New Students and Enabling Pedagogies: Supporting Students from Diverse Backgrounds through a University Enabling Program

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Abstract: The 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (HE) set widening participation targets to diversify Australian universities (Bradley et. al, 2008). This paper discusses effective enabling pedagogies for new students through a case study of an enabling program at an Australian university college. The Foundation Studies program is designed to provide access and transition to university for students from equity groups. In 2008, 16% of university enrolments came from low socio-economic status backgrounds (low-SES) and the HE Review set a target of 20% by 2020 (Bradley et. al 2008); in comparison, 50% of students at this college identify as low-SES (UniSA 2013). UniSA College students include refugees and new Australian citizens, with 20% of students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds (UniSA 2013). The College was established in 2011 and has seen rapid growth of student numbers, as well as a diverse student cohort. The Foundation Studies program is free for Australian citizens and humanitarian visa holders, offering access to university with minimal financial risk. Klinger and Murray note that the retention rates in enabling programs are usually around 50% (2012), whereas the current success rate for Foundation Studies is 60% (UniSA 2013). Students from equity groups attain success at the same rate as other College students (UniSA 2013) suggesting that differences are normalised in this supportive environment. Given the more diverse backgrounds and limited educational experience of those undertaking College programs, informed educational practices and enabling pedagogies are required to support these new students. Reflection on educational practice at the College highlights three approaches which are particularly valuable as enabling pedagogies: transition pedagogy, inclusive practice and critical pedagogy. On completion of the program, students apply for competitive GPA-based entry to undergraduate degrees. In 2012, 85% of the students who completed College programs were offered a place in an undergraduate degree at the University of South Australia (UniSA 2013). The success of this College model highlights the importance of enabling pedagogies and extended support services for widening university participation and supporting diverse student needs.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Enabling Program, Enabling Pedagogies, Diverse Students, Widening Participation.

Introduction

Widening participation policy is increasing student diversity at Australian universities. While diverse classrooms provide many benefits, specific challenges are also raised. Biggs and Tang (2011, 3-4) argue that "massification" is the most significant change occurring in the current university system, that 'increased diversity challenges teaching', and they suggest that 'coping with academic diversity in the universities of the twenty-first century becomes largely a matter of improving teaching and learning' (2011, 13). As student cohorts diversify, varied teaching approaches are needed in order to support and augment the range of skills and knowledges this heterogeneous group brings to the academy. Academics must ask how to best teach these new students, and explore appropriate, inclusive pedagogies.

Enabling programs are designed to provide access and transition to university for students from under-represented or equity groups. Therefore, these programs can offer insight into working with students from diverse backgrounds with limited educational experience. This paper discusses enabling pedagogies for new students, through a case study of an enabling program at an Australian university college. Reflection on educational practice at this College suggests that enabling pedagogies should focus on transition, inclusion and criticality. This paper will outline a successful College model for teaching diverse students and provide strategies for embedding

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relevant pedagogies. This paper will also consider the role of enabling programs in widening university participation and supporting diverse student needs.

Diversity in Higher Education (HE)

A more diverse student cohort provides many educational benefits. Increased diversity has been shown to support the development of critical thinking, greater understanding of broad perspectives, increased communication skills and the development of 'professional identities' (Shaw 2009, 324). Interaction with diverse peers encourages intellectual engagement and increases problem-solving skills, while interacting with students from other races is particularly beneficial for 'cognitive development' (Bowman 2010 cited in Valentine et al. 2012). Educational diversity is particularly valuable for those students with limited university preparation, who gain 'substantially greater critical thinking benefits from engagement in interactional diversity activities' (Loes, Pascarella and Umbach 2012, 19). Academics are aware of these benefits and 'faculty support diversity on campus', although many are still grappling with the challenge of teaching more diverse cohorts (Valentine et al. 2012, 7).

Australian university student numbers more than doubled between 1989 and 2007 (Dobson 2010); however it is only recently that policy has been enacted to encourage universities to better reflect the diversity of the Australian population. 26 per cent of the recent growth in the Australian university market was comprised of international students (Dobson 2010), leading to more diversity on campus. However, the identification of Australian HE equity groups acknowledged that the following groups are under-represented at university: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI), Disability, Low-socio economic status (Low-SES), Rural and Isolated, Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) and Women in non-traditional areas (NBEET, cited in Klinger and Murray 2011). The Labor Federal Government initiated the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education, which set aspirational targets for HE participation; namely, that 'by 2020, 20% of enrolments (come) from low SES backgrounds...by 2025, 40% of 25-34 year olds hold a bachelor degree' (Bradley et al. 2008, xiv)[1]. These targets were established in order to build the nation as a knowledge economy. This approach also assists individuals in fulfilling educational aspirations, provides greater empowerment through social inclusion, and supports societal transformation as more people are able to realise their intellectual potential (Gidley et al. 2010).

While the benefits of diversity are clear, widening participation in HE exposes tensions between social justice approaches and the hegemonic discourses of elite institutions. As Shaw notes 'what constitutes a quality university (is)... often associated in the public mind with privilege' (2009, 326). The traditional Australian university student is white, able-bodied, aged under 25 and uses good grades to transition directly from high school to university where they study full-time; these students typically come from 'high socio-economic status backgrounds that equipped them with the kind of cultural capital that provides a head start in the academic environment' (Munro 2011, 115). Within this stereotype, race, age and class politics are evident. Widening participation can be seen to threaten the status quo, inciting moral panics wherein 'mass equals lower standards and "dumbing down"' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2010, 599). Privileged groups question the ability of HE institutions to produce quality graduates from increasingly diverse entrants. However, Shaw (2009) argues that excellence and equity can comfortably co-exist, providing universities focus on social justice; observing that:

> Diversity may lead to much that defines excellence by any common standard, such as a welcoming environment in which all are supported to succeed, a reflection of the social justice aims of society and a willingness to embrace diverse forms of knowledge.

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[1] The change in Federal Government at the 2013 Australian elections is likely to lead to a shift in policy; however these policy targets are still in use at the time of writing.

Excellence may also be claimed in relation to improved learning outcomes for students. (Shaw 2009, 328).

A social justice approach also raises questions about traditional entry mechanisms and argues that a range of pathways should be made available. As 'prior educational attainment is the indicator most often used as a proxy of "intelligence" in discerning who "merits" entry to elite HE', there must also be a greater recognition of the limitations of this meritocracy and 'the role of various social factors in determining educational attainment... These factors, such as social class, ethnicity and disability, may indeed be considered fairly strong determinants of educational choice-making and success' (Shaw 2009, 327). If universities can provide pathways for students to access HE, despite limiting social factors, then there may be a genuine opportunity to widen participation. Pathways, such as enabling programs, can provide a supportive context for individuals to determine whether they are able to flourish in the HE environment. Here, institutions can ensure students are equipped for the rigours of university study, while also minimising previous educational disadvantage. In this way, universities can provide socially just approaches while also maintaining quality.

The Changing Student Body

Enabling programs provide a more diverse student cohort with a supported transition to university. Foundation Studies at UniSA College is a one year, Commonwealth-supported enabling program. This program provides an introduction to university study, wherein students develop academic literacies and other prerequisite knowledge in a supportive environment, while earning a GPA for competitive undergraduate entry. The program is fee-free[2] and available to Australian citizens, permanent residents and those on Humanitarian visas. This open access pathway supports committed students while they develop required knowledge and skills, in order to gain entry to undergraduate study. Students who have completed secondary school and attained an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) may apply to study a two year Diploma. Three discipline-based Diplomas are available, in which the first year contains Foundation Studies courses and the second year includes courses from the first year of selected undergraduate degrees, alongside extra support from the College. Providing that the students pass the 16 required Diploma courses, they then gain guaranteed entry into the second year of selected undergraduate degrees. In this way the College provides an open access program with competitive GPA-based entry to university, and a supported two-year transition for those with recent educational experience.

University in Australia has traditionally been skewed towards upper and middle class enrolments; consequently, equity in Australian higher education is focused on achieving more proportional demographic representation in university graduates (Gale and Parker 2013). For example, while 25% of the population are low-SES, the higher education sector has struggled to lift low-SES participation above 16% and 2020 targets aim for 20% representation (Lomax-Smith, Watson and Webster 2011, 117). However, UniSA College provides a welcoming environment for students from low SES backgrounds, who now comprise 50% of the student cohort (UniSA 2013). In 2011, people with a disability comprised 8% of the Australian population and 4.23% of the commencing undergraduate cohort (DIISTRE students 2011 cited in Gale and Parker 2013), yet 11.3% of students at the College that year identified as having a disability (UniSA 2013). Students from NESB backgrounds comprised 4.66% of the wider population and 3.92% of the undergraduate population in 2011 (DIISTRE students 2011 cited in Gale and Parker 2013), however this group comprised 20.7% of the 2011 College student cohort, with many studying on humanitarian visas (UniSA 2013). A comparison of DIISTRE statistics (DIISTRE students 2011 cited in Gale and Parker 2013) with UniSA College Foundation Studies

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[2] Tuition is free, however the Student Amenities fee may apply.

access percentages (UniSA 2013) shows that College enrolments are above proportional representation for all surveyed equity groups[3], demonstrating that the College provides access to students with complex needs, from a broad range of backgrounds.

However, providing access is only the first step in widening university participation. Students must also stay engaged with the curriculum, feel a connection to the institution and, ultimately, achieve success through their studies. It is important to note that it is inaccurate to apply standard university indicators of success to enabling programs, so the College student success rate must be considered in context and is in line with best practice. Klinger and Murray note that the retention rates in enabling programs are usually around 50% (2012), whereas the current success rate[4] for Foundation Studies is 60% (UniSA 2013). Students from equity groups attain success at the same rate as other College students (UniSA 2013) suggesting that differences are normalised in this supportive environment.

For the majority of College students, success is found through transitioning to their preferred undergraduate degree, therefore the success of this approach may also be seen in how well the College prepares students for undergraduate study. 85% of the students who complete College programs are offered a place in an undergraduate degree at the University of South Australia (UniSA 2013). As the College opened in 2011, a comprehensive analysis will be possible from late 2014 onward, once alumni have completed their undergraduate degrees; however, early indicators are positive, with both alumni and undergraduate staff commenting on how effectively the enabling program prepares students for undergraduate study. Positive word of mouth has seen a rapid growth in demand, with student enrolments tripling between 2011 and 2013, to almost 1000 current students at the College (UniSA 2013). The success of this College model highlights the importance of enabling pedagogies and extended support services for widening university participation and supporting diverse student needs.

New Students and Enabling Pedagogies

Given the more diverse backgrounds and limited educational experience of those undertaking College programs, informed educational practices and enabling pedagogies are required to support these new students. This section will discuss both the extensive support provided and the pedagogies implemented to help students succeed at university.

At UniSA College, support takes two forms, focussing both on individual needs and general approaches which support all students. Deliberate approaches have been designed to address the specific needs of individuals, particularly those from equity groups. These specific supports include the Australian Indigenous Mentors Experience (AIME) program, Language Learning Advisors, Disability Advisors, and financial support, scholarships and resources. In addition to these specialised supports, broad inclusive approaches are implemented to support all student needs. A calendar of events assists the students throughout the year with Orientation, information for family and friends, careers advice, support applying for further study, practical strategies for managing stress, effective study practices, and a number of social events to support networking.

Academics engage in reflective practice and communicate frequently about teaching issues, ensuring that support is provided across the program. In this way, all students benefit from the approaches implemented to address specific student needs. As Fuller et al. (2008, 3) note 'many of the adjustments introduced to help disabled students... are good teaching and learning practices which benefit all students'. Reflection on educational practice at the College highlights three approaches which are particularly valuable as enabling pedagogies: transition pedagogy, inclusive practice and critical pedagogy. By considering each of these pedagogies in turn, this case study will provide implementable strategies for enabling program practitioners.

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[3] The enrolment of women in non-traditional areas was not assessed in this data.
[4] Success is defined here as the successful completion of program requirements.

'Welcome To University': Supported Transition

Commencing students suffer anxiety and stress during transition to HE. Nelson et al. note that students from equity groups may face 'greater challenges' during transition to university (2012, 85), and Christie observes that non-traditional students are particularly at risk of suffering negative emotions during transition (2009); therefore, it is of particular importance that enabling programs provide supported transition to students. Transition pedagogy is strongly aligned with the social justice goals of enabling programs, seeking to 'ensure that all students, whatever their entering backgrounds, are provided with every opportunity to access equitably the transformative effects of higher education'(Kift, Nelson and Clarke 2010, 13). Academic and professional College staff view the enabling program as a transitional time, working with the broader institution to provide a supported and effective transition for the students, which 'optimises the opportunity for student engagement, provides timely access to support and the development of a strong sense of belonging' (Kift, Nelson and Clarke 2010, 13). UniSA College staff are aware of student needs and implement deliberate strategies to make transition more manageable, working to build rapport and minimise student stress. As one Foundation Studies focus group participant observed:

> I was very anxious before I started. I dropped out of high school and never learnt how to write an essay. The support from the teachers here has boosted my confidence and now I believe I can actually study at uni. (UniSA 2013).

The College provides a supported introduction to academic culture, which commences at Orientation, and is maintained throughout the year. Orientation provides a comprehensive welcome for new students; including a student panel, student mentors, academic mentors, learning advisors and individual enrolment sessions. Students are encouraged to ask questions, seek help and foster social networks and academic supports, both in the College and the broader university. Orientation identifies positive practices and supportive networks which students can access throughout their studies, helping to minimise negative emotions and encourage successful study outcomes.

As studies commence, further approaches are implemented to assist students in a successful transition to university culture. Students are encouraged to build peer networks and access support services. Students study at a CBD campus of the university. This allows an authentic transition to the university environment, as students become comfortable on the physical campus and work to the university timetable. On the campus, students have access to designated College facilities, which includes a common room where students can access computers, meet with academics and build peer networks. In this way, students are able to experience the broader university while still receiving specific support through an identifiable 'home' on campus.

Student anxiety often relates to negative previous educational experiences, so enabling programs support students to develop positive learner identities. College academics design and deliver student-centred course content to support this development. For example, a study practices quiz in the first week assists the students in understanding different learning styles and developing study practices which meet their individual needs. Students are encouraged to identify personal goals and reflect regularly on their progress towards these goals. Course discussions actively challenge previous educational experiences, build trust and create a positive culture which supports the development of learner identities. As Gallacher et al. (2002, 505) observe in their research, students 'indicated that the atmosphere of the college and the relationships that they established with their tutors were important in enabling them to become more committed to their role as learners'. The positive atmosphere and supportive staff at UniSA College encourage students to grow as adult learners: '(the lecturer) is very helpful and is willing to help those who need it. Thanks to her help I felt very comfortable adjusting to a university lifestyle' (Student Evaluation of Teaching 2012).

The College models success and positive practices for diverse students. One example of this is seen in a course at the end of the program, where finishing students write letters of advice to the next generation of College students. The commencing students receive these welcoming letters when they begin their studies the following year. In this way, finishing students model success for new students, while also showing that this outcome is attainable through effective study practices, thereby building confidence and knowledge in commencing students. At the College, diversity is respected and seen as beneficial. Diverse College alumni return as student mentors to assist commencing students, provide advice for managing complex issues, and further model success. In this way, diversity is seen as a positive aspect of learning at the College.

> Student diversity in and of itself may be positive or negative depending on how it is managed…structural diversity combined with a positive campus climate, a conscious use of "difference" as a curriculum resource and structured opportunities for students to interact with diverse peers both in and out of the formal learning environment would seem to bring positive learning benefits for all students. (Shaw 2009, 326).

Through these varied approaches, a supported transition is provided for a diverse range of commencing students.

'You Belong Here': Inclusive Practices

Inclusive practices assist diverse students to succeed at university. Inclusive practices also align with the social justice aspect of widening participation, as delivered via enabling programs; as Hockings notes 'underpinning the concept of inclusive learning and teaching are values of equity and fairness' (2010, 3). The goal is to remove obstacles based on life circumstance, so that all students may participate on equal grounds. Inclusive approaches inform the development of curriculum and co-curricular activities at the College.

Inclusive practices are employed at the College in order to support students to fully participate in university education. As Tinto observes, university classrooms which encourage student success share certain attributes; namely, 'expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement' (2012, 4). College academics practice student-centred, constructivist pedagogy. Teaching is grounded in respect for individuals, awareness of diversity and a desire for students to succeed (Cocks and Stokes 2013). College staff work to build rapport with students, through inclusive strategies, such as learning names, identifying individual interests, identifying learning styles and goals, using humour and showing respect. Positive staff attitudes inform student attitudes and College culture, helping to involve students and engage them with learning, as illustrated by student feedback:

> (The lecturer) made each tutorial interesting, fun and a fantastic learning experience. I wanted to make sure I attended every tutorial, knowing I would learn something new every time. (Student Evaluation of Teaching 2013).

> (The lecturer) took the time to get to know everyone in the tute. Always positive towards things and very helpful. (Student Evaluation of Teaching 2013).

Assessment and weekly topics are designed to engage students so deep learning can occur. Hockings observes that one inclusive approach is to 'design curricula that learners can customise to suit themselves' (2010, 26). In the College, this occurs in a number of courses, such as 'University Studies' and 'Information Skills', where students develop their own topic based on their research interests, with assistance from teaching staff. As Conley notes, in order to ensure that students are ready for university, 'colleges should be clearly focused on enabling students to develop the key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge and self-management skills

necessary for college success' (2008, 26). Academics meet regularly to discuss course content and ensure delivery is timely across the program; this regular communication helps ensure assessments are staggered and that the program helps students develop the necessary mix of strategies, knowledge and skills. In this way, staff praxis ensures that academic literacies are embedded alongside content knowledge and that the program takes a scaffolded approach, supporting the development of the learner. Early tasks build confidence and capabilities, while later tasks allow the student to fully demonstrate their abilities. For example, the first assessment in a core course at the start of the year is a multiple choice quiz; however a final assessment at the end of the year is a 2000 word research paper on an advanced topic.

Clear communication is important for inclusive education, so academics strive to set clear expectations and guide students to achieve these. Academic and professional staff communicate in a friendly and supportive manner, while still building requisite knowledge and behaviour. This can be seen in the academic integrity process, which is framed as educative rather than punitive (Cocks and Stokes 2013). Clear expectations are also evident in thoughtful assessment design and thorough explanation of assessment requirements. For example, in a number of courses the Research Skills Development rubric (Willison, Le Lievre and Lee 2010) is used for assessment. Prior to assessment submission, the tutor discusses the rubric with students, clearly identifying what is needed to achieve a high grade for a research task, thereby demystifying the process and making high grades more achievable. This discussion also provides an opportunity for students to seek clarification about aspects of the assessment. Here, clear expectations and high expectations are important, so teaching staff use this exercise to explain both the marking process and the purpose of the exercise, while also conveying high expectations of the student. As Tinto reasons 'high expectations are a condition for student success, low expectations a harbinger of failure.... no one rises to low expectations' (2012, 4). Students also take the opportunity to bring in drafts to academic drop-in consultation times, in order to seek guidance: 'I like giving her drafts as she gives constructive feedback which boosted my confidence' (Student Evaluation of Teaching 2013). This communicative approach has been positively received by students, as it promotes engagement and understanding: 'I was able to understand all the tasks given to me. In the past I wasn't very engaged in my learning experiences' (Student Evaluation of Teaching 2013). In these ways, inclusive approaches encourage students to engage more effectively with their study and increase the likelihood of a more positive educational experience for all.

'You Can Do This!': Critical Pedagogy

Enabling programs are specifically designed to redress societal inequities and this can be further achieved through critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is useful here as enabling program students often come from societal groups that have been oppressed by dominant systems. As Kress states, 'embracing critical pedagogy, as a form of action, involves making a commitment to fighting oppression that emerges from and maintains these power inequalities that negatively impact people's lives' (2011, 262). Critical pedagogy informs teaching practice at UniSA College. College curriculum is designed to help students build critical understandings of power and society, identifying means of oppression, while developing ways to circumvent or challenge systematic limitations. Embracing critical pedagogy assists academics in recognising that teaching is a political act which privileges certain perspectives, and this awareness helps academics develop educational experiences that are both empowering and transformative (Freire 1994).

College academics strive to create learning experiences which are meaningful to those who are new to the university environment. Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti emphasise the importance of acknowledging that students bring diverse knowledge and skills, and valuing these existing 'funds of knowledge' in educational contexts (2013). College courses use existing knowledge as a bridge toward academic understanding. Course content unpacks complex concepts and explores

theory through accessible examples which recognise students' practical and cultural knowledge, such as media texts. Students develop academic literacies while researching areas of interest, based on their experiences; in this way students are 'learning to read the word through a reading of the world' (Freire 1994, 29). Kincheloe asserts that critical teachers must 'take student experience seriously... (and) attempt to discern the ways students give meaning to their lives' (2011, 116). Through discussion, students and academics are able to reflect on experiences and help students to build confidence and capabilities as university students.

UniSA College Foundation Studies assists students to build critical thinking and criticality, by providing new ways of understanding the world around them. The program includes courses in critical literacy, information literacy and sociology. Critical thinking skills are embedded across the curriculum, where students critique dominant messages and imagery, and create new understandings through discussion and research; in doing so, students 'disengage themselves from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations in order to exert more control over their every day lives' (Kincheloe 2000, 24 cited in Walker 2010, 906). When offered their choice of research topics, some students choose to research specific systematic limitations and oppression which have had personal impact. In recent research essays, for example, a female refugee who arrived in Australia by boat examined the development of Australia's border control policies and the political rhetoric around these policies, while an indigenous man assessed the cultural and medical reasons for the life expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Student Evaluation of Teaching (2013) shows that some students identify this topic selection as the best element of the core course, as it provides the opportunity to critically unpack issues which have shaped their lives.

Critical pedagogy assists students and academics to understand the political role of education, and provides the opportunity to critique existing structures and imagine alternatives. While this approach assists all students to develop more criticality; for some, the chance to critically examine the issues which have shaped their experiences is inspirational and the start of a lifelong academic journey.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates how enabling programs can work to achieve the social justice aims of widening participation policy through informed pedagogy. The College model provides access, supported transition and a low-risk entry to HE, wherein students can develop academic literacies, learn positive study practices and build content knowledge for undergraduate success. An open access pathway which supports students to develop requisite knowledge and skills, in preparation for competitive GPA-based entry to undergraduate programs, presents a balanced approach to improving HE access while maintaining quality. As more diverse students enter university, academics need to identify effective teaching approaches to address varied needs and support successful outcomes. As demonstrated by the success of UniSA College, enabling programs which support students through educational experiences that embrace transition pedagogy, inclusive approaches and critical pedagogy will assist students' intellectual and emotional transition to university. Further development of enabling pedagogies will help to strengthen the role of enabling programs in providing access and supported transition to university studies for new students. In this way, enabling programs can actively play a role in ensuring that more people realise their aspirations and potential through university study, while simultaneously supporting societal transformation through greater social inclusion.

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