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using inductive analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), and consistent with a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2014), interviews were coded, then a number of themes generated which informed further analysis and reporting of results. Quotations from participants are used extensively in the paper, and pseudonyms are used when reporting findings. Full details of methodology, results and recommendations were published in a report to the funding body (Johns et al., 2014).

The study has several limitations. It is based on a small, self-selecting sample of former UPP participants who had successfully completed at least one UPP unit, and favoured participants who had remained in the

Cradle Coast region. It is difficult to determine causal links between participation in UPP and longer-term outcomes such as employment, given that a range of other factors are likely to have contributed to these outcomes and the study was not designed to control for these factors. Any claims of causality come from the interviewees themselves, who provided comment on the extent to which participation in UPP influenced their later lives.

Results

Participant profile and motivation

Participants were broadly representative of the 1996-2007 UPP cohort in terms of gender (71% female), age (mainly in the 30-49 age group), and mix of previous educational levels, with one third having an education level of Year 10 or below. Approximately half were low socioeconomic status (SES). Thirty three (59%) survey respondents were first in their family to attend university. Most of those surveyed (82%) were still living in the Cradle Coast region. There were small numbers of respondents from each of the study years.

A number of interviewees identified that reasons for not previously undertaking university-level study were linked to expectations and aspirations within families and communities, which valued employment over further study. This is consistent with other research into rural aspirations and educational participation (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Cullity, 2006). Other reasons cited by interviewees were negative school experiences, peer pressure and the cost of further study.

The majority enrolled in UPP to prepare for university study (57%), with 23% citing personal development. The main motivation for enrolling was to gain qualifications to enhance career options:

Mine [reason for doing UPP] was that I got to the stage where, heading back to work, 'do I really want to be in retail for the rest of my life? Is this it? Let's explore a different path ...' (Gaylene)

I was looking at another career. ... I was quite fearful that I wouldn't be able to look after myself for the rest of my life as a hairdresser so ... I would have been on the poverty line on a pension ... just going from one low skilled job to the next and ... I couldn't bear that. (Ashley)

*... my [health] problems caught up with me and I just couldn't maintain farming and [job at the paper mill] and I knew I had to make a change and it had to be something off my feet.
(Daniel)*

Themes of resilience, and a strong sense of purpose and commitment to further learning, ran through the interviews. This is reflective of mature-aged student characteristics identified elsewhere (Archer et al., 1999). Interviewees described how UPP represented a personal challenge and, for some of the females in particular, a challenge to accepted gender roles and family values around further education. It also represented a chance to realise long-held aspirations:

*they [parents] didn't like it too much because ... it was a full time commitment ... so basically they got to talk to me and see me when I had spare time. ... at the point when I first said I was going to uni [my father said] 'oh just get another job and wait until you're married'; he just didn't understand ... he'd come from a different time. ... it did cause a bit of a ruckus actually.
(Wendy)*

Most interviewees had positive perceptions of their UPP experience because of the accessibility of the program through the Cradle Coast campus, and the supportive relationships developed amongst students and between students and staff.

New opportunities

Participation in UPP built individual capacity in three broad areas: foundations for change, confidence, and new opportunities. Interviewees talked about UPP as a catalyst for change, describing how they gained the skills and confidence to access new opportunities such as further study and employment. This paper focuses on new opportunities. Foundations for change and confidence are covered elsewhere (Johns et al., 2014)

Most survey respondents (88%) continued with further study post-UPP, mainly undergraduate study at UTAS (see Table 1 for field of study) and most (77%) completed their course.

Table 1: Field of study post-UPP

Field of study	Number	Percentage (%)
Natural and Physical Sciences	3	6
Information Technology	3	6
Engineering and Related Technologies	1	2
Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies	2	4
Health	3	6
Education	15	31
Management and Commerce	8	16
Society and Culture	12	25
Not stated	2	4
Total	49	100

Students who completed five or more UPP units (i.e. more than half) were significantly more likely to continue with further study than students who completed four or fewer units (100% vs 78%, $p=0.016$). Seventy two percent of those who continued with higher education undertook Bachelor degrees, while 28% chose to then continue with postgraduate study at Honours, Masters and PhD level. Two had subsequently gained their PhD. Interview data indicated that at least six others had plans to continue with further study at some stage in the future.

Some interviewees recognised how their own experience of UPP had helped to shape attitudes regarding higher education amongst family and friends:

University is a part of normal life; it's not something that just other people do ... not only has it broadened my horizons and my prospects but for my whole family. (Andrea)

[My children's friends would] see you working away on

assignments and go oh yeah, and then they see you graduate and they go OK, that leads to that path.’ (Barbara).

... my family saw the changes in me and saw I was making these small steps and then these great leaps forward in terms of learning and research skills ... Some of them then went onto Uni within the next couple of years and have now completed their own degrees, so I guess it had an effect on them as well. (Kevin)

The former Cradle Coast Campus manager reflected that the introduction of UPP made the community more

higher education conscious ... a person goes to UPP and they do one unit and then they drop out, and their friend discovers that they did it or their daughter knows they did it, the person who was there for a semester is having a significant impact on the people in their circle.

Participation in UPP assisted just over half the survey respondents (54%) to get a job or a better job. Some interviewees talked about UPP leading to undergraduate study, which subsequently led to employment opportunities locally and interstate:

I was trapped because I didn’t have any choices ... and the day I got my degree ... I opened the newspaper and there were three [social worker] jobs I could apply for and I applied for them all and I got two of them. (Ashley)

Now, as a person with a university degree, I was able to just go straight in [to the armed forces] as an officer. (Chris)

Others described how participation in UPP led directly to employment:

... the reason that I’ve got the [public service] job I’ve got now is because of UPP ... It was a combination of two things. The fact that I had done the course and the fact that one of the ladies I met there ... helped me do my resume and address the selection criteria ... I couldn’t have done that by myself ... So out of that I got the interview and then I got the job. (Kahla)

Table 2 shows occupational classifications post-UPP. There was a marked increase in the proportion of people employed in professional

roles (61% of those in employment post-UPP were professionals, compared with 12% pre-UPP). This is similar to the 71% of former enabling students now in professional work reported by Albright and Fagan (2014). Professional roles included teachers, administrators in government and private enterprise, and university researchers. Many of the interviewees who had secured different employment post-UPP compared with pre-UPP, indicated their new employment offered better job security, satisfaction and remuneration.

Table 2: Occupational classification post-UPP

Occupational classification	Number	Percentage (%)
Manager	3	8
Professional	22	61
Technician and Trade Worker	1	3
Community and Personal Service Worker	5	14
Clerical/Administrative Worker	2	5
Sales Worker	0	0
Machinery Operator and Driver	1	3
Labourer	1	3
Not stated	1	3
Total	36	100

Most participants in the study chose further study that would lead to local employment in education, allied health, agriculture, or to employment in management roles. All interviewees who were awarded an Education degree reported they had gained local employment in that field. As the former UPP coordinator noted:

the majority of the mature-aged people saw it [UPP] as a means of remaining here in an environment where employment is hard to find in many cases and made more secure by the level of professionalism. So teachers or nurses or agricultural scientists with formal qualifications are more likely to find employment in their industry than people without.

Post-UPP, a greater proportion of females were participating in the paid workforce compared with males (72% vs 44%) and the difference was statistically significant ($X^2(1) = 4.1, p = 0.043$). Prior to UPP, the proportion of females and males in the paid workforce were similar. Survey findings also show that a greater proportion of females compared with males reported increased self-confidence and self-esteem from participation in UPP and again the difference is statistically significant (92% vs 69%, $p = 0.038$). Melissa, now a teacher, was seeking financial independence following a failed relationship. She reflected that UPP had made a 'huge difference ... I certainly wouldn't be where I am now and I wouldn't have the career I have without UPP'. Gina recognised that she lacked employability skills after many years at home caring for her children. She completed UPP and continued with, but did not complete, undergraduate study. She is now a successful project manager, with a career that has seen her manage projects worth over \$20 million.

Discussion and conclusions

By taking a longitudinal perspective we have been able to demonstrate how participation in UPP facilitated social inclusion for mature-aged learners, leading to increased financial security and/or independence. Females, in particular, appeared to enjoy economic and social benefits post-UPP. While a greater proportion of females were in paid employment post-UPP compared with males, it should be noted that this also reflects broader employment trends in the region following the Global Financial Crisis, in terms of declining male employment and increasing female employment (Tasmanian Government, 2012). For many male and female participants, qualifications gained led to local employment in key industry areas, thus increasing and expanding the skills base of the local workforce. The shift to higher-status employment, and the associated rewards in terms of remuneration and job security, have also been identified in other recent research (Albright & Fagan, 2014; Bunn, 2013), and indicate increased capacity of these individuals to contribute to the region economically and socially. Increased skill levels in priority areas such as agriculture, and increased management capacity, are necessary to drive and sustain growth within the region (Tasmanian Government, 2012).

The fact that most survey respondents continued with and completed

further study at the University of Tasmania suggests that not only was UPP a bridge or transition to tertiary study for this group of mature-aged students, but also a source of well-prepared undergraduate students for the university. It confirms other research regarding successful academic performance of enabling students who continue with undergraduate study (Clarke et al., 2000; Klinger & Tranter, 2009), particularly mature-aged students (Cantwell et al., 2001). Completed or planned postgraduate study is a clear indication that UPP has engendered lifelong learning amongst some participants, and is consistent with findings from other studies regarding the postgraduate pathways of former enabling students (Bunn, 2013; Cooper et al., 2000). However, progression to and completion of undergraduate study was only one avenue to success for this group of participants. As Kahla and Gina demonstrate, participation in UPP led to a successful employment outcome without the completion of undergraduate study, suggesting that the confidence, skills and relationships developed through UPP were applicable across multiple contexts.

The influence of UPP as a place-based capacity-building initiative (Allison & Eversole, 2008) should not be overlooked. It is unlikely that the same outcomes would have been realised if UPP had been available only by distance from another campus. UPP was an accessible local option that prepared mature-aged students for further study and employment opportunities that they may not otherwise have accessed. The study provides early evidence that the presence of UPP offered through the Cradle Coast Campus, as well as the visible success of former students and their influence as role models and potential change agents, contributed to broader attitudinal change regarding higher education. This builds on findings from earlier studies regarding the impact on children and other family members of enabling students (Cooper et al., 2000; Debenham & May, 2005), and provides further evidence of the broader community outcomes touched on by Albright and Fagan (2014). In the current study, interview participants identified the way they influenced the aspirations of their family and others in the community, while the former Cradle Coast Campus manager described the ripple effect of UPP completion on broader community attitudes towards higher education. The ripple effect of enabling programs was also identified by Albright and Fagan (2014). The influence that former enabling students have on others builds on recent research (Crawford,

2014) that identified leadership in terms of the mentoring undertaken by former enabling students in undergraduate courses. The contribution of UPP and its participants to attitudinal change is important, given the region's low university participation rates (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), and given that historically this community had been characterised by a culture in which employment was valued over further learning (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Cullity, 2006). The findings suggest that former UPP participants, as trusted and credible community members, have the potential to shape educational aspiration within the region (Bok, 2010; Hawkins, 2014). Further research into the leadership potential of former enabling students is needed to confirm the nature and extent of this influence.

The study has identified new directions for research into the medium to longer-term outcomes of enabling programs. It highlights the need for longitudinal research that looks beyond the first semester of undergraduate study and that considers individual and whole-of-community outcomes, including transition out of university and beyond. The complexity of rural communities means that while survey data are useful in giving a picture of rural demographics and patterns of behaviour, qualitative research is also needed to tease out the varying aspirations, motivations and life courses of the individuals who live in rural communities. Further research is needed to better understand the nature and scope of the medium to longer-term outcomes from enabling programs and the extent to which these outcomes are mediated by student characteristics and rural context. Such research would benefit from an examination of successful and less successful student outcomes and the reasons for this.

This study favoured students who enjoyed successful outcomes. While it is not intended to imply that all enabling students experience similar outcomes, it is clear that participation in an enabling program can and does have a transformative effect. The changes in the lives of individuals, and the way this impacts on the community, are compelling and powerful narratives about the social and economic value of enabling programs in rural communities. Issues in relation to the development of capacity in rural communities are complex and require multiple solutions. Enabling programs are part of the solution, and represent a powerful but under-valued tool in helping to unlock the potential within.

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