Southern Cross University
Case study report

The impact of an enabling program on the regional student undergraduate experience.

Janet A Taylor

Tina van Eyk

This case study is one of eight studies which contribute to a wider project:

Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities

http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/

Executive summary

This report describes the impact of completing the enabling program, Preparing for Success Program (PSP) at Southern Cross University (SCU) on student experience in undergraduate study. Students who completed PSP and who were now enrolled in the second year of their degree studies were interviewed. The interview data were coded using both grounded theory and Kahu's framework.

The interviews revealed that completing PSP had significant impact on the students' undergraduate experience. The students were more confident, possessed the necessary academic skills including management of lifeload and felt a sense of belonging in their undergraduate studies.

Quantitative institutional data and staff interview responses confirmed the success of PSP students in their undergraduate studies.

1   Introduction

1.1   Context

The Shaping the 21ˢᵗ Century Student Experience Project seeks to understand the experiences of the diverse undergraduate student populations of regional universities, to identify how equitable outcomes for these students can be achieved.

Non-school pathways into university study are an important way that regional universities engage with their communities to enhance participation in Higher Education. However, although such pathways especially the enabling pathway, are understood within each university they are not necessarily accepted outside of these institutions.

Southern Cross University with campuses at Lismore, Coffs Harbour and the Gold Coast has a footprint that ranges from Kempsey in the south to Gold Coast in the north, with distance education students coming from across Australia and overseas. Like other regional universities, SCU has a highly diverse student population with many students being first in their family to study at university. To cater for this diversity SCU employs a range of pathways to University study. These pathways include Diplomas and Associate Degrees, TAFE delivered Certificate IV, and an enabling program called Preparing for Success Program (PSP).

This case study reports on the impact of the PSP enabling program on the student undergraduate experience. The PSP is an award winning enabling program (OLT Citation 2014, http://scucollege.scu.edu.au/index.php/23). It has been offered since 2006 and routinely enrols approximately 1000 students each year. The program is studied over 12 weeks full time with part time opportunities available. Students study four subjects, the three core subjects of "Managing Your Study", Communicating at University" and "Applying Quantitative Concepts" along with one elective either "Studying Science" or "Issues and Enquiry in Arts and Business" (http://courses.scu.edu.au/courses/preparing-for-success-at-scu-program).

Students who enrol in PSP come from highly diverse backgrounds: 66% are regional; 27% are low socio-economic status (SES); 6% are Indigenous; 72% are first in their family; and 11% have a disability (Data retrieved from SCU Management Information System 2016). Internal SCU reports indicate that students who complete PSP perform the same as or better than students who enrol through traditional pathways.

Enabling programs are common across the university sector and have been offered for over 40 years. All regional universities possess an enabling program of some form. The format of the programs has evolved to meet the diverse needs of students in the footprints of the parent university. The success of these programs is reported in Hodges et al. (2013).

2   Purpose

The purpose of this report is to describe the actions and findings of the case study.

3   Case design

3.1   Case study plan

This case study focusses on the experiences of seven undergraduate students who have entered university through the PSP enabling program. The project team is made up of:

- Case study leader (CSL) Professor Janet Taylor
- Project Officer (PO) Tina van Eyk.

3.2   Theme

3.2.1   Theme title

The impact of an enabling program on the regional student undergraduate experience.

3.2.2   Theme description

This case study focuses on the experiences of undergraduate students who have entered university through an enabling program called Preparing for Success Program (PSP).

3.2.3   Unit/Units of analysis

N/A

3.2.4   Theme scope

SCU internal reports have been previously collected and reported on. This project includes in-depth interviews with post-PSP students who are in their second year of university study across a range of disciplines, and interviews with key staff across five schools which receive PSP students.

3.2.5   Participants

Table 1: Description of student participants

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	F	F	F	M	F	F	F
Degree	Social Welfare	Visual Arts	Education	Engineering	Social Science	Midwifery	Nursing
Age	57	21	36	36	41	39	32
Mode	DE	On Campus	DE	On Campus	DE	On Campus	On Campus

Modes: On Campus and Distance Education (DE).

Five staff members from the schools of Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Tourism, Education, Environmental Science and Engineering, and Health and Human Sciences.

3.3   Data collection, management and analysis

Contact and demographic information for students who successfully completed PSP and were now in second year of undergraduate studies were harvested from SCU's student system. These students were invited by email to participate in an interview as per ethics protocols. In total seven students were interviewed, most for approximately 40 minutes each. Interview questions are summarised in Appendix 1. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, de-identified and entered in the NVIVO qualitative data analysis software. Interview data were analysed in two ways:

- Data were coded using an inductive grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to determine which themes emerged directly from the data.
- Data were coded around the Kahu (2014) facets to determine how the PSP experience reflects Kahu's interpretation of student engagement.

Coding was undertaken by the PO and confirmed by the CSL.

To confirm student experiences, five staff were also interviewed. Data management procedures were the same as above. Interview questions are summarised in Appendix 2. Coding was not undertaken as part of this project.

4   Timeline

Table 2 Case study timeline

	2015					2016				
	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May
Activities										
Ethics application and approval (CSL)		X								
Invite participants (PO)								X		
Conduct interviews (PO)								X	X	
Conduct analysis (CSL + PO)									X	X
Write report (CSL)										X
Review report (CSL + PO)										X

5   Findings

5.1   Overview

Internal SCU reports indicate that students who complete PSP perform the same or better than students who enter university through traditional pathways. This investigation paints a picture of the students' experiences within their undergraduate programs. These experiences are characterised by feelings of confidence and the presence of key academic skills that enable academic success.

5.2   Description of themes

The principal themes that emerged from the interview data include:

Confidence: *"Wow, I can do this," is probably one of the most amazing things and that it can lead me to where I want to go."*

Skills: *"that gave me not only a love of maths, but amazing skills and I thought, "Oh, is that how you do that?" and that was such a great learning experience"*

Managing lifeload: *"everyone's schedule can change at the drop of a hat. And, because I'm still a carer for my husband and have to take him to medical appointments … I can just fit <study> around everything else that's going on in life, which is just wonderful."*

5.3   Observations from the case study

The observations from the case study were as expected. The enabling program builds students' confidence in both emotional and practical ways. Unexpectantly five of the students undertook to share their PSP knowledge with others. The students often commit to sharing these skills with other students who have not done the program:

> *"I had a friend who had come from a town where there was a very, very low percentage of matriculation from high school and her parents had year eight educations. And she was completely baffled by this concept of critical thinking and analysing texts … I went through my notebook from PSP … and it became this amazing thing, watching her realise how intelligent she was".*

6   Understanding the regional student experience

6.1   Relationship to the Kahu model

Kahu (2014) presents an extended understanding of student engagement, which combines the diverse perspectives that can impact on the student experience. Student comments clearly reflect these diverse perspectives. Overarchingly psychosocial influences dominated (41% of 1072 comment segments). This was followed by structural influences (28%), proximal consequences (20%) and distal consequences (11%).

This is not unexpected as students, after having completed the PSP, came to undergraduate study motivated, confident and armed with the relevant academic skills. Through PSP they had refined their interest and developed their sense of belonging:

> *"my first day when I was actually on campus with midwifery, it didn't matter what you looked like or what age you were, it was completely irrelevant, you were all just there, you were a uni student and off you went."*

6.2   Insights gained

Enabling programs such as PSP thrive in regional locations or locations which have low levels of university qualifications. The data from these interviews would be representative of the experiences of other university level enabling providers.

From the interviews it was apparent that the Preparing for Success Program was successful in students' eyes for three main reasons:

- **The curriculum design** – *"I think it really does what it sets out to do, and I couldn't recommend it highly enough to anyone who was thinking of going for the skills that you get from it."*
- **The quality of the teaching** – *"I find the lecturers and the course tutors and everything, I just find they're more than willing to help if you need help. They obviously want to see you succeed, is the feeling I get."*
- **The location in a region** – *"I studied here because of my location. I guess had I been living in a city, I would never have considered university because of that push to work full time to earn the money you're earning plus more. I would never have thought that I could afford to do uni, so I guess living in this regional area allowed this space for me to go in a new direction."*

6.3   Good practice examples

The impact of an enabling program on the regional student undergraduate experience.

Janet A Taylor & Tina van Eyk, Southern Cross University.

> *"I remember my first year, my first assignment – I got an HD for it and it was just like 'what?' It was really funny just to, … <that> stuff that I did in PSP actually worked".*

The Preparing for Success Program has successfully prepared students for university study over a ten year period. It is typical of the enabling programs that operate at other regional universities and has been designed to open access to university study for those students who have previously not had the opportunity to study at this level. Many of these students have not completed high school and would

not be eligible for an ATAR. The students typically come from a diverse range of social and educational backgrounds.

The program is offered over 12 weeks full time study (or part-time equivalent). It can be studied on all SCU campuses and online. Students study four subjects: Three core and one elective subject (http://courses.scu.edu.au/courses/preparing-for-success-at-scu-program).

Individual students and their learning are at the heart of the program's design and delivery. The program focuses on students' development of self along with academic skills associated with academic literacy and numeracy. All subjects are underpinned by theory but are practical with assessments focused on outputs that can be used in their future degree studies, such as reflection, essay and report writing skills. In the quantitative unit, the mathematics is developed around real world problems that support critical quantitative thinking. Students gain valuable skills in independent learning, critical thinking, self-reflection, research and writing skills, along with group work and presentations. They have a taste of discipline specific learning with the elective subject, which past PSP students report as being critical for their success in the degree programs.

It is well known at SCU through quantitative tracking that students who complete the program perform the same or better than students who enter through traditional pathways. One school has intensively tracked these students:

> "<our School> actually tracked the PSP students, their success rate in our courses and it was absolutely clear that they were more successful than standard entry students and they were less likely to leave so their retention was higher. So on both counts - they were less likely to leave and their success rate was higher."

Students' experiences confirm the quantitative data and reveal deep transformations have taken place.

Impact on students' confidence (Kahu: Psychosocial - self-efficacy, emotion)

Students arrive in PSP often lacking confidence in their own ability to succeed but with ideas about a new or different career. Throughout the PSP they build their own knowledge of self and self-management skills. One student reflects on their confidence and also what they observed from their peers:

> "And going into PSP really restored my confidence in my ability to overcome that illness and succeed in further activities. So, just the fact that it was such a respectful learning environment and that it was not like overwhelmingly difficult, but very much encouraged us to look at things in an intellectual academic way was really positive."

> "I watched people who had no idea that they could actually engage with academic content completely flourish, have a massive turnaround in their opinion of them self and their confidence that they can actually be in a tertiary environment. And that was a really beautiful transformation to watch for several of my classmates".

Development of academic skills (Kahu: Psychosocial – self-efficacy; Structural – curriculum)

The PSP curriculum has been designed to ensure that students have the confidence and key academic skills to be successful at university. This impacted significantly on students' experience when later studying at the undergraduate level:

> "Yeah, I know how to write an essay, I know how to reference an essay, I know how to research for an essay, which is so much of what the assessments involve. I know how to work through a study guide or pick out the important things and do all the critical reflection …, which are all those different skills that you're called upon to do in various courses."

Managing lifeload (Kahu: Structural – lifeload; Psychosocial – identity)

Students who access university via PSP often have significant lifeload commitments. The program has provided significant strategies to help students from diverse backgrounds manage this load:

> *"Well, because of the chronic fatigue I'm careful not to massively overburden myself, I'm already at my full extent of my capacity with the uni stuff, so I'm not working, but I guess I have a small level of family commitments, … I do visit my parents and grandparents in Coffs Harbour, so I do a small amount of travelling ... I have pain syndrome, I have back pain, so I have a little bit of medical stuff and osteopathic care to factor in as well, but that's fairly manageable, especially with the clinic being on campus in Lismore."*

In analysing the students' interviews using the Kahu framework there was clear overlap between a number of elements for example the psychosocial influences, structural influences and student engagement (Table 3).

Table 3: Examples of interactions between selected Kahu elements

Kahu feature	Kahu feature	Number of student comments in common
Psychosocial influences	Student engagement	
Skills	Cognition	21
Skills	Behaviour	16
Skills	Affect - Belonging	14
Structural influences	Student engagement	
Policies	Affect - Belonging	12
Curriculum	Affect - Belonging	15
Curriculum	Cognition	19

In summary, students who emerge from PSP are skilled and resilient, and face the challenges of undergraduate study with confidence. They exhibit a sense of belonging. In the words of two staff members:

> *"I think it's essential in terms of a regional university."*

> *"<post-PSP students are> usually very committed and go the extra mile to ensure that they're here and they're learning in their units. They're not doing the bare minimum to get a pass. They're more likely to want to learn what the content of the unit is all about. …Every other experience I've had with PSP has been extraordinary. The success rate is very good."*

7 Implications

Enabling programs have an important role in regional universities and should continue to be supported by these universities and the wider government higher education agenda.

8 Conclusion

Enabling programs provide regional students with access to university studies. The quantitative evidence indicates that students who complete an enabling program have enhanced chances of success in their undergraduate studies. This case study reinforces that evidence with data on the students' experiences while in their undergraduate program. The students are more engaged and more prepared than their peers who have come through traditional pathways. This was apparent from the comments

of the students and the staff in this study. Enabling programs transform students' experience at university and their lives, and facilitate lifelong learning and active citizenship.

9   References

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

Hodges, B. et al. (2013). *Enabling retention: Processes and strategies for improving student retention in university-based enabling programs*. Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) Project. Retrieved from http://enablingretention.org.au/

Kahu, E. (2014). Increasing the emotional engagement of first year mature-aged distance students: Interest and belonging. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 5*(2), 45-55.

10 Funding acknowledgement

11 Appendices

11.1 Student interview questions

Qualifiers:
- Have you read the consent statement and agree to participate in this interview?
- Let me tell you about what will happen here
  - Recording of interviews
  - You can stop any time
  - Interview will be transcribed and any identifying information will be removed.
- Are you happy to proceed?

Choosing to Study at SCU

1. Can you tell me what brought you to study at SCU and what pathway you followed?

2. What were your motivations or what influenced you to choose to study here?

Studying at SCU

3. Can you tell me about your usual week at university?

4. How does university fit with other aspects of your life?

5. Can you tell me what you like about your university experience and being here at SCU?

6. Is there anything that you particularly enjoy or find helpful that assists your learning?

Transition to University Undergraduate Study

7. Is there any aspect of your experience in the Preparing for Success Program (PSP) that you think was particularly helpful or valuable which now assists your learning at university?

8. Did the digital experiences you were involved with during PSP help you to transition into undergraduate study?

9. What was the best thing about starting university after completing PSP?

10. What was the hardest thing about starting university after completing PSP?

11. What skills and approaches did the PSP program provide you with to succeed at university study?

Future Thoughts

12. Looking forward, what do you plan to do once you finish your studies at SCU?

11.2 Staff interview questions

Qualifiers:

- Have you read the consent statement and agree to participate in this interview?
- Let me tell you about what will happen here
    - Recording of interviews
    - You can stop any time
    - Interview will be transcribed and any identifying information will be removed.
- Are you happy to proceed?

Introductory

1. Can you tell me what you know about the Preparing for Success Program (PSP)?

Framing

2. Can you describe how you engage with the students who have been through PSP?

3. What do you think PSP students bring to their study or university experiences that:

    - Is the same as other students

    - Is different from other students?

4. In what ways do you think PSP enhances the university experience of these students? (If not already answered)

5. What particular attitudes or skills do you think this program equips the students for their study or their future work and life? (If not already answered)

6. As SCU is a regional university how important is PSP in this situation?