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From the Editor's desk

Associate Professor Trace Ollis

Vale Dr Barrie Brennan

I commence this July editorial with much sadness, acknowledging that Dr Barrie Brennan, ALA lifetime member, former editor of the journal and past President of the Australian Association of Adult Education (now ALA), passed away on the 18th of July 2022.

Barrie was an elder of adult learning education in Australia and a generous and talented academic who had an enormous impact on the sector. He was the editor of the Australian Journal of Adult Education (AJAE, now AJAL) for 6 years in the 1980s and the Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE now ALA) President in the 1970s. He described this as AAAE's period of 'adolescence".

Barrie was also involved with our international partners Asia Pacific Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) and the international adult education and development agency DVV. He was also a long-time Vice President of the Australian Folk High School Association.

He was renowned for his critical and capable critique of adult education policy and practice in the Australian and International context and for the advancement of women, encouraging women to take up leadership roles in adult learning, including in ALA. In Barry Golding's monograph,

"Reflection on 60 years of ALA" (2020), Barrie speaks on this:

> On critical reflection a decade on, I believe the 'introduction' of women onto AAAE committees between the 1970s and 1990s and then 'en masse' was a major and positive influence on AAAE and Australian Adult Education. There was just one female on the Board when I joined (Joan Allsop), but a female became President the year after I retired as President in the early 1980s. For me, a key factor then (as now) was that problems in adult education had to be tackled at 'ground level', and women in female groups proved to be particularly effective at doing this in the local town or suburban areas.

In recent years, Barrie championed issues of adult learning education in rural communities in the broader Tamworth region of NSW, highlighting adult learning in rural sites and spaces in the country areas around him.

Barrie was an incredibly generous colleague and very encouraging and welcoming of me as the new incoming journal editor in 2017. He held a great deal of institutional history and knowledge of the journal and adult learning in Australia and for this, we are most grateful.

On behalf of the Editorial and Board of AJAL, we send our sincere and deepest sympathies to Barrie's family and friends. Notably, we are a stronger and more resilient sector because of Barrie's contribution to the practices and scholarship of adult learning in Australia and internationally.

This issue of AJAL is focused on three important areas of adult learning, professional learning, transition pathways to higher education and adult learning in the context of COVID 19. The articles represent the broad context of adult learning in Australia and internationally. In this edition, articles inform us on professional learning in policing and help us understand the contemporary condition of police work and education for police. Two articles examine and explore transition pathways to education in the Australian context,

these important programs are set in the background of the massification of higher education and Bradley's review promise access and equity in education. Both articles explore the tensions and contradictions inherent in providing enabling programs for access and equity students. AJAL is presently receiving many articles on the impact of COVID 19 on adult education with two articles in this issue. Unsurprisingly given COVID 19 has affected so much of our lives, work and learning. Notable is adult learning moving from embodied relational and material ways of learning to online and blended forms of learning, delivered through online learning platforms and workshops held by zoom technologies. Adult education settings have had to adjust to these new ways of working and learning.

The first article explores professional learning in the context of police practice. Cheryl Ryan's article "Common sense and police practice: It goes without saying". The paper investigates police professional learning and training in the context of one Australian jurisdiction of policing. This narrative research examines discursive practices of policing, focussed on making judgements through embodied processes such as intuition, hunches and common sense. Common sense is viewed by police as an intrinsic "attribute of policing". Ryan argues, "Anything requiring complex thought and inquiry is viewed in opposition to common sense". The research notes the necessary shift from ideas of policing as a craft or trade, one which is learned on the job and has dominated police training to a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of police practice which has both theory and practice at its core. Using the narratives of police, the article reveals three examples of officers' perceptions of common sense in policing. She argues police need to become more agentic and attentive about their education and training and that the focus on "common-sense" is viewed by many as "good sense" and includes conceptions of what police "should know". The author claims police education should move beyond concrete material understandings of policing to education and training which deploys the theoretical as well as the practical mastering of policing. The focus on common sense as a practice is antithetical to the ongoing national and

international debates about police and professionalisation, as Ryan claims there are dangers in this unqualified acceptance of "common sense" in police practice. She claims in the new era of the professionalisation of policing, police require quality education experiences.

Enabling programs and pathways for single mothers are a focus of the next article "Just hope you don't get sick and live off caffeine" by Trixie James, Louise Mullaney, Katrina Johnston and Anne Braund. The paper claims the number of single mothers accessing non-traditional transition pathways and enabling education programs at Universities is growing. This research conducted with seven women all of whom are young single mothers, about their experiences of education, reveals the unique and oftentimes difficult struggles these women face in their journey to achieve an undergraduate degree. What the research uncovers is that even with these inherent difficulties these students achieved great accomplishments, becoming more confident and resilient by building relationships and seeking support from both peers and university staff. The research disclosed the learning experiences of these women expressed as "survival narratives" were empowering and transformative experiences. The authors argue the support services that are available to young mothers in these enabling programs are crucial to their success in higher education.

Joanne Lisandro's article contiues our focus on the importance of university pathways and enabling programs. Her paper "First-year university retention and academic performance of non-traditional students entering via an Australian pre-university enabling program".

She notes transition pathway programs to education have expanded under the project of the massification of higher education. Lisandro argues whilst the programs have become increasingly popular, limited evaluation of the effectiveness and outcomes of these enabling courses are currently available. The paper compares and contrasts first-year retention and academic outcomes of students in the 'on track' enabling programs between 2014 and 2016. Most of the students who participated in this program were access and equity students - many first in family at university. The

article compared the outcome of the OnTrack-pathway students with students who accessed university through the conventional entry requirements of ATAR. She argues the research revealed the "OnTrack" students were retained at a rate that was similar to or better than students entering via all other admission pathways, despite their poorer academic performance. Multivariate regression modelling revealed that admission pathway, demographic and enrolment factors explained very little of the observed variation in student outcomes and were poor predictors of academic underperformance or success. Lisandro claims the findings in this study provide empirical data to reveal enabling programs that have been successful in providing access and participation to students who are capable learners but otherwise lack the resources to study at university, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The impact of COVID 19 on a vocation education and training program is explored by Susan Rajeev and Alana Anderson in their paper "COVID – 19 the catalyst for a new paradigm in vocational education and training ". The paper commences by providing a context and an overview of the impacts of COVID 19 on the VET sector in the Northern Territory of Australia. It positions the research in the context of the current VET regulatory environment and the compliance requirements of the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). The methodology for the paper is mixed methods research, which uses face-to-face interviews and telephone calls to gather data from stakeholders about the effectiveness of the programs. The paper uncovers the intricacy of providing online adult learning to a majority of international students cohort and the complexity of delivering a VET program of its kind requiring specialist vocational education and training pedagogy to support its implementation online. The paper concludes with a call for a new paradigm and policy shift in the delivery of Online vocational education and training in the post-COVID-19 environment.

In the final article for this edition, we are transported to a neighbourhood learning program in Saudi Arabia. Obeidallah Aljohani's article titled: "The role of Learning

Neighborhood programme in achieving the necessary life skills for adult learners in Saudi Arabia to confront the COVID-19 crisis". In Saudi Arabia, the "Learning Neighbourhood Program" assists adult learners to have the skills to solve complex problems in a rapidly changing world of accelerated progress and change. Saudi Arabia's Learning Neighbourhood Programme provides many courses, such as vocational skills, literacy, and life skills, for adult learners. In the context of the global pandemic of COVID 19, the program was also used to assist adult learners in their local communities to achieve the necessary knowledge and skills to prevent illness during the pandemic. This quantitative study's purpose was to illustrate the benefits of life skills that adult learners needed to help them during the COVID-19 crisis in Saudi Arabia. The programs focus on skills for living such as critical thinking, communication and problem-solving were crucial to participants having up-to-date information about the risks associated with the COVID 19 virus. The findings revealed many of the survey respondents reported that their knowledge from the life-skills course assisted members of their families to clarify any misconceptions they might have about the pandemic. Crucial to this was the importance and accuracy of their communication skills. The study found that those who enrolled in multiple courses in the educated-neighbourhood program practised these skills during the crisis of the pandemic and there were also some differences in the development of life skills based on gender. The article concludes by espousing the importance and effectiveness of the Learning Neighbourhood Program during the COVID 19 crisis.

Book Review

Robert H Haworth and John M Elmore (eds) (2017. Out of the ruins: The emergence of radical informal learning spaces. Reviewed by Meghan O'Brien, Deakin University

Common sense and police practice: It goes without saying

Cheryl Ryan

Common sense in practice was a significant finding of a qualitative narrative research project investigating the professional practice and learning of police in an Australian police jurisdiction. Police officers in this research emphasised common sense as an intrinsic attribute of policing. Conceptions of policing as a craft or trade, learned on-the-job, and police officers as artisans, have dominated police training. In recent years, in response to global trends to professionalise policing, organisations in most Western nations have established partnerships with tertiary and higher education institutions to provide integrated programs of professional learning and practice for police. This paper draws on Bourdieu's practice theory to examine the narratives of traditionally trained police officers' perceptions of common sense. Police officers' narratives revealed three distinct perspectives that supported the unquestioning acceptance and application of common sense to their everyday practice.

Keywords: *police practice, common sense, practice theory, Bourdieu, police training and education.*

Introduction

This paper examines the concept and application of common sense to police officers' practices. Common sense was identified as a significant finding of a qualitative narrative research project investigating the professional practice and learning of police in an Australian police jurisdiction. Common sense is a ubiquitous term, the meaning readily assumed and accepted (Geertz, 1973; Rescher, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2011). It has been referred to as "good sense" (Rescher, 2005, p.37) that every "reasonable person" (Geertz ,1973, p.772) "*should* know" (Rescher, p.23, emphasis in original). In contrast, labels of deficient or incompetent are assigned to those who are judged as lacking common sense (1973, p.773). Police officers in this research emphasised common sense as an intrinsic quality of policing. Considering the conceptions of policing as a craft, learned on-the-job, and police officers as artisans (Birzer, 2003; Beckett, 2001; Jones, 2015; Steinheider, Wuestewald, Boyatzis & Kroutter, 2012), common sense keeps things simple, accessible, and informs everyday practice (Rescher, 2005, p.26). Anything requiring complex thought and inquiry is viewed in opposition to common sense. This is antithetical to the ongoing national and international debates about police and professionalisation (Fyfe, 2013; Green & Gates, 2014; Rojek et al., 2012; Stone & Travis, 2013; Tong, 2017); the need for police to be educated and professional in their practice and behaviour. The definition of police professionalisation has been described as a "thorny issue" with many scholars struggling to identify standards for police professionalism (Fleming, 2014, p.356).

This paper draws on Bourdieu's practice theory to examine the narratives of traditionally trained police officers' perceptions of common sense as an intrinsic attribute of policing. Traditionally trained refers to those officers who were educated through training programs delivered wholly in and by the police academy and in the workplace.

The author was immersed in the police jurisdiction as a non-police employee involved in the education and professional learning division of the organisation and was conducting doctoral research with police officers in this jurisdiction. The researcher's status as an outsider-part insider enabled a rapport and trust to be established in the interviews and enabled access to police from the highest level of the organisation to ranks and levels across the jurisdiction.

Literature review
Policing and police work

Efforts to define policing and police work through an examination of literature reveal no fixed or precise definitions (Reiner, 2000, 2017; Rowe, 2008). Instead, a range of approaches are evident in contemporary literature that give insights to approaches to policing, ranging from: problem-oriented policing (Scott & Clarke, 2020, p.1); community policing (Cordner, 2014); intelligence-led policing, to name a few. Popular media perpetuates images of power, authority, physical strength, and use of force (Rowe, 2008), which align with the legitimate state-authorised powers police have for social control (Silvestri, 2003; Westmarland, 2017). In recent times, police confront "radically different forms of risks, uncertainty and instability" (McLaughlin & Murji, 1999, p.217; Manning, 2015), as they attempt to meet the diverse and complex needs and expectations of individuals and communities today (Cox et al., 2018; Manning, 2015; Murray, 2005). This further supports global agendas to professionalise policing. Integral to policing and police work is police culture. It is complex and imbued with negative and positive practices (Cockcroft, 2015; Shearing & Ericson, 1991). Police culture has been the source of research for many years.

Police culture

Culture can be understood in terms of "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p.12) comprising symbols, narratives, discourses, and practices that convey culture that influences how people perceive themselves in relation to one another. It constructs "ways of talking", "ways of seeing", thinking, and being that are resistant to challenge and change (Fairclough, 1995, p.41). Culture creates coherence, certainty, and clarity (Bauman, 2005). It provides structure, meaning, and control by safeguarding existing thinking and practice and counteracting resistance or efforts to disrupt the current state of equilibrium (Bauman, 2005). Police culture functions as a source for the (re)production of common sense. Further to this, education and training are vehicles for establishing ways of talking and seeing that inform police practice.

Police training and education

Police training and education in Australia has been described respectively as: "hav[ing] clearly run past [its] used-by dates" (Bradley, 2009, p.102); and "intellectually redundant", based on "behaviouralist-orientated competency-based training" (Cox, 2011, p.4). Recruit training programs range from 25 weeks plus 12 months' on-the-job probation in Queensland (Queensland Police, 2020; Rogers & Wintle, 2021, p.17), 31 weeks plus 21 weeks' probation in Victoria (Rogers & Wintle, 2021, p.17; Victoria Police, 2021) and six months plus three months' probation in South Australia (Rogers & Wintle, 2021, p.18; South Australia Police, 2019). Foundational learning occurs at the police academy with probation generally occurring on-the-job. Learning in the police academy involves the socialisation of recruits to policing as a craft or trade (Bradley, 2009; Conti, 2009), limiting opportunities for deep learning to equip recruits for the exigencies and uncertainties of police work in the twenty-first century. Significantly, police recruits in all but one police jurisdiction

in Australia are paid a wage or allowance (Rogers & Wintle, 2021) and are subject to the organisation's authority, standards, and sanctions, and their behaviour and progress are under constant surveillance and assessment (Conti, 2009; Conti & Nolan, 2005). Despite the variation in the length of training across the states, all recruits graduate with comparable powers and are expected to perform as fully-fledged police constables.

Overlaying this context are national and international agendas driving the professionalisation of policing (Burgess, Fleming & Marks, 2006; Fyfe, 2013; Lanyon, 2007; Murray, 2006; Ransley & Mazerolle, 2009; Rowe, 2008; Stone & Travis, 2013). This has resulted in the emergence of tertiary and higher education programs being embedded in recruiting and professional police education in Australia and other Western countries. However, alongside and within this context is the enduring impact of informal learning in occupations, professions, and workplaces. For police, the collegial nature of their profession and practice, and the continued existence of police academies and in-house training, delivered predominantly by experienced police officers, represents the "webs of significance" that have the potential to (re)produce common sense while simultaneously contradicting or conflicting with what may be learned in tertiary and higher education programs (Heslop, 2011). Westmarland (2001, p.83) describes policing as: "… an occupation based upon experientially gained expertise and officers often have a high regard for almost anyone who can display knowledge based upon experience".

The effects of police education and training on officers' practices are difficult to assess because numerous operational, cultural, and workplace influences will occur to mediate their practice (Rowe, 2009, p.4). The traditionally trained police officers in this study lacked deep learning in part due to the reproduction of practice-based knowledge by and through trainers in the academy, mentors in the

workplace (Author, 2016), and the exchange of stories, often referred to as "war stories" (Waddington, 1999, p.302). These relationships and stories produce a common sense that affords a sense of comfort, certainty, and closure (Geertz, 1973; Rescher, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2011).

Common sense

Following the historical traditions of Scottish philosophers, common sense can be understood in terms of logical cognitive reasoning and judgement; a capacity to accept things without question (Rescher 2005, p.14). Common sense is therefore concerned with everyday matters in work and daily life: what is obvious, natural, beyond doubt and question (Geertz 1973, p.782), and eschews theoretical expertise (Rescher, 2005, p.52). Bourdieu (1977, p.167, emphasis in original) writes of the way in which common sense "*goes without saying because it comes without saying*". Through regular usage, Rescher (2005) argues that common sense is regarded as:

> *… ordinary sagacity and prudence so that common sense is seen as encompassing the judgements, evaluations, and principles of decision and action that "any sensible person" – virtually the whole of adult mankind – would accept in the circumstances (p.49).*

The doctrinal and pragmatic wisdom of common sense is simultaneously persuasive and pervasive. It is spontaneous in nature, and grounded in "jokes, anecdotes" as opposed to formal theories and could be seen as "vernacular wisdom" (Geertz, 1973, p.787). The very simple, practical nature of common sense and its accessibility to every reasonable person through everyday experience underscores its capacity to influence decision-making, guide practices beyond rules and procedures, and enable the management of personal and professional actions and image (Beckett, 2008; Geertz, 1973). The facts or truths of common-

sense beliefs are formed through experience and become universal or "*consensual*": accepted on face value, without hesitation, without argument or justification, without reflection (Geertz, 1973; Rescher,2005, p.12, emphasis in original; Rosenfeld, 2011). The rhetorical, metaphorical nature of police culture and the "war stories" (Shearing & Ericson, 1991; Waddington, 1999, p.302) are central to its (re)production in police practice. Common sense prefers "shared experience" (Rescher, 2005, p.53) and "practical sense" or wisdom to specialist and intellectual knowledge (Bourdieu, 1990, p.69; Geertz, p.788; Rosenfeld, 2011). Practice can therefore become an automatic, unquestioned response, involving little if any critique (1990, p.69).

The Achilles' heel of common sense is its limited purview and supporting this, is its resistance to denial, different interpretations, and debate, which further restricts its scope of attention and comment beyond the superficial (Rescher, 2005, p.31). In essence, common sense constructs a shared language but limits what can be spoken, heard and who can speak (Rosenfeld, 2011, p.256). Policing, professional judgement and practice represent distinct yet integrated concepts. Central to these is discretion.

Discretion

Discretion within the context of established professions is based on society's acknowledgement of the service they provide, their commitment, exclusive knowledge and capabilities, and the permission or authorisation given to them to apply discretionary decision-making in the provision of service (Kleinig, 1996). It has been argued that discretion in policing is not an exemplary approach to practice and is essentially "a *power* that police have to exercise their own judgment" (Doyle, 2006; Kleinig, 1996, p.82, emphasis in original). Further to this, police discretion can be seen not so much as a right, but as a privilege, an indulgence for an officer to use their judgement. Significantly, there is an underlying presumption and an

unquestioning acceptance of competence to apply one's judgement (Doyle, 2006; Kleinig, 1996). Bronitt and Stenning (2011, p.319) described the challenges police face: "on the one hand to enforce the law fairly and impartially, on the other hand to temper law enforcement for sound policy and operational reasons". This raises questions of the efficacy of police training in equipping police to apply discretion (Kleinig, 1996; Rowe, 2008). How traditional approaches to training (i.e., didactic, transmission of information) support rule- and procedural-based practices as opposed to developing independent judgement, problem-solving, and critical thinking are significant issues (Birzer, 2003; McCoy, 2006; Marenin, 2004; White, 2006).

It has been argued that the interpretation and application of legislation in policing practice necessitates "a degree of subjectivity on the part of the officer" (Rowe, 2008, p.99). While many other professions use discretion in their practice, there is evidence that discretion applied by police is different. One reason for this claim of difference is that police regularly work at a distance from, and independently of, their supervisors (Kleinig, 1996; Rowe, 2008). Another reason relates to a potential tension or contradiction in the notion and application of discretion for police because police officers are not independent practitioners as are other traditional professionals. Instead, they are employees of hierarchical organisations with established rules and expectations of behaviour and practice. In addition, they represent state power with legitimacy to use force, unlike other professions (Doyle, 2006; Kleinig, 1996; Rowe, 2008). A belief in and reliance upon rules and standards guiding decisions and actions combined with common sense and "personal and unexamined morality" are inadequate in equipping police officers to use discretion, make "moral choices" and "account for others' needs and expectations" (White, 2006, p.400).

Theoretical and conceptual framework

This paper draws on Bourdieu's practice theory to examine common sense and its attribution to police practice. It is often presented as straightforward and uncomplicated, denoting, for instance, what people do (Hager, 2013). Such a pragmatic focus on "activity, performance, and work", has the potential to construct practice as a process grounded in routine: "the way things are done" (Nicolini, 2012, p.3). Further to this, there is the potential to accept, without critical consideration, the learning generated from practice (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2010). For police, much of their learning is experiential with a focus on the technical aspects of practice, and the assessment of competence is the remit of experienced police officers (Cox, 2011). This reinforces the reproduction of practice-based knowledge and compliant "technicians" (Timperley, 2011, p.8). This resonates with the spontaneous and pragmatic wisdom of common sense.

Billett (2010, p.1) argued that practice-based learning should be seen as more than an adjunct to organised education, but "essential for developing the knowledge required to effectively practice occupations". While practice can represent specific daily occupational activities, drawing on relevant "conceptual, procedural, and dispositional knowledge" (Billett, 2010, p.2), it is far more complex and nuanced involving contextual, temporal, social, symbolic, and ritual dimensions (Bourdieu, 1990).

Bourdieu's (1990, p.54) concepts of "habitus" and the "logic of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86) are relevant to this discussion. The concept of habitus is integral to understanding the learning that occurs in policing. Bourdieu argued that habitus is internalised and established in practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Certain habits, practices, and dispositions are developed and reproduced through socialization with others and through institutional procedures and practices (Bourdieu, 1990). It functions as an historical construct that "produces individual and

collective practices" based on historical constructs. The logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86), paradoxically 'defies logic', but is evidenced in systems and structures of habitus that are constituted simultaneously by regularities (practical coherence) and irregularities (practical incoherence). Both coherence and incoherence are inscribed and necessary. In fulfilling practical functions of coherence, or what appears to be coherent, the "economy of logic" is ever-present, "sacrific[ing] rigour" for "simplicity and generality" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86), thereby ensuring convenience or a practice that is "easy to master and use" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86). "Ritual practices" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.90) are created through "mimesis" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.92) and repetition. Ritual practices form habitual practice that can be performed without awareness of and ability to perceive cultural, structural, ideological influences of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, pp.90-91).

In addition to habitu*s* is "*pedagogic work*" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.31, emphasis in original), done by families and education, for instance, and involving the inscription and habituation of practice on the body (Nicolini 2012), establishing what is '"sensible" and "reasonable"' or competent practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.79). Green (2009, p.8, emphasis in original) argued that all too often practice is understood simply as what people "*do*, with context added on", or taken for granted. However, context is always within practice, never outside or alongside. It needs to be recognised and interrogated because it is in a state of flux: "blurred, indistinct, shifting" (2009, pp.8-9). This superficial, "unreflective" approach to practice and learning is grounded in "common sense": the "vernacular wisdom" or "of course" matters of everyday. Bourdieu's (1977, emphasis in original) "*doxa*" – "everyday opinions" – coalesce with notions of common sense, establishing and limiting shared knowledge and the product of learning (Rosenfeld, 2011).

Contrasting the inscribed notion of practice is the recognition of agency, enabling the individual to

purposefully acquire and adapt practice in response to dynamic contexts (Nicolini, 2012). Building on the notion of agency, practice an also be seen as the integrated application of knowledge, thought, action, discourse, emotions, and values (2012). Overlaying and influencing these different perceptions of practice is the existence and function of "power, conflict, and politics" (Nicolini, 2012, p.6) evident in practice-based approaches. In this regard, history and context are important, for example highlighting how inequalities and differences might be perceived, framed, and practised (Nicolini, 2012).

Practice is relational, social, agential, and embodied (Edwards, 2010; Hutchings & Jarvis, 2012). Adding to this holistic, social, sense-making notion of practice, Schwandt (2005, p.327) describes it as "purposeful, intentional, and goal-directed" … [and] "situated within a larger network of relations with others". Instead of being passive and accepting of what happens, practitioners need to be active and agentic applying ethical and moral standpoints to their practice (p.180). Schatzki (2012, p.14) described practice as "an open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings", while Higgs (2012, p.3) referred to practice as "embodied, agential, and socially-historically constructed".

Policing occurs in bureaucratic, institutional, highly regulated settings where practices are mediated by practice-based knowledge that is entrenched in habitual practices and occupational and legislative procedures (Edwards, 2010, p.3). This results in perceptions that endure and function to (re)produce knowledge and practice as opposed to the contestation of the very essence of knowing and practicing (Giroux, 2006, pp.4-5).

Methodology

Narrative analysis was central to this qualitative research project. Stories and storytelling are key sources of data in narrative analysis. Narrative was chosen because of the cultural practice of police telling "war stories" (Waddington, 1999; Wenger, 1999). Using a narrative approach in research provides "a way of thinking" about and with data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.43) that is "relational" within and across three dimensions: "temporality" – places, events, things; "sociality" – social, emotional, cultural, institutional content; and "place" – locations and spaces (Clandinin, 2013, p.39). In this study, police officers' narratives of their practice revealed insights to cultural and relational practices that shaped how common sense was understood and (re)produced.

Ethics approval was given by the Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG), Deakin University. The Human Resources office of the police jurisdiction issued a letter and the plain language statement inviting voluntary participation. Police officers contacted the researcher directly by email. Consent form was issued to participants and a time was negotiated for an interview. Approval had been given by the head of the organisation for interviews to occur during work hours, including shift work. The researcher met participants in private settings in their own work locations.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 police officers – 13 females and 23 males – including senior police officers in the leadership management team to inspectors, sergeants, and constables. The semi-structured interviews enabled participants to tell their stories, rather than answer questions: creating a more personalised, adaptable, shared encounter or a co-creation of multiple meanings (Clandinin, 2013). The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and

participants de-identified using pseudonyms and, to respect the jurisdiction's anonymity, a pseudonym was assigned to the organisation.

Participants had a choice of one of two interviews. One focused on police officers' perceptions of and preferences for learning, e.g., what is learning, what does it mean to you, and how to learn best? The other involved police officers reflecting on their practices through an exploration of specific workplace experiences, e.g., something that worked well, something that was challenging, something that did not work well. Nineteen of the 36 participants chose the first interview. Seventeen participants chose to critically reflect on their practice and experiences. During the interviews, participants were reminded of the counselling and psychological services available to them in the organisation and that they could stop the interview at any point.

Data analysis and interpretation

The social constructionist and narrative analytical approach adopted to analyse and interpret police officers' narratives in this research acknowledged the social, relational, and embodied nature of practices and the development of knowledge through practice. Analysis involved an iterative process of listening to recordings of interviews, transcription of interviews, and writing and rewriting segments from multiple narratives afforded opportunities to analyse and identify narratives. I worked the data from the narratives using Clandinin's (2013) dimensions of "temporality", "sociality", and "place". The three narratives discussed below depict police officers' perceptions of common sense: (1) Common Sense – Shades of Grey; (2) Common Sense – As Simple as That; (3) Common Sense – A Kind of Judgement.

Narrative 1: Common sense – Shades of grey

Eleanor and Edward emphasised the practical nature of policing as they positioned it as something that is not for the academically inclined individual. This reinforced that common sense is concerned with obvious, simple, easy to master everyday matters, and eschewing theoretical expertise. They see the value of practice-based knowledge rather than theory and expertise that is generated through qualifications and formal education.

> *People who do well academically might not make very good police officers because it is a very common sense role and you need to be flexible; so I just don't know that policing is designed to be one of those professions (Eleanor, constable).*

> *Academic qualifications mean absolutely nothing. You can't teach common sense and that's the most important element of police work (Edward, sergeant).*

Further to this, Edward acknowledged it was not possible to teach common sense, despite its importance to policing and the quintessential wisdom of everyday police practice. A contradiction is evident in Edward and Eleanor's reflections. On the one hand, police officers have common sense; it is an innate quality. On the other hand, it is reproduced through training, shared experience, and war stories; inscribed through the habitus of policing, yet they believe it cannot be taught. Edward does not fully appreciate the "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p.12) and the powerful threads of those webs in establishing common sense thinking and practice.

> *Police need common sense. I believe there's a lot of room for common sense and discretion, and it should never be taken away. The law is black and white, but its application is very grey in most areas (Monty, sergeant.)*

Monty reinforced that common sense is integral to, and necessary for, police practice and often applied to practice. Monty's description of law as "black and white" and application as "grey" positions common sense as the grey which then requires the use of discretion. However, this raises critiques of police and how they apply their discretion to making decisions and acting when they regularly work independently of supervisors. Further to this, it is argued they are not independent practitioners but employees of hierarchical organisations with set rules and expectations of behaviour and practice (Rowe, 2008). To what extent those rules and expectations are understood and applied is perhaps not clear.

> *I like the actual doing. A lot of things you do, particularly with general duties policing, there are no rules. It does rely on initiative and a bit of common sense and, I suppose, being able to ask for some guidance. I mean even when you're in an acting role, which I was a fair bit out there, you're left to your own devices and you've gotta try and make those decisions (Rose, constable).*

For Rose it is the general duties of policing that requires her "common sense" and "initiative" while working independently in general duties and in higher duties when she believes "there are no rules" and she must "try and make those decisions". Questions arise as to the efficacy of police training to equip police to apply discretion when it is based on "behaviouralist-orientated competency-based training" (Cox, 2011, p.4), supporting rule- and procedural-based practices. Shades of grey appear as police officers apply their common sense to their discretion in independent work contexts.

Narrative 2: Common sense – As simple as that

David saw common sense, along with people skills, as the key to surviving in policing; further emphasising its intrinsic value to police and their practice.

> *Common sense and good people skills will get you by. You'll survive as a police officer pretty much (David, senior police officer and corporate manager).*

> *In general duties policing there are no rules, and it does rely on common sense through to the way you speak to people and how you deal with things; quite simply, that's common sense (Eleanor, constable).*

Eleanor's reflections also touched on the fundamental skills of interacting and "deal[ing] with things". Again, this brings the focus back to doing the basics, the simple, rudimentary activities of policing, which reflect the "economy of logic" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86) that reinforces simplicity, effortlessness, and superficiality over difficulty, complexity, and profundity. Wrapped up in this, is the notion and application of common sense as a way of keeping things simple, understandable, and accessible to every reasonable police officer.

Narrative 3: Common sense – A kind of judgement

It is acknowledged that in recent times police confront and are expected to respond to "radically different forms of risks, uncertainty and instability" (McLaughlin & Murji, 1999, p.217; Manning, 2015). This reflects the diverse, dynamic, and complex needs and expectations of individuals and communities today.

> *You're dealing with things that you haven't got skills in. No formal training in. You're branching into areas like social work and all that stuff. So common*

> *sense prevails. I recall [as a young uniform police officer] going to a domestic involving 40-year-olds and they're asking you for advice. Jesus! You'd make something up, based on very little (Monty, sergeant).*

Monty's comments about a lack of skills and formal training to "deal with things" that are beyond his purview and capabilities underline the changed and changing landscape of policing. It seems apposite for Monty to draw on common sense and, to "make something up", when he has nothing concrete, theoretically informed, to draw on. It could be viewed as a deficiency, incompetence, and lacking common sense to not respond to the situation he described. Omitted from Monty's reflections is the context, which is often "added on", or taken for granted (Green, 2009). However, context is always within practice, never outside or alongside. It needs to be recognised and interrogated because it is in a state of flux: "blurred, indistinct, shifting" (2009, pp.8-9). The context here is the changing and changeable nature of police work that has officers like Monty feeling ill-equipped and drawing on common sense knowledge: the product of the habitus of policing.

> *I've always decided to make decisions on common sense and rational objective decision-making. Sometimes I've stepped outside that and been willing to take the kicking because I could not justify why I came to that decision ... (Edward, sergeant).*

Edward's conviction of "always" making decisions using common sense further highlights it as the pre-eminent guide to practice. The practical coherence and practical incoherence of the "logic of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86) are in-play here as Edward describes common sense as a source of "rational objective decision-making". He was making decisions that made "good, rational sense" equating to "reasonable or *good* judgment" (Rescher, 2005, p.49, emphasis in original).

Discussion

The examination of police officers' perceptions of common sense as an intrinsic attribute of police practice revealed three narratives that emphasise: (1) Shades of Grey and the application of the accepted, uncomplicated concept of common sense to everyday, unsupervised practice; (2) As Simple as That, featuring the agreed simplicity, effortlessness, and superficiality of common sense in denial of difficulty, complexity, and profundity; and (3) A Kind of Judgement where common sense is viewed as a rational, objective response to increasingly complex and different situations that are beyond the purview, capabilities, and training of police officers. These narratives emphasise the ubiquity and acceptance of the concept and meaning of common sense, seen as "good sense" (Rescher, 2005, p.37) that every reasonable police officer "*should* know" (Rescher p.23, emphasis in original). The doctrinal and pragmatic wisdom of common sense is persuasive and pervasive.

Pivotal to understanding police officers' unquestioning acceptance of common sense and its relevance to their practice are the concepts of "habitus" and the "logic of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86). Habitus is internalised and established in practice (Bourdieu, 1990). The logic of practice, which ironically flouts logic, is present in systems and structures of habitus that are constituted simultaneously by practical coherence and practical incoherence. The latter is seen in comments about general duties policing having no rules and the need therefore to use common sense. These beliefs are the products of police culture that establishes "ways of talking, "ways of seeing" (Fairclough, 1995, p.41), thinking and being that become unquestioned habits of practice (Bourdieu, 1990, p.90). Further to this, the logic that prioritises simplicity and superficiality over difficulty and profundity (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86), thereby ensures a practice that is "easy to master and use" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86), rational and self-evident (Rescher, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2011).

These regimes of truth and the "limits of intelligibility" (Britzman, 1995, p.155) elevate the value of common sense to a good police officer which in turn diminishes the value of training and education (Geertz, 1973; Rescher, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2011). Police training and education are fraught, described as outmoded and a vehicle for the reproduction of practice-based knowledge (Bradley, 2009; Cox, 2011). To this end, the "*pedagogic work*" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.31, emphasis in original) that occurs through academy training and education and on-the-job functions to inscribe and habituate practice establishes what is deemed to be coherent, reasonable practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.79). This was the experience of the police officers in this research whose learning was in the academy and then predominantly on-the-job. The practice that develops represents a superficial, unreflected learning that is grounded in the wisdom of common sense relevant to everyday policing practices. It simultaneously establishes and limits the shared knowledge and what is learned (Rosenfeld, 2011).

Conclusion

The value afforded to common sense in everyday police practice was a significant finding of a qualitative narrative research project investigating traditionally trained police officers' professional practice and learning in an Australian police jurisdiction. This paper examined the conception and application of common sense to police officers' practice.

The very simple, practical nature of common sense and its accessibility to every reasonable police officer through everyday policing practice underscores its capacity to influence decision-making, guide practices beyond rules and procedures, and to enable management of personal and professional actions and image (Beckett, 2008; Geertz, 1973). Learning in the police academy and on-the-job involves the socialisation of police officers to a practice that is considered logical and simple. This happens

despite national and international agendas driving the professionalisation of policing and the need for police to be educated and professional in their practice (Burgess, Fleming & Marks, 2006; Fyfe, 2013; Lanyon, 2007; Rowe, 2008; Stone & Travis, 2013). Questions arise as to how prepared police officers are to engage with and apply discretion to the exigencies and uncertainties of police work when their practice is based on common sense and "personal and unexamined morality" (White, 2006), as opposed to critically informed judgement and problem-solving (Birzer, 2003; McCoy, 2006; Marenin, 2004; White, 2006).

Essentially, police officers need to become more active and agentic in their practice (Schwandt, 2005), enabling them to purposefully acquire and adapt practice in response to dynamic contexts (Nicolini, 2012). Building on the notion of agency, practice can also be seen as the integrated application of knowledge, thought, action, discourse, emotions, and values (Nicolini, 2012). While practice-based learning can address specific daily occupational activities, drawing on relevant "conceptual, procedural, and dispositional knowledge" (Billett, 2010, p.2), it is far more complex and nuanced involving contextual, temporal, social, symbolic, and ritual dimensions (Bourdieu, 1990). A concerted and critical review of training and education is needed along with what constitutes police knowledge and standards for police professionalisation and practice.

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About the author

Cheryl Ryan is a Senior Fellow (SFHEA) of UK Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia. Cheryl's research focuses on the areas of adult and community education, professional practice and learning, and workplace learning. She teaches in the Master of Applied Learning and Teaching (Secondary) for pre-service teachers and is Course Director and teaches in the Graduate Certificate of Higher Education (Learning and Teaching).

Contact details

Email: c.ryan@deakin.edu.au

First-year university retention and academic performance of non-traditional students entering via an Australian pre-university enabling program

Joanne G. Lisciandro

Pre-tertiary enabling programs have become an increasingly popular pathway to university in Australia in recent years, however little is published about how well enabling students fare once they start university. This paper examines and compares first-year retention and academic outcomes of students that entered Murdoch University between 2014 and 2016 via successful completion of its enabling program, OnTrack. A greater proportion of students transitioning via OnTrack were from equity and disadvantaged backgrounds than any other entry pathway; thereby demonstrating an important function of this enabling program in boosting the representation of these students at the university. Further, OnTrack-pathway students were retained at a rate that was similar or better than students entering via all other admission pathways, despite poorer academic performance. This persistence suggests enhanced resilience amongst this cohort, potentially built during their enabling education experience. Multivariate regression modelling was also undertaken, revealing that admission pathway, demographic and enrolment factors collectively explained very little of the observed variation in student outcomes

for all first year students, and were particularly poor predictors of academic underperformance. Thus, once students are enrolled in undergraduate study, student outcomes may be better explained by student variables not captured in university databases, such as personal circumstances or psychological factors. In summary, these findings provide empirical data to support the notion that enabling programs have been successful in 'enabling' access and participation of students who are capable but otherwise lack opportunity, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, enabling pathway students may experience ongoing challenges that impact their academic performance, and thus future equity and access policy should address appropriate mechanisms for supporting the broader transition experience of these students.

Keywords: *first-year university, retention, academic performance, pre-university enabling programs, transition, equity*

Introduction

Equitable access to and participation in higher education (HE) has featured as a key policy imperative since the transition from elite to mass HE systems in most developed countries (Trow, 2007). Pre-university enabling programs, referred to by a variety of names such as "bridging courses, university preparation courses, foundation courses and pathway courses" (Hodges et al., 2013) became a key strategy in boosting the representation of non-traditional students in HE in Australia and abroad (Agosti & Bernat, 2018). These programs are diverse in nature (e.g. length, delivery method, institution/teaching environment) but typically target students that have experienced educational disadvantage or disruption within the local communities that they serve. They also share a common aim of enabling a second chance for university access and participation by providing the necessary preparation and requisites

for entry. In Australia, the rise in the popularity of these programs was facilitated by national policy intervention and substantial investment by the Australian government from 2008 onwards in order to meet 'widening participation' targets identified by Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales (2008) for equity, economic and social justice reasons. As a result, by 2013 more than 27 Australian universities offered at least 35 enabling programs (Hodges et al., 2013), with the number of student enrolments and program offerings ever-expanding to meet increasing demand (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; McKay et al., 2018).

Despite the injection of resources and increasing popularity of Australian enabling programs as a pathway to university, "enabling programs are not part of the Australian Qualifications Framework and seem not to have been subject to a targeted review of effectiveness despite having existed since 1990" (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011, p. 122). Most research to date has been qualitative in nature, revealing significant 'soft' benefits (Bennett et al., 2013) for students such as increased self-confidence, leadership and a sense of belonging (Crawford, 2014), greater self-belief and transformation (Habel, Whitman, & Stokes, 2016; Willans & Seary, 2007), improved study and employment opportunities (Crawford et al., 2015), an enhanced first year university experience (Smith, 2010), as well as positive flow-on effects for students' families and communities (Johns et al., 2016). However, empirical data on the outcomes achieved by enabling pathway students remains limited.

This is further complicated by discord on definition(s) of success, which may be viewed differently by different stakeholders (Bennett et al., 2013). For example, while in-program retention and conversion to undergraduate enrolment may be seen as a measure of success, there is a strong argument for the case of some attrition being positive, particularly where the enabling program experience has opened up other meaningful study

or employment opportunities (Hodges et al., 2013; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2013). The contribution of enabling programs to boosting university participation by traditionally under-represented groups, such as those from recognised equity subgroups, may be another indicator of efficacy. Among these subgroups are people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic status (SES) or non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), as defined by DEET (1990, p. 10). Previous research related to this outcome has shown that students belonging to such equity subgroups have a substantially higher representation in Australian enabling programs compared to other sub-bachelor pathways, as well as at Bachelor level (Pitman et al., 2016). Others yet, including those investing in enabling education, may place more value on measures of undergraduate student retention, completion and academic performance. To date, findings related to these latter measures are scarce and "often based on small numbers of enabling program students, hence, not generalisable" (McKay et al., 2018). However, in the current neoliberal political environment characterised by a desire for HE reform and the tying of enabling funding to demonstrating quantitative evidence of efficacy (Australian Government, 2017, p. 25), there is an urgent need not only for greater sectoral research, but also for this "research to be translated more effectively into policy through greater dissemination and advocacy" (Harvey, 2017).

Purpose and scope

The OnTrack enabling program, which has been operating since 2008 at Murdoch University in Western Australia, has delivered high and sustained in-program retention and conversion to undergraduate enrolment for the thousands of students that have completed it (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). However, the retention and academic outcomes of OnTrack-pathway students during their undergraduate study program are yet to be explored. These are valuable measures for evaluating the success of programs such as OnTrack

in 'enabling' university participation by traditionally underrepresented groups and thus fulfilling the purpose for which they were designed.

The aim of the current evaluation was to investigate the outcomes of OnTrack-pathway students during their first year of undergraduate study, as an indication of program efficacy. This period is of particular importance as it is "the time when the highest amount of academic failure and discontinuation occurs" (Mills, Heyworth, Rosenwax, Carr, & Rosenberg, 2009); and indeed a number of studies have well established that once a student progresses from the first year to the second year, they are more likely to continue to completion (Hillman, 2005; Marks, 2007; McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000).

The major research questions in this study were:

(1)   What is the first-year retention rate for students that enter university via OnTrack? How does this compare to retention rates for students that enter university via other pathways?

(2)   How well do OnTrack-pathway students perform in their first-year units? How does this compare for students who enter university via other pathways?

Additionally, we were also interested in exploring: (a) whether OnTrack contributes to boosting undergraduate enrolment by traditionally under-represented groups such as those with a disability or from low SES or NESB backgrounds, as well as (b) other enrolment and demographic factors that may also influence or predict retention and academic outcomes during the first year of university.

Methods

Permission to undertake this study was granted by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 2014/131) and de-identified data were obtained from Murdoch University's Student Records databank. The subjects for this evaluation were all domestic students who enrolled and started their undergraduate degree in Semester 1 or 2 in 2014, 2015 or 2016. Students were differentiated on the basis of admission pathway. This included traditional entry pathways such as via completion of standardised Secondary School exams, and non-traditional entry pathways such as successful completion of OnTrack, prior participation in Higher Education or prior Vocational Education and Training (VET) such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or equivalent. Table 1 shows the total number of students in each of these groups during the period under study. Notably, 14% of all students gained entry via OnTrack, and more students used non-traditional pathways than traditional pathways to gain access over this period.

Table 1. *Number of domestic students who entered via various pathways during intake periods between 2014 and 2016.*

Intake period	Entry pathway						Total
	OnTrack	Higher Education participation	VET e.g. TAFE or equivalent	Other non-traditional pathways[1]	School Leaver[2]	Completed Secondary Education[2]	
2014	312	430	523	296	740	221	2522
2015	298	491	501	234	485	210	2219
2016	429	547	515	306	738	243	2778
Total	1039	1468	1539	836	1963	674	7519

[1] Other non-traditional pathways included entry via the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT), a standardised aptitude test available Australia-wide (offered to mature-aged students as a pathway to access Murdoch University) or enabling programs other than *OnTrack* (offered at Murdoch University or other universities).

[2] 'School leavers' are students that gained admission to university directly from school on the basis of their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), while

'Completed Secondary Education' is anyone else whose basis of admission is that they completed secondary education (typically this is mature age students or high school leavers who took time off and then applied for a university course).

First year student retention and academic performance of students entering Murdoch University via different pathways were analysed. Definitions, specific indicators and calculations of these dependent variables under study were according to previously published and broadly used government definitions (Table 2).

Table 2. *Dependent (or measured) variables to be studied: definitions, specific indicators and associated calculations.*

Dependent variable	Broad definition	Specific indicator used	Calculations for each indicator
Retention	"The number of students who continue to be enrolled in a degree after a certain time period." (Mills et al., 2009).	*Retention rate:* "the number of students enrolled in a course in one year in relation to the number enrolled in the following year" (Gale & Parker, 2013).	"Retention rate for year (x) = the number of students who commenced an undergraduate course in year (x) and continue in year (x+1) as a proportion of students who commenced an undergraduate degree course in year (x)" (DIISRTE 2011; as cited in Gale and Parker 2013).[1, 2]
Academic Performance	How well students successfully complete their first-year units.[3]	*Success (Pass) Rate:* "measures academic performance by comparing the equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) of units passed to the EFTSL of units attempted" (DIISRTE 2011; as cited in Gale and Parker 2013).	"Success Rate = student load passed, divided by student load certified (passed, failed, withdrawn)" (DIISRTE 2011; as cited in Gale and Parker 2013).

[1] Calculated separately for each intake period – for example, students starting at the beginning of 2014 were followed up one year later at the commencement of 2015; and mid-year intakes were followed up mid-year the following year.

[2] Does not take into account student transfers to other institutions, as this data was not available.

[3] The term 'unit' in this context refers to single subject of study within an

undergraduate/Bachelor level course.

Additional demographic and enrolment information was collected for students included in this study. This included: gender, age at commencement of the undergraduate degree, School of enrolment (i.e., Faculty), attendance mode (internal/on-campus or external), enrolment load (full-time: enrolled in 0.375 or more EFTSL per semester; part-time: enrolled in less than 0.375 EFTSL per semester), disability, NESB and low SES. Disability and NESB data were based on student self-disclosure at the point of enrolment, according to the students' own definition. Low SES data was "based on the students' postcode of permanent home residence, with the SES value derived from the 2011 SEIFA Education and Occupation Index for postal areas, where postal areas in the bottom 25% of the population aged 15-64 being classified as Low SES" (Australian Government, 2013). The collection of this data enabled multivariate regression analysis to be performed, in order to investigate whether any demographic or enrolment factors were associated with, or can be used to explain, statistics regarding retention or performance for the student cohorts under study. Of note, the campus of enrolment was not considered here as all but one undergraduate course (Nursing, in the School of Health Professions) was offered at a single campus (metropolitan) during the period of the study.

Analysis of influences on student retention and success rates

Admission pathway, demographic factors and enrolment characteristics were investigated as potential predictors of student retention and performance. The independent variables studied were those for which information was readily available from university student records. First year retention and success rates were used as the dependent (response) variables in the analyses.

Single associations between student retention and each independent variable of interest were explored via a

chi-square analysis. However, multivariate analysis was deemed necessary as some independent variables of interest were correlated (Appendix Table A1). Single association variables with a conservative p-value of less than 0.20 were further investigated in the multivariate regression model. Multi-collinearity between independent variables was ruled out before proceeding with further analysis. Plausible interactions were also investigated as part of the model. The final multivariate regression model included the following predictor variables: admission pathway, School, attendance mode, enrolment load, gender, age group, low SES, disability and success rate. As the dependent variable (retention) was dichotomous, a logistic regression analysis method was employed. For this analysis, categorical data were dummy coded into exhaustive and mutually exclusive variables, each with a designated reference group for comparison. As it is recommended that multivariate logistic regression models employ an n value of at least 10-15 per independent variable included in the model (Johnson & Wichern, 2007; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), the sample size for modelling was more than sufficient.

Associations between success rate and admission pathway as well as other independent variables of interest (demographic and enrolment factors) were investigated using the method described above for analysis of retention. For multivariate analysis, the dependent variable (success rate) was dichotomised into a binary variable (passed less than 50% of units attempted versus passed 50% or more of units attempted) before proceeding with logistic regression analysis.

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted using the statistical package SPSS, version 21. Chi-square analyses were used to test for differences in frequency data, while t-tests were used for cohort comparisons of retention and success rates. Associations were considered statistically significant if two-

sided p-values were less than 0.05.

Findings

Student characteristics

Demographic and enrolment characteristics significantly differed for students that accessed university via different entry pathways (Table 3). Notably, the proportion of low SES students and students with a disability was highest in the OnTrack pathway cohort compared to the other cohorts under study. Further, compared to students entering via other 'alternative' pathways (such as VET, STAT or other enabling programs), OnTrack pathway students tended to be younger, and more likely to study on-campus and take on a full-time enrolment load in their first year of undergraduate study.

**Table 3**. *Demographic and enrolment characteristics of students by entry pathway**

Student characteristics	Entry pathway						p-value
	OnTrack	Higher Education participation	VET	Other non-traditional pathways	School Leaver	Completed Secondary Education	
Gender							0.009
Female	592 (57%)	879 (60%)	943 (61%)	510 (61%)	1250 (64%)	396 (59%)	
Male	446 (43%)	588 (40%)	594 (39%)	326 (39%)	710 (36%)	278 (41%)	
Age							<0.001
≤19 years	644 (62%)	284 (19%)	383 (25%)	257 (31%)	1942 (99%)	466 (69%)	
20-29 years	301 (29%)	735 (50%)	689 (45%)	397 (47%)	18 (0.9%)	172 (26%)	
30+ years	94 (9%)	449 (31%)	467 (30%)	182 (22%)	3 (0.1%)	36 (5%)	
Low SES	286 (28%)	215 (15%)	373 (24%)	209 (25%)	400 (20%)	114 (17%)	<0.001
Disability	150 (14%)	165 (11%)	136 (9%)	94 (11%)	116 (6%)	52 (8%)	<0.001
NESB	84 (8%)	130 (9%)	167 (11%)	63 (8%)	107 (5%)	41 (6%)	<0.001
Attendance mode							<0.001
Internal	1037 (99.9%)	1288 (88%)	1322 (86%)	767 (92%)	1954 (99.6%)	628 (93%)	
External	1 (0.1%)	180 (12%)	215 (14%)	69 (8%)	8 (0.4%)	46 (7%)	
Enrolment load							<0.001
Full-time	668 (64%)	818 (56%)	861 (56%)	497 (59%)	1832 (95%)	516 (77%)	
Part-time	371 (36%)	650 (44%)	677 (44%)	339 (41%)	131 (5%)	158 (23%)	
School							<0.001
Psychology & Exercise Science	119 (12%)	128 (9%)	136 (9%)	62 (7%)	207 (11%)	57 (8%)	
Arts	166 (16%)	174 (12%)	163 (11%)	119 (14%)	265 (14%	100 (15%)	
Business & Governance	86 (8%)	152 (10%)	245 (16%)	87 (10%)	145 (7%)	75 (11%)	
Law	76 (7%)	245 (17%)	65 (4%)	119 (14%)	249 (13%)	77 (11%)	
Veterinary & Life Sciences	175 (17%)	276 (19%)	172 (11%)	131 (16%)	545 (28%)	133 (20%)	
Engineering & IT	117 (11%)	196 (13%)	220 (14%)	73 (9%)	202 (10%)	72 (11%)	
Health Professions	144 (14%)	204 (14%)	301 (20%)	144 (17%)	183 (9%)	85 (13%)	
Education	150 (15%)	92 (6%)	237 (15%)	94 (11%)	166 (8%)	72 (11%)	

* Counts, column percentages and two-sided p-values from chi-square analyses are shown.

Student retention in the first year of undergraduate enrolment

The first outcome to be explored was student retention in the first year of undergraduate study, as this provides an important indication of student progress and persistence. Of all students that enrolled and started their degree between 2014 and 2016, 66% of OnTrack-pathway students were retained for the full year, compared to 68% of all other students (Figure 1). There were no significant differences in the frequency of retention outcomes between these groups [Pearson chi-square (χ^2) = 3.443, df=2, p=0.179]. Notably, during the first year of enrolment, 6.5% (68/1039) of OnTrack-pathway students and 4.9% (325/6669) of all other students transferred between courses.

Figure 1. *Student progression outcomes over the first year of enrolment for those who started between 2014 – 2016 (OnTrack n=1039; Other pathways n=4538)*
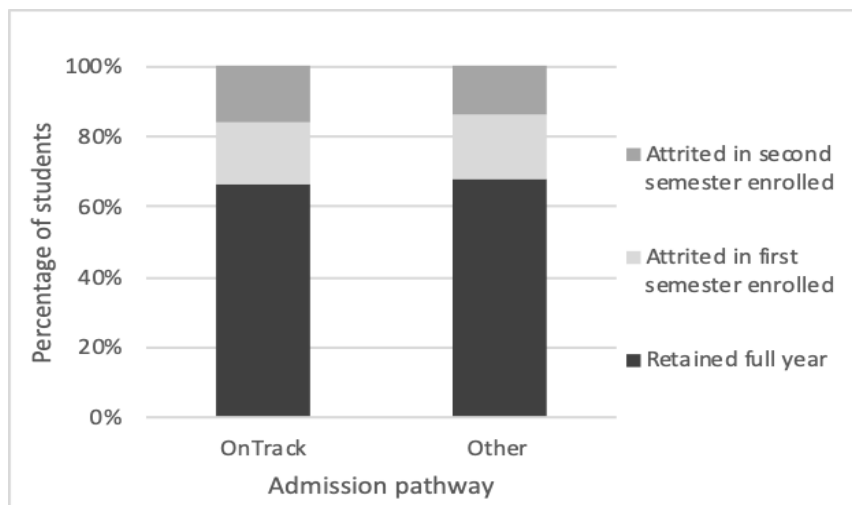
The retention rate was also analysed and compared for students entering via specific pathways (Table 4). OnTrack-pathway students were retained at the same rate as students entering via all other pathways, except School Leavers.

Table 4. *First year retention rate of students entering via various admission pathways*

Admission pathway	Retention (% of students retained)
OnTrack	66
Higher Education participation	67
VET	64
Other non-traditional pathways	65
Completed Secondary Education	68
School Leaver	75*

* Indicates statistical difference ($p<0.05$) in retention rate compared to *OnTrack* pathway students

Retention within the OnTrack group was also examined to determine whether retention outcomes for this group were stable over time; no significant differences in student retention were found for different intake periods [Pearson chi-square ($\chi2$) = 8.123, df=10, p=0.617].

Finding predictors of student retention

To determine whether the admission pathway influences student retention in the first year of undergraduate study, this should be studied whilst taking into account (or controlling for) potential confounders or other variables that may also influence/explain retention outcomes. For example, demographic characteristics differ for students entering via different admission pathways, and it is important to account for this when studying and understanding predictors of retention. Moreover, student performance in units may also influence student decisions to continue or drop out of university (Mills et al., 2009). A regression analysis technique was employed to control for potential confounders whilst studying the effects of the admission pathway on retention. Firstly, single associations between independent variables of interest (e.g. success rate, demographic and enrolment factors) and the response variable (retention) were investigated (Table 5).

Table 5. *Relationship between student retention in the first year of undergraduate study and student demographic and study factors* [1]

Demographic and study-related variables[2]		Retention		P-value
		No	Yes	
Gender	Female	1430 (30%)	3262 (70%)	<0.001
	Male	1048 (35%)	1961 (65%)	
Age group	≤19 years	1150 (29%)	2878 (71%)	<0.001
	20-29 years	847 (35%)	1541 (65%)	
	30+ years	485 (38%)	807 (62%)	
NESB	No	2276 (32%)	4816 (68%)	0.833
	Yes	197 (33%)	409 (67%)	
Low SES	No	1913 (32%)	4117 (68%)	**0.137**
	Yes	551 (34%)	1086 (66%)	
Disability status	No	2218 (32%)	4746 (68%)	**0.058**
	Yes	261 (35%)	479 (65%)	
School	Psychology & Exercise Science	241 (34%)	470 (66%)	<0.001
	Arts	356 (36%)	641 (64%)	
	Business & Governance	327 (41%)	467 (59%)	
	Law	212 (25%)	623 (75%)	
	Veterinary & Life Sciences	448 (31%)	991 (69%)	
	Engineering & IT	314 (35%)	574 (65%)	
	Health Professions	251 (23%)	852 (77%)	
	Education	261 (32%)	559 (68%)	
Attendance mode	Internal	2183 (30%)	4982 (70%)	<0.001
	External	296 (55%)	243 (45%)	
Enrolment Load	Part-time	994 (41%)	1433 (59%)	<0.001
	Full-time	1487 (28%)	3793 (72%)	
Pass/success rate	<50% of units attempted	1262 (73%)	476 (27%)	<0.001
	≥50% of units attempted	1214 (20%)	4749 (80%)	

[1] Counts, row percentages and two-sided p-values from chi-square analyses are shown.
[2] Variables that met conservative single association criteria ($p \leq 0.20$) for inclusion in the multivariate logistic regression model are highlighted in boldface.

Female gender, and full-time and on-campus attendance were associated with a significantly enhanced retention rate. Increasing age and passing less than 50% of units attempted was associated with significantly reduced retention rates. Retention also varied significantly according to the School of enrolment, with the highest retention rates observed in the Schools of Health Professions, Law, and Business and Governance. There was a trend for slightly lower retention rates for students with a disability or from a low SES background, but this was not significant at the 5% level. NESB was not associated with student retention (Table 5).

Importantly, a number of these independent variables were found to correlate with each other as well as the admission pathway (Appendix Table A1), highlighting the need to investigate covariates in a multivariate model. No multicollinearity issues were detected. An interaction between attendance mode and enrolment load was considered plausible, however, was not significant and therefore not considered further. The multivariate model is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. *Multivariate Logistic Regression Model analysing the influence of admission pathway, academic performance, demographic and enrolment factors on student retention*

Independent variable[1]		Odds ratio	(95% CI)	P-value[3]
Admission pathway	OnTrack[2]	1.000		
	Higher Education participation	0.857	(0.694 – 1.057)	0.150
	VET	0.825	(0.673 – 1.011)	0.064
	Other non-traditional pathways	0.876	(0.696 – 1.102)	0.259
	Completed Secondary Education	0.752	(0.590 – 0.957)	**0.021**
	School Leaver	0.865	(0.706 – 1.059)	0.159
School	Psychology & Exercise Science[2]	1.000		
	Arts	1.083	(0.860 – 1.364)	0.500
	Business & Governance	1.162	(0.907 – 1.491)	0.235
	Law	1.554	(1.212 – 1.993)	**0.001**
	Veterinary & Life Sciences	1.235	(0.993 – 1.536)	0.057
	Engineering & IT	1.391	(1.086 – 1.782)	**0.009**
	Health Professions	1.775	(1.395 – 2.259)	**<0.001**
	Education	1.364	(1.065 – 1.747)	**0.014**
Attendance Mode	External[2]	1.000		
	Internal	1.924	(1.531 – 2.418)	**<0.001**
Enrolment Load	Part-time[2]	1.000		
	Full-time	1.418	(1.241 – 1.620)	**<0.001**
Gender	Female[2]	1.000		
	Male	1.008	(0.890 – 1.141)	0.905
Disability	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	1.014	(0.839 – 1.227)	0.885
Low SES	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.983	(0.856 – 1.128)	0.804
Age group	≤19 years[2]	1.000		
	20-29 years	0.994	(0.850 – 1.163)	0.944
	30+ years	0.821	(0.676 – 0.997)	**0.046**
Success rate	Passed <50% of units attempted[2]	1.000		
	Passed ≥50% of units attempted	10.001	(8.777 – 11.395)	**<0.001**

[1] Model Chi-square = 1677.7 *df* = 20, p<0.001; Nagelkerke R-squared = 0.283; *N*=7456 included in the analysis.
[2] Reference group
[3] P-values significant at the 5% level are highlighted in boldface.

The model (Table 6) suggests that OnTrack-pathway students were retained at a similar or significantly better rate compared to students entering via all other pathways when taking into account demographic and enrolment factors, as well as academic performance during the first year of undergraduate study.

The model also suggests students who passed 50% or more of their units were ten times more likely to be retained than those that passed less than 50% of their units. As well as this, students enrolled internally and full-time had higher odds of being retained than those enrolled externally and part-time, respectively. Students enrolled in the School of Health Professions, Law, Engineering and IT, and Education were more likely to be retained than those enrolled in other Schools. Demographic factors such as gender, disability and low SES status did not influence retention whilst controlling for other variables.

The model correctly allocated 78.2% of total cases, with 50.6% of attrited students correctly predicted and 90.9% of retained students correctly predicted. Importantly, the model's effect size, Nagelkerke R-squared was 0.283; indicating that 28.3% of the variance in the dependent variable (retention) was explained by this model. Notably, student performance in first year units had the greatest influence on retention of any other variable in this model. When success rate was excluded as an independent variable in the regression model (Appendix Table A2), the Nagelkerke R-squared was much lower at 0.057; indicating that only 5.7% of the variance in retention is explained by admission pathway, demographic and enrolment factors alone. Further, this alternative model correctly allocated 69% of cases, with only 8.9% of attrited students correctly predicted. Therefore, despite some of these variables reaching significance, admission pathway, demographic and enrolment factors collectively explained very little about student retention and were particularly poor predictors of attrition during the first year of undergraduate study.

Student performance during the first year of undergraduate enrolment

The second outcome to be explored was student success rate in the first year of undergraduate degree enrolment, defined as the proportion of units passed versus attempted, as an indicator of how well students perform. On average, OnTrack-pathway students passed 62% (± Standard Error of the Mean (SE) = 1%, n=1038) of attempted units, which was lower (p<0.001) than the mean success rate of 74% (± SE 0.5%, n=6474) for the rest of the student cohort collectively. Figure 2 shows the first year mean student success rate (+SE) for each individual admission pathway; OnTrack pathway students underperformed compared to students entering via other admission pathways.

Figure 2. *Mean success rate of students entering via different admission pathways for the first year of undergraduate study*
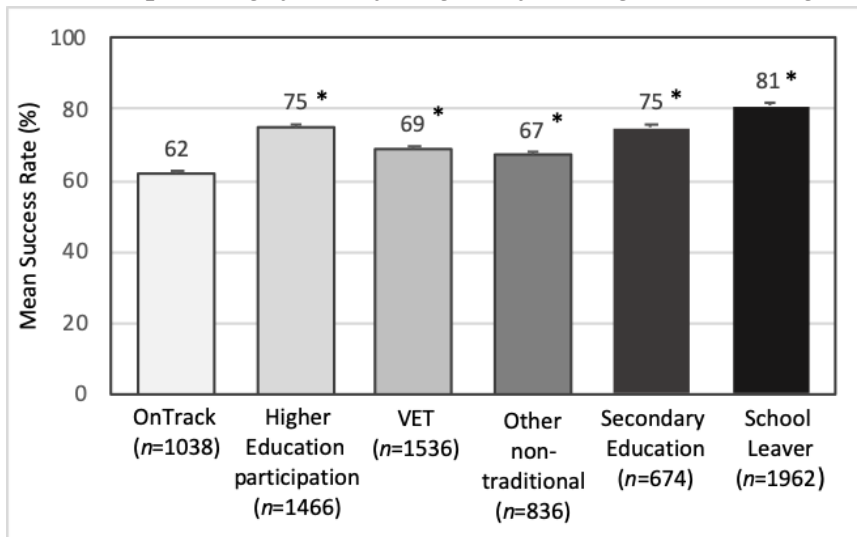
* Indicates statistical difference (p<0.05) in success rate compared to OnTrack pathway students

Finding predictors of student performance

As per student retention, to determine whether the admission pathway influences student performance in the first year of undergraduate study, it is important to control for potential confounders or other variables that may also influence/ explain performance outcomes. Firstly, single associations between potential confounders/independent variables of interest (e.g. demographic and enrolment factors) and the response variable (performance) were investigated (Table 7).

Table 7. *Relationship between student performance in the first year of undergraduate study and student characteristics*

Demographic and enrolment factors[1]		Mean success rate ± SE	P-value[2]
Gender	Female	76 ± SE 0.5%	**<0.001**
	Male	67 ± SE 1%	
Age group	≤19 years	74 ± SE 0.5%	**<0.001**
	20-29 years	67 ± SE 1%	
	30+ years	76 ± SE 1%	
NESB	No	73 ± SE 0.5%	**0.002**
	Yes	68 ± SE 2%	
Low SES	No	73 ± SE 0.5%	**0.001**
	Yes	70 ± SE 1%	
Disability status	No	73 ± SE 0.5%	**0.001**
	Yes	68 ± SE 1%	
School	Psychology & Exercise Science	74 ± SE 1%	**<0.001**
	Arts	71 ± SE 1%	
	Business & Governance	64 ± SE 1%	
	Law	77 ± SE 1%	
	Veterinary & Life Sciences	73 ± SE 1%	
	Engineering & IT	64 ± SE 1%	
	Health Professions	84 ± SE 1%	
	Education	72 ± SE 1%	
Attendance mode	External	60 ± SE 2%	**<0.001**
	Internal	73 ± SE 0.5%	
Enrolment Load	Part-time	67 ± SE 1%	**<0.001**
	Full-time	75 ± SE 0.5%	

[1] Variables that met conservative single association criteria (p ≤ 0.20) for inclusion in the multivariate regression model are highlighted in boldface.
[2] Two-sided p-values derived from one-way ANOVA test.

Female gender, full-time study and internal enrolment modes were associated with a significantly enhanced success rate. The 20-29 year old age group, NESB, disability and low SES status were associated with a lower success rate. Performance also varied according to the School of enrolment, with the highest success rates observed in the Schools of Health Professions and Law (Table 7).

As these demographic and enrolment variables were found to significantly influence student performance, as well as the fact that a number of these variables also correlate with each other and admission pathway (Appendix Table A1), a regression analysis technique was employed to control for potential confounders whilst studying the effects of admission pathway on performance (Table 8). A multiple logistic regression model was employed with the dependent variable (student performance) included in the model in dichotomous format (passed less than 50% of units attempted versus passed 50% or more of units attempted).

Table 8. *Multivariate Logistic Regression Model analysing the influence of admission pathway, demographic and enrolment factors on student performance*

Independent variable[1]		Odds ratio	(95% CI)	P-value[3]
Admission pathway	OnTrack[2]	1.000		
	Higher Education participation	1.751	(1.435 – 2.138)	**<0.001**
	VET	1.384	(1.145 – 1.673)	**0.001**
	Other non-traditional pathways	1.151	(0.932 – 1.422)	0.191
	Completed Secondary Education	1.770	(1.399 – 2.241)	**<0.001**
	School Leaver	2.742	(2.247 – 3.345)	**<0.001**
School	Psychology & Exercise Science[2]	1.000		
	Arts	0.832	(0.653 – 1.059)	0.134
	Business & Governance	0.711	(0.552 – 0.915)	**0.008**
	Law	1.134	(0.871 – 1.478)	0.351
	Veterinary & Life Sciences	0.772	(0.614 – 0.970)	**0.027**
	Engineering & IT	0.710	(0.554 – 0.909)	**0.007**
	Health Professions	2.117	(1.613 – 2.780)	**<0.001**
	Education	0.948	(0.734 – 1.224)	0.680
Attendance Mode	External[2]	1.000		
	Internal	1.441	(1.157 – 1.793)	**0.001**
Enrolment Load	Part-time[2]	1.000		
	Full-time	1.626	(1.426 – 1.853)	**<0.001**
Gender	Female [2]	1.000		
	Male	0.750	(0.663 – 0.849)	**<0.001**
Disability	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.790	(0.658 – 0.949)	**0.012**
Low SES	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.767	(0.670 – 0.879)	**<0.001**
NESB	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.808	(0.659 – 0.990)	**0.040**
Age group	≤19 years[2]	1.000		
	20-29 years	0.951	(0.819 – 1.104)	0.511
	30+ years	1.580	(1.294 – 1.929)	**<0.001**

[1] Model Chi-square = 466.724 *df* = 20, p<0.001; Nagelkerke R-squared = 0.093; *N*=7456 included in the analysis.
[2] Reference group
[3] P-values significant at the 5% level are highlighted in boldface.

After controlling for covariates by performing multivariate logistic regression, the model suggests that OnTrack-pathway students have lower odds of passing 50% or more of their units compared to students entering via most other pathways, except those who enter via "other non-traditional pathways" (i.e. STAT test or other enabling programs).

The model also suggests that students enrolled on-campus and full-time are more likely to pass units than those enrolled externally and part-time, respectively. Having a disability, residing in a low SES postcode, NESB and male gender was associated with reduced odds of passing 50% or more of units attempted, while students aged 30 years or older were more likely to pass 50% or more of their units. The odds of success also differed by School of enrolment.

The regression model correctly allocated 77.6% of cases, with 99.1% of the students passing 50% or more of their units correctly predicted, but only 2.3% of students passing less than 50% of their units correctly predicted. Additionally, the model's effect size, Nagelkerke R-squared was also only 0.093; indicating that 9.3% of the variance in the dependent variable (student performance) was explained by this model. Therefore, despite these variables reaching significance, admission pathway, demographic and enrolment factors collectively explained very little about student performance during the first year of undergraduate study. Moreover, these were a particularly poor predictor of academic underperformance.

Discussion

Similar to that reported for enabling programs across Australia (Pitman et al., 2016), we found that a greater proportion of students transitioning via OnTrack were from equity and disadvantaged backgrounds than any other pathway; thereby demonstrating an important function of this enabling program in boosting the representation of these students at the university. Further, multivariate regression analysis revealed that OnTrack-pathway students were retained at a rate that was similar or better than students entering via all other admission pathways, despite poorer academic performance.

This is in line with previous findings at other Australian universities: both Chesters and Watson (2016) and Cantwell, Archer, and Bourke (2001) reported that once enabling-pathway students reach university, they are retained at a level that is commensurate with their peers entering via other pathways, including school leavers, but tend to have lower academic achievement. In an Australia-wide study, Pitman et al. (2016) also found that equity students who articulated via enabling programs had higher first-year retention rates and engendered "greater resilience or 'stickability'" (p. 55) than those accessing university via other sub-Bachelor pathways, despite experiencing academic barriers to success. On the contrary, traditional students may be more prone to discontinuing study in the face of unsatisfactory academic performance (Mills et al., 2009). Of the variables analysed in the current study, academic performance was the most important predictor of retention, and yet the retention of enabling pathway students appears relatively unaffected by their poorer academic performance compared to their non-enabling pathway peers. Taken together, these findings suggest that even though enabling students are more likely to struggle academically in first-year university, they may be more resilient in the face of new challenges; an encouraging finding given that students tend to arrive at their enabling program with low levels of confidence and academic self-efficacy (Atherton, 2015).

Alongside enhanced resilience, enduring social connections built during the enabling experience (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016) and "feelings of belonging" reported by enabling cohorts (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 5) may also go some way to explaining their persistence as they transition to university.

Other variables for which information was available, including demographic and enrolment factors, were also considered in this study as potential confounders of the relationship between admission pathway and first year outcomes. This was important as demographic and enrolment variables significantly differed by entry pathway, and therefore could potentially contribute to the cohort differences in outcomes observed. Multivariate regression analysis revealed that many of these demographic and enrolment variables were associated with statistically significant differences in retention and academic performance. For example, students who studied full-time and on-campus were more likely to be retained and achieve greater academic success than students enrolled part-time and externally, respectively. Notably, student choices regarding enrolment mode are likely influenced by personal circumstances and/or competing responsibilities (e.g. carer, financial, familial); factors that may also modulate their level of academic and social engagement at university, and therefore also their outcomes (Krause, 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008; Tinto, 2019; Whannell, 2013). Further, variables indicating equity status such as disability, low SES and NESB were not found to influence retention, but were associated with a reduced odds of academic success in the first year of undergraduate study, similar to that reported by McKay et al. (2018) using national data. The comparatively higher representation of equity, part-time and/or online students amongst non-traditional cohorts, including enabling cohorts, may go some way to explaining observed differences in outcomes and alert us to the additional challenges that these students face as they move into their undergraduate studies.

It is important to note that the admission pathway, and demographic and enrolment factors were not sufficient to explain the vast majority of the variance observed in either retention or academic performance. Moreover, these variables were particularly poor predictors of attrition and academic underperformance. These findings were not surprising: enrolment and demographic factors also were not sufficient to explain most of the observed variation in student retention during the OnTrack experience (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). Instead, attrited students most commonly cited "medical and emotional issues" as the reason for prematurely leaving OnTrack, similar to that reported for other Australian enabling programs (Hodges et al., 2013). Psychological factors, in particular, may have a

significant influence on student outcomes during the first year transition. Research has revealed an ever-increasing burden of mental ill-health and psychological distress amongst university students (Said, Kypri, & Bowman, 2013; Stallman, 2010), including those in enabling pathways (Crawford et al., 2016); and the dire effect on student retention (Hodges et al., 2013; Orygen, 2017; Walter, 2015). In one recent study, almost all (95%) enabling students were found to be experiencing above normal levels of psychological distress (Nieuwoudt 2021). Belonging to an equity subgroup (Orygen, 2017) and the stress of transitioning to university (Cleary, Walter, & Jackson, 2011) are also significant risk factors that likely contribute to, or compound, poor mental health in this cohort. The Orygen (2017) report highlighted that "the mental health of university students has largely been absent at a government policy level" (p. 6), and that it "must be included in the higher education policy agenda" going forward (p.7). Australian universities are now starting to make a concerted effort to implement institution-wide mental health strategies, with many drawing on the "Enhancing Student Wellbeing" framework (Baik & Larcombe, 2016) that emphasises a role for curriculum in supporting student wellbeing. Proactively addressing student affect and social and emotional learning in enabling and first-year curricula is one example of a strategy that aims to enhance student wellbeing and success (Jones, Lisciandro, & Olds, 2016; Lisciandro, Jones, & Geerlings, 2018; Lisciandro, Jones, & Strehlow, 2016). Recent guidelines and recommendations from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education also reinforce the importance of teaching, learning and curriculum to supporting student wellbeing and persistence of disadvantaged groups (Crawford 2021).

Limitations of the current study

The variables included in the current study were limited by the types of information captured in university administrative databases, and therefore other variables that may have better explained student outcomes, such as psychological data, were not investigated here. Moreover, 'disadvantaged' groups have long been recognised as "difficult to define and differentiate" (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 9); and measures of disadvantage can have their limitations. For example, the postcode method of identifying low SES students does not take into account the complexity of factors that determine an individual's overall social and economic position (Sinclair, Doughney, & Palermo, 2003).

In the current study, it was not feasible to explore outcomes beyond the first year of undergraduate study, however, it would be useful to address this in future. Nonetheless, the first year is

the time when the greatest risk of discontinuation occurs, and our findings provide empirical data to support the notion that enabling programs have been successful in 'enabling' access and participation of students who are capable but otherwise lack opportunity, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Corroborating the findings of Pitman et al. (2016, p. 55) their "success rates remind us that disadvantage does not disappear after the enabling pathway has been completed. Many equity-group students still require ongoing academic support in their undergraduate studies" (p. 55). Future discussion regarding access and equity policy should centre around ways that we can continue to support the transition experience of these students into the first year of university and beyond.

Final Considerations

In recent years, there have been questions about the efficacy of enabling programs in meeting academic standards and equity goals (Shah & Whannell, 2017). The proposed Higher Education Reform package (Australian Government, 2017), and the more recent Consultation paper (DET, 2018) attempted to define empirical measures of evaluating program efficacy and emphasise these as essential criteria for determining the future of enabling funding. While this study goes some way toward investigating some of these measures at one Australian university, it is important to note that quantitative data regarding student retention and academic performance provides only one part of the story. It does not necessarily value the knowledges and experiences of enabling participants, or alternative measures of success such as increased confidence, as well as other study and employment opportunities gained. It may not capture the success experienced by disadvantaged students who take a longer or more convoluted path to achieve the same ends amidst many personal, health or circumstantial hurdles. As Bennett and Lumb (2019, p. 7) argue "notions of 'competition', 'measurement' and 'return on investment' – exemplify the neoliberal approach to policymaking". This is a discourse that seems far removed from the social justice principles of achieving a "fairer and more just society" that Dawkins wrote about in A Fair Chance for all (DEET, 1990) and which set in motion the Bradley et al. (2008) Review and the resulting expansion of enabling pathways.

Nonetheless, this study found that an enabling program boosted participation by underrepresented groups at one Australian university, and equipped students to persist through their first year of undergraduate study just as well as other entry pathways. Enabling programs hence remain an important tool for enacting social justice in universities and the communities in which they serve.

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Appendix

Table A1. *Single associations between independent variables*

Predictor variables	Spearman rho correlation coefficients[1]								
	School	Age group	Gender	Disability	NESB	Low SES	Attendance mode	Enrolment mode	Success rate
Admission pathway	-0.034 **	-0.412 **	-0.037 **	-0.089 **	-0.049 **	-0.017	-0.081 **	0.269 **	0.119 **
School	X	0.048 **	-0.060 **	-0.040 **	0.025 *	0.095 **	0.016	-0.077 **	0.030 *
Age group		X	-0.020	0.073 **	0.066 **	0.013	0.266 **	-0.375 **	-0.044 **
Gender			X	-0.010	0.003	-0.050 **	0.012	0.058 **	-0.95 **
Disability				X	-0.033 **	0.005	-0.012	-0.038 **	-0.040 **
NESB					X	0.012	-0.025 *	-0.062 **	-0.024 *
Low SES						X	0.002	-0.030 **	-0.036 **
Attendance mode							X	-0.216 **	0.085 **
Enrolment mode								X	0.104 **

[1]Significant associations at the 5% level are shaded in grey. P-values not corrected for multiple comparisons, thus exercise discretion in the interpretation of results. Association data not replicated on the bottom left of the table.

* indicates 2-sided p-value <0.05

** indicates 2-sided p-value <0.01

Table A2. *Alternative Multivariate Logistic Regression Model analysing the influence of admission pathway, demographic and enrolment factors only on student retention*

Independent variable[1]		Odds ratio	(95% CI)	P-value[3]
Admission pathway	*OnTrack*[2]	1.000		
	Higher Education participation	1.135	(0.944 – 1.365)	0.177
	VET	0.998	(0.835 – 1.193)	0.980
	Other non-traditional pathways	0.975	(0.797 – 1.192)	0.804
	Completed Secondary Education	1.033	(0.835 – 1.279)	0.763
	School Leaver	1.345	(1.125 – 1.607)	**0.001**
School	Psychology & Exercise Science[2]	1.000		
	Arts	0.993	(0.807 – 1.221)	0.944
	Business & Governance	0.976	(0.782 – 1.218)	0.828
	Law	1.495	(1.194 – 1.872)	**<0.001**
	Veterinary & Life Sciences	1.070	(0.880 – 1.301)	0.495
	Engineering & IT	1.126	(0.904 – 1.402)	**0.291**
	Health Professions	2.073	(1.663 – 2.584)	**<0.001**
	Education	1.262	(1.011 – 1.575)	**0.040**
Attendance Mode	External[2]	1.000		
	Internal	1.952	(1.593 – 2.392)	**<0.001**
Enrolment Load	Part-time[2]	1.000		
	Full-time	1.615	(1.435 – 1.818)	**<0.001**
Gender	Female[2]	1.000		
	Male	0.893	(0.800 – 0.998)	**0.047**
Disability	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.921	(0.779 – 1.090)	0.338
Low SES	No[2]	1.000		
	Yes	0.885	(0.783 – 1.000)	0.051
Age group	≤19 years[2]	1.000		
	20-29 years	0.971	(0.846 – 1.116)	0.682
	30+ years	1.017	(0.855 – 1.210)	0.850

[1] Model Chi-square = 310.611, df = 19, p<0.001; Nagelkerke R-squared = 0.057; N=7459 included in the analysis.

[2] Reference group

[3] P-values significant at the 5% level are highlighted in boldface.

About the author

Dr Joanne Lisciandro is a Lecturer in University Preparation Pathways at Murdoch University and has worked in enabling education for the last ten years. Her current research interests focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning in enabling education; and understanding the mechanisms that support the wellbeing, retention, success and achievement of non-traditional students in their transition to university.

Contact details

Dr Joanne Lisciandro

University Preparation Pathways
Murdoch University 90 South Street, Murdoch, Western Australia 6150
Email: J.Lisciandro@murdoch.edu.au

Survival narratives from single mothers in an enabling program:
'Just hope you don't get sick and live off caffeine'

Anne Braund

Trixie James

Katrina Johnston

Louise Mullaney

A growing number of single mothers are seeking entry to higher education via enabling programs; however, these students face unique struggles to make their dream a reality. There is some research on the challenges faced by student-mothers in higher education; however, research specifically on single mothers in enabling education is limited. This research focused on identifying the competing discourses that single mothers faced during an enabling program, and the ways they can be supported. Interviews were conducted with seven women who self-identified as single mothers, describing their personal struggles, alongside their experiences of great accomplishment. What became evident, was despite the difficulties of raising children as a sole parent, the student-mothers gained noticeable confidence in themselves during and after completing their enabling studies. Analysis of the data identified unique challenges faced by this non-traditional group of students and highlighted specific supports that this student group require. This paper details a range of obstacles that impeded their study; related directly to their status as single parents. These hurdles included financial

difficulties, lack of support, negative familial relationships, personal health concerns, and study related challenges.

In addition, these seven student-mothers identified the key factors that supported their success: forging strong connections with other students, improved self-efficacy, the observed positive 'knock-on' effect to their children, and quality academic support and pastoral care from university staff. Thus, with perseverance and appropriate support, these student-mothers were able to achieve success in an enabling program. This study voices the personal 'survival narratives' of seven student-mothers; revealing challenges and strategies unique to their circumstances, that in-turn, generated a successful student experience.

Keywords: *enabling education, student-mother, single mothers, non-traditional student, widening participation, qualitative research, thematic analysis*

Introduction

Many universities in Australia offer pre-tertiary preparation courses, commonly known as enabling programs, to allow non-traditional students the opportunity to access higher education. Many of these non-traditional students come from low socio-economic backgrounds, have lower-level academic skills, are first in the family, and require equity consideration to support these factors. Within this cohort, mothers are a growing student subgroup that require additional supports to assist in their engagement and success in enabling education. A study of 284 women who self-identified as mothers whilst enrolled in the enabling program *Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies* (STEPS) at CQUniversity Australia was undertaken. From this group, student-mothers volunteered to participate in research interviews, and subsequently, seven single mothers (SM) were interviewed. These interviews share the lived experiences that single student-mothers face when

engaging in enabling education. This study aims to identify the competing commitments that both supported and hindered mothers during their enabling studies, and how they could be best supported; financially, socioeconomically, communally, familiarly, educationally, academically, and whether the support is relational, contextual, or environmental in nature. This paper details the depth of the challenges that impeded their study, along with the strategies that supported success, with a focus on those directly related to their status as single student-mothers.

Literature review

Enabling programs offer access to higher education, with increasing enrolments from non-traditional students (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 1). With female enrolments at 58.3 per cent of all domestic students (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 9), mothers are a growing population within the larger non-traditional student groups entering university via enabling education programs (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 9). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data (2016) reported that 12.7 per cent of students enrolled at a university are parents caring for their children; however, there is a paucity of data available on the parenting status of higher education students, presenting a major barrier to understanding the support needs of parents who study (Andrewartha et al., 2022, p. 10).

CQUniversity's enabling program, STEPS, has increasing enrolments from mothers. Research confirms this increase is due to mothers seeking the opportunity of a career, and an improved future for themselves and their families via a higher education pathway (Bender et al., 2021; Lyonette et al., 2015). While there is significant literature on female students in higher education, there is limited research focused on mothers, specifically engaging in enabling studies (Johnston et al., 2018). The researchers found even less quantity of research on single student-mothers entering

higher education; therefore, this research is particularly significant as it highlights the plight of single mothers entering university through the non-traditional pathway of enabling education. Understanding the characteristics of this unique student cohort – single, student-mothers, is fundamental to enabling their success (Auguste, Wai-Ling-Packard & Keep, 2018).

Mothers face complex challenges when entering university; finding ways and means to blend their responsibilities as a student and mother. Student-mothers must balance academic study with competing priorities: household duties, work, childcare, family support, self-belief, financial stress, and time restrictions (Devlin, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018). Many mothers are the first in the family to attend university, hence, lacking familiarity with the expectations of a university landscape (Devlin, 2017; Stahl & McDonald, 2022). First in family students noted that they "struggled to socially integrate" finding the university experience "isolating, and they doubted themselves" (Stahl & McDonald, 2022, para 15). These patterns haven't changed over time, with literature from the 1990s and currently, reporting the same key reasons that student-mothers leave their university studies: the difficulty of combining family, work, and study responsibilities (Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1996; Devlin, 2017). Many mothers commence enabling studies lacking self-confidence and feeling ill-equipped to navigate academia (Braund et al., 2020). Single mothers often enter study with lower academic skills, are the first in the family, require equity support and come from low socio- economic backgrounds (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). Significant financial pressures (Devlin, 2017) and lack of familial support were also highlighted as challenges for student-mothers (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). These additional pressures demonstrate that student-mothers often require an extra level of support to succeed in their studies (Billingsley et al., 2020).

There are strong motivations for mothers to enter university studies. Historically, Carney-Compton and Tan (2002)

found that at the beginning of the 21ˢᵗ century, the fastest growing non-traditional group of students undertaking university study, were females. This trajectory has continued with Auguste, Packard and Keep (2018) finding that most non-traditional students identify as women, with many reporting they balance employment, childcare, and family responsibilities alongside their studies. Inside this group, are single mothers, solely managing a household and study. When comparing single mother households to other family types, family units headed by single mothers experienced a "disproportionate share of poverty" with "37% … more than a third of single mothers and their children living in poverty" (Australian Council of Social Service, 2020, para 4). This standard of living is due substantially to lower levels of education attainment (Synnott, 2010, p. 5). Mothers are financially motivated to complete a university degree, with statistics confirming that graduates experience better employment outcomes, with higher income (Universities Australia, 2021). The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022, para 1) states that "higher educational attainment leads to higher total incomes" reporting that a median income for a bachelor's degree graduate is $51,200 while a median income for a sub-bachelor qualification was 34 per cent lower at $33,800 (Universities Australia, 2021, para 3). Researchers concur that "higher average incomes and higher rates of employment correlate with higher levels of educational attainment", therefore generating a discouraging cycle for those unable to achieve a higher education degree (Synnott, 2010, p. 5). Fortunately, for students who are not able to enter higher education immediately following high school, they can complete a bridging or enabling program as a pathway to enter university. Willans (2019, p. 49) supports the benefits of this pathway stating that an enabling program "prepares students with an appropriate level of knowledge, academic skills, competence and confidence for higher education studies". Enabling programs are in most cases government funded as an "equity initiative", so non-traditional cohorts (such as single mothers) and other "marginalised groups

that would otherwise be ignored" can access higher educational opportunities (Chojenta, 2017, p. 89).

While post-secondary education historically has been associated with white middle-and upper-class status (Coontz, 1992), increasing numbers of minority and working-class women from low socio-economic backgrounds are pursuing higher education as an avenue toward upward social mobility (Collins, 1999; Hodges et al., 2013). This aligns with recent research confirming that mothers actively pursue university studies because it provides the opportunity for increased social status (Stahl & McDonald, 2022). More specifically for single mothers, Haleman (2004, p. 770) described their experience in tertiary education as providing "an opportunity for disrupting negative expectations directed toward them" and that higher education "symbolised for the women the possibility of realising the hopes and dreams they hold for themselves and their children". Similarly, Katz (2013, p. 274) said that the single mothers in their study 'construct' "survival narratives – in order to 'resist' welfare policies and to 'give meaning' to their hardships". There were very real personal impacts for the 64 student-mothers in Katz's (2013) study, including mental health concerns, financial problems, and emotional guilt around less time spent with their families. Most of the women admitted that they struggled with their mental well-being during their time as a student (particularly due to time pressures) but once studies were completed, most said their self-esteem had increased (Katz, 2013). In addition, once enrolled, the single mothers felt a sense of commitment that "failure was not an option" and they did not want to "lose themselves" long term in the welfare system (Katz, 2013, p. 287). These single, student-mothers thought that constructing their own "narratives" along with "survival strategies" was important, and helpful to let other mothers know that they have the capacity and ability to study too (Katz, 2013, p. 274). Haleman's (2004) research echoed that single mothers valued education as instrumental in moving them beyond welfare and poverty, a

position still shared today (Universities Australia, 2021).

Single mothers enter study with a desire to improve themselves, believing that through completing a higher education qualification, they are providing positive role models for their children (Haleman, 2004). According to Synnott (2010), single mothers in undergraduate programs said they decided to return to higher education study, weighing up their concerns about being able to balance family, study, work and the guilt of spending less time with their children, but focused on the goal of successfully completing their undergraduate degree. In a more recent study, Greenberg and Shenaar-Golan (2017) collected information from single mothers who were studying a bridging course to gain access to university and suggested that their main motivation for entering via this pathway was to help them attain improved job prospects, improve their self-efficacy and life satisfaction, and become better role models for their children. These mothers accessed a scholarship fund and received personal tutorials, counselling, assistance with goal setting, and support plans for success at university (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan 2017). In another study, Ratel (2010) shared that the single mothers felt extremely tired due to their multiple roles of student, mother and employee and this constant balancing act caused disorienting dilemmas that at times became overwhelming. Similarly, Stone and O'Shea (2013) claimed that their female participants identified five main hindrances during their higher education studies: being time poor, giving up leisure pursuits, persistence of traditional gender roles, money and financial stress, and guilt over the time committed to studying away from their family. Ratel (2010) suggested that these study obstacles were heightened for single mothers, causing very high levels of emotional and physical stress; however, Van Stone et al., (2016) and Ratel (2010) highlighted that the student-mothers in their studies identified higher education as a pathway to improving many aspects of their lives.

Mothers entering university begin this journey with competing commitments. Research in the early 1990s found that in general, Australian mature aged students are often more academically successful than school leavers, due, in part, to life experiences, the development of time management skills, and resilience (Scott, 1993). More specifically, Scott (1993) noted that student-mothers faced hardships due to completing the majority of household duties, childcare, work commitments, and the expectation that they stay home to care for non-school aged children. This narrative has not changed with recent student-mothers reporting the challenge of balancing study with the competing responsibilities of household duties, work, and childcare (Devlin, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018). Due to these responsibilities, Scott (1993, p. 5) found that many mothers had to "interrupt their studies" to allow for external variables and suggested that university systems and support structures need to be more empathetic towards mothers and their external situations. Acknowledging that student-mothers have unique demands, Scott (1993) proposed that universities should assist this cohort with improved access to childcare and support services. More current research recognises that childcare and its associated costs, represents a significant obstacle for "parenting students" and that student-mothers are at risk of being pushed out of higher education systems if institutes do not accommodate their needs (Ryberg et al., 2021, para. 14). The Institute for Women's Policy Research says that on-campus childcare, academic and career counselling, employment services, and flexible course schedules should be the priority strategies for supporting parents enrolled in higher education (cited in Ryberg et al., 2021, para. 13). Research also noted that universities need to work around school hours where possible and incorporate on-campus childcare facilities to give mothers an equitable chance to succeed in their studies (Von Benzon, 2022). According to Youngblut et al., (2000, p. 125) there are three primary obstacles that either prevented single mothers from studying or attaining work: childcare (affordability and availability), lack of involvement

by the father (financially and in the day-to-day care of the children), and negativity from family and friends about a mother commencing study or work.

External support networks are critical for mothers to achieve academic success. Johnston et al., (2018) found that single mothers valued a strong support network, and many of these mothers rated the support of lecturers and other university staff as essential for their success. Research by Van Stone et al., (2016) concurs that personal ambition (psychological factor), and support from university services, family, fellow students, and university staff (sociological factors) were crucial to single mother's academic success. The importance of these supports was confirmed by Haleman's (2004, p. 780) research participants, with the single mothers stating that they could not have experienced success in higher education without external supports, saying they felt "stressed out by the combined responsibilities they faced". Johnston's et al., (2018, p. 17) research on student-mothers found that whilst they struggled with a number of challenges, the enabling program helped them gain self-confidence, improved time-management, motivation, and the perception that they were more positive role models for their children. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) noted that whilst balancing study was challenging, most non-traditional female students decided to embark on higher education mindful of the added demands of higher education. Braund et al., (2020, p. 13) reported that student-mothers conscientiously made positive choices to support their study success; spurred on by "hope for their possible futures". Andrewartha et al., (2022) asserts that current research shows that single mothers show great academic persistence and are committed to achieving in higher education.

In summary, there is limited literature available on the experiences of single mothers in enabling education. Enabling education is unquestionably a journey of

empowerment and development for single mothers (Torres et al., 2020, p. 158). Research conducted indicates that student-mothers are resilient and highly capable, and if they manage their competing commitments and utilise external supports, they can achieve success (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). As the support requirements of student-mothers are different from those of the general student population, universities should prioritise implementing specific policies and strategies to retain student-mothers, and support higher levels of success for non-traditional female students (Augustine et al., 2019). This qualitative study was designed to identify the challenges facing single student-mothers in an enabling program and distinguish the most effective supports that assisted them to achieve success.

Methodology

Merriam's (2009) basic qualitative research methodology underpins the research design, allowing the researchers to apply an interpretive lens to analyse more thoroughly, the meaning constructed by the participants about their personal experiences. In turn, the analysis strives for a deeper appreciation of the single mother student experience. The primary method of collecting data was through individual interviews. The researchers used a semi-structured approach where key topics were highlighted for discussion. This allowed the researcher to encourage open dialogue with the participants. Merriam (2009, p. 90) confirms this semi-structured approach "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic". Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis method was used to effectively analyse the transcripts to identify and report the common themes that presented within the data set. The six phases of thematic analysis were followed: analysing and coding the data, searching for broad themes, then reviewing each one, identifying, and narrowing the themes, and the final step of writing the report (Braun

& Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and data inductively extrapolated using the six phases of thematic analysis to identify and report the key findings. The process of analysis was inductive, and meaning was mediated through the researcher. The findings strive for depth of understanding of the students' experiences, with the final outcome being a richly descriptive account of the experiences of single mothers in an enabling program.

Participants

The participants for this study were extracted from a broader scale research project. The initial project involved emailing 5880 female students who had been enrolled in the STEPS enabling program. From the 410 responses, 284 identified as a mother with dependant children, and of those, 85 self-identified as single mothers. As the focus of this research was to investigate the experiences of single mothers in an enabling program, purposive sampling was employed. This was a deliberate approach to ensure the characteristic of being a single mother, was the common feature of the sample population. Therefore, the 85 single mothers were invited by email to participate in individual interviews. As a result, seven single mothers volunteered to participate in the research. The interviews were conducted either by video conference or face-to-face and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. To de-identify the participants, pseudonyms (A-G) were assigned for confidentiality purposes. The demographics of the participants were varied, with ages ranging from 24 to 43 years. While most women were aged 30 to 43 years with between two and four children in their care, the youngest participant was 24 years of age, with one dependent child (see Table 1). Four were enrolled as on-campus students, two enrolled as mixed-mode blended learning students (online and on-campus) and one was a fully online student. At the time of publishing this paper, all of the participants had successfully completed the STEPS enabling program and five out of seven were

currently enrolled in undergraduate degree studies. The main limitation of this study is that the paper is gender specific, using only the voices of women, who self-identified specifically as single mothers during their enabling program, and this study is a small contingent from that sample group. Although participants were able to nominate as non-binary, there was no one in this sample that chose to identify as a gender, other than female.

Table 1. *The main demographics of the seven (7) single mothers interviewed in the study*

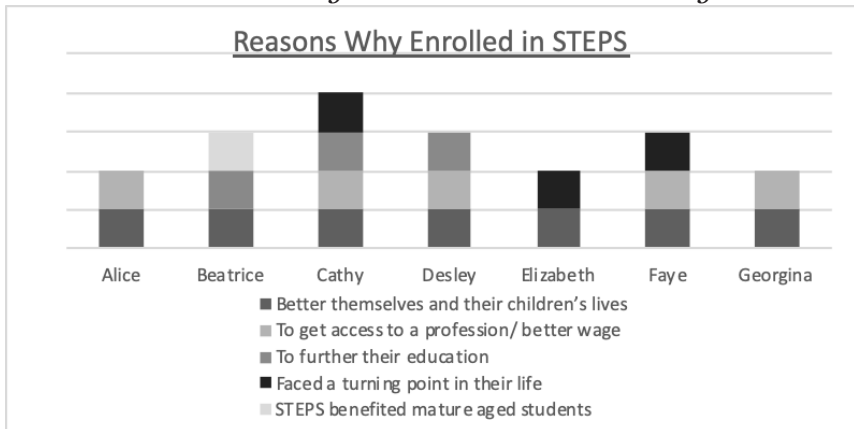| Name	Age started Enabling Program	Year started Enabling Program	Number of Dependent Children	Relationship Status	Course of Interest/ Current Study
Alice	31	2017	3	Divorced; Casual boyfriend	Want to study Nursing
Beatrice	37	2013	2	Separated	Bachelor of Law/ Accounting
Cathy	43	2015	4	Separated from second marriage	Bachelor of Psychology
Desley	41	2016	2	Single	Diploma of Early Childhood
Elizabeth	30	2015	3	Single	Bachelor of Nursing
Faye	37	2017	3	Single	Bachelor of Law
Georgina	24	2017	1	Single	Bachelor of Nursing

Findings

Through an inductive analysis process, six key themes emerged from the data reflecting the context and factors impacting single mothers engaging in enabling education. These themes include reasons for enrolment; fiscal arrangements; support networks; challenges experienced; positive study experiences; and advice to prospective students. These findings are discussed using the students' voices to present a deeper and more meaningful

understanding of the complex experiences of single mothers in enabling education.

Reason for enrolment

Students were asked to share their motivations for enrolling in an enabling program (see Table 2). All participants shared the goal of wanting to improve themselves and better their children's lives. Five single mothers were motivated to complete an enabling program as a bridging course to their chosen undergraduate degree, with the perception that this would lead to job opportunities with a higher income. Georgina wanted to give her daughter a better start in life. She stated '*I didn't just want to live on a childcare wage ... I wanted her (Georgina's daughter) to have that financial stability, so... I could get a better job pretty much*'. Desley had similar reasons stating, '*I didn't want to be stuck at home sitting on the dole.*' Three single mothers faced turning points in their life in the form of marital relationship breakdowns and homelessness, forcing them to look for improved future opportunities. Cathy explained that she was also financially motivated after being faced with a turning point in her life '*basically to be homeless would have been the only other step we had.*'

Table 2. *Reasons that single mothers enrol in enabling education*

Reasons Why Enrolled in STEPS

- Better themselves and their children's lives
- To get access to a profession/better wage
- To further their education
- Faced a turning point in their life
- STEPS benefited mature aged students

Fiscal arrangements

Fiscal arrangements were of interest, as it was assumed that most single mothers would have been reliant on financial support.

The findings clarified that although some participants worked, most relied on government benefits to finance their studies (see Table 3). Cathy had a very difficult financial and personal situation saying she had to rely on '*charity and my family, my mum'*. Ex-husband issues also exacerbated the issue and put Cathy under severe financial stress where she '*couldn't pay for my own groceries.'* Desley also found making ends meet quite a struggle, as did Elizabeth who called herself a '*broke student'*. Georgina's mum had studied the enabling program prior to her enrolling, so she was very supportive of her daughter and helped finance her studies. Alternatively, Beatrice said even though she worked full-time through the whole course, she still experienced financial challenges to make ends meet. Beatrice highlighted that Centrelink benefits were not enough to support her family, so she needed to continue working. Beatrice acknowledged that she was willing to work while studying; however, she noted that this created challenges trying to fit work around work, family, and study commitments, particularly when children are young.

Table 3. *Financial support for single mothers when engaging in study*

Name	Alice	Beatrice	Cathy	Desley	Elizabeth	Faye	Georgina
Work	1	1		1			
Savings	1						
Centrelink			1	1	1	1	1
Charity			1				
Family			1				1

Support networks

The single mothers provided insight into the networks that supported them through their study. As evidenced in Table 4, all seven participants noted the value of the support provided from lecturers and Access Coordinators (AC). Alice said the educators were '*fantastic'* and they were only ever an email away and even provided extra time to assist after formal classes. *'I don't know if there would really be anything more that they could do, bar doing your assignments for you.'* One student noted that the Access Coordinator's Monday morning motivation session reminded students about assessment due dates and was very helpful in assisting with planning out her week. Georgina was grateful for her lecturers who were '*very patient with me.'* Faye summed up how positive the staff were by saying: *'The support network that we have at uni is phenomenal.'* Several participants specifically named their Access Coordinators by praising the special efforts they made to support them throughout their studies. All single mothers noted that fellow students played a significant support role during their studies, with a special mention of a student-mother's playgroup noted as highly valued. Additionally, support from family members and counsellors was a recognised support network. Cathy highlighted the importance of a support team - the lecturers, fellow students, and counsellors. She noted that other '*people will support you, but … they're not going to understand why you're in tears over an essay'*. She also mentioned that as a single parent, you do not always have a supportive network and can often have '*judgy relatives*' leading you to '*doubt yourself'*.

Table 4. *Networks supporting single mothers during their studies*
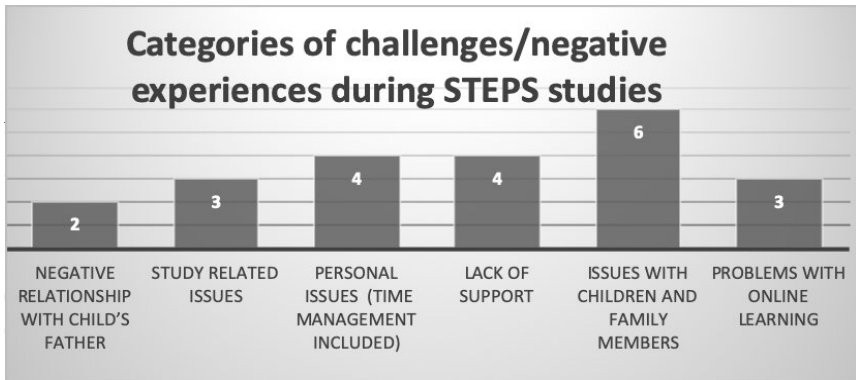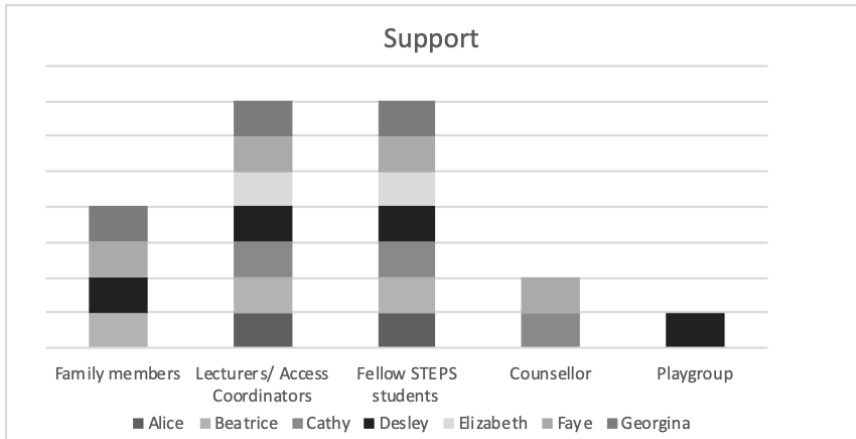
Issues with children and family members

Almost all the participants reported issues with children and family members as the most significant challenge faced during their studies. Georgina expressed difficulty due to the timetable not being released until one week prior to the commencement of term. This created difficulty securing childcare, and added emotional stress for her and her child, as they had never attended outside care prior to Georgina attending university. Georgina recommended that the timetable should be available earlier to assist others in this

same situation. She also found that having a young baby limited her options to attend any extra classes or be involved with a study group, as she felt an emotional sense of guilt, for not being there for her child. However, Georgina did have the support of her mother saying if '*things got too heavy she would just do stuff for me*'. Faye talked about the mental health issues her teenaged children faced due to an abusive ex-partner (including post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal tendencies, and mental breakdown). She said that these issues would escalate around the time their school assessments were due, creating a great deal of additional stress to manage in the household. Despite these challenges, Faye said her children were generally supportive of her; however, her youngest child did have additional needs requiring extra attention. Faye explained how study became very particularly challenging when either she or her children got sick, sharing that you '*just hope you don't get sick and live off caffeine*.' Alice echoed a similar sentiment, stating she found it very difficult to maintain her study patterns and '*keep up*' if she missed classes due to her child's sickness.

Elizabeth also experienced challenges with her children; two of whom have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and do not manage change well. As a coping strategy, Elizabeth implemented strict routines to help keep her family life and household running smoothly. Beatrice said she found it difficult to balance the demands of family and study and needed to learn to '*say no*' to extraneous demands. An example she noted was agreeing to her niece living with her for four months, which derailed her family and '*completely screwed up my life*'. This additional responsibility impacted Beatrice's studies, as she was already tired from working full-time, looking after her own two children, and managing the additional stress from her niece's negative behaviours. Cathy said she found it difficult to find extra time to study, as after school her young children needed her time and attention, adding how she felt '*mother's guilt*' when leaving her children in after school

care. She explained that she followed the generational pattern of marrying young and having her first baby soon after. She negatively compared herself to her cousins who travelled and '*had a fantastic life*' before settling down around 30. She felt the disappointment from her family; '*I was like the family loser, I collected ex-husbands and children whereas everyone else got degrees. In my Nan's house, there's really no pictures of me.*' Cathy's role as a student-mother conflicted with her childcare demands; however, she was motivated to achieve to provide greater opportunities for her own children.

Lack of support

Absence of family support was highlighted as an aspect that created substantial challenge. Although Cathy shared that she had a supportive mum, she knew of other single mothers who were undertaking their study with very limited family support. She summed up the impact of being a single mother approaching study:

> '*I don't think it's actually the study, I think it's the emotional strain and the big change in your life. When you are a single parent, you're a bit bashed around by the time you get there... you have probably had someone else in the relationship by the end of it, telling you all your faults and how incapable you are... you do carry a lot of guilt and you do carry a lot of failure.*'

Georgina was not the first in family to undertake university study but experienced a lack of family support because she felt her relatives forgot 'how crazy and how demanding it [study] is'. Similarly, Elizabeth said she recognised she did not have the support of extended family saying, 'it's just me and my kids against the world really, which is not bad... at least I know who is on my team'.

Furthermore, Alice noted that she struggled to look after

herself properly, due to her tendency to put everyone else first. This selflessness and lack of self-care was also reiterated by other single mothers.

Cathy experienced many challenges during her enabling program studies, acknowledging that in the beginning her older children and friends were supportive until they discovered the time commitment and then quickly *'bailed'* on offering support to her. Cathy described a major '*meltdown right when I was finishing the enabling program'*. She was selected to present at the Australasian Undergraduate Research Conference, which she felt was a great honour. The dilemma arose when the conference date clashed with her youngest daughter's birthday, and Cathy was advised her daughter was unable to attend the conference with her. Cathy chose the valuable opportunity to present at the conference but felt that she was viewed as a *'bad mother'* for choosing the conference over her child. She shared the frustration of societal *'double standards'* as fathers' work commitments cause them to miss children's events without being viewed as a *'bad father'*, but the moment a mother makes this choice, then they are judged as a '*bad parent.*' She felt a lack of support when another parent commented that '*you're a really a lousy person if you're not doing the school concert and the tuckshop and everything else"* especially as she had done this for her first two children.

Another participant felt the Australian Government could provide additional support for single mother's seeking to improve their lives through enabling education. Beatrice felt exhausted having to work full-time alongside her studies, saying that the demands of work, study and family were very difficult to manage simultaneously. She stated, '*Yes, we can still work, but* (if) *we're getting* (more) *support, even if it's for two years or three years, we would then be off the Centrelink treadmill.'* Beatrice described the frustrating challenge of not having a reliable support system to *'babysit the kids'* so she could attend classes and spend time on her

studies.

Study related issues

Three single mothers described specific challenges that they faced during their enabling studies. Georgina explained her most evident challenge of time management;

> *'I can't just come into the 24-hour labs and do it all night, as other people can. I was the only person that I really knew that was doing four subjects ... and that had a child, so it became really hard to try and talk to people about that.'*

Faye spoke about a debilitating fear of writing and referred to her commitment to her study as a *'roller-coaster ride'*. She would over analyse everything and worry about the grades she predicted she would get. Desley admitted she came close to giving up the whole enabling program, due to not understanding maths, but after asking for some help from an old school friend she successful *'pulled through'*. Several participants spoke about struggling with the equipment and platforms needed for online learning. Alice explained how she found it difficult to independently navigate online studies, and Cathy mentioned not being able to attend the Zoom sessions due to family commitments, especially afternoon sessions, after the children were home from school or early in the morning. In contrast, Beatrice said the video conferencing technology and online support lecturers helped bridge the learning gap; however, she found the challenge of online learning was the lack of peer support by '*not being able to connect to the other students'*.

Negative relationship with the child's father

Issues pertaining to their children's fathers were also identified as creating a challenging study environment for single mothers. Georgina said one of the major obstacles she experienced in completing the enabling program, was having constant interference from her child's father with

whom she had a very '*unhealthy relationship*'. She found that getting ahead with her studies in case '*something happens*' was the coping mechanism that she established. Similarly, Desley also experienced major time and energy hindrances from the fathers of her two children; *'I've been juggling two court orders for almost three years and that's very time consuming'*, but she would remind herself of her long-term career goals to keep moving forward with her studies.

Positive Study Experiences

Despite many challenges, the single mothers noted that there were many positive elements to the enabling program for themselves and their families. The key positive themes to emerge were 1) changes in self; 2) knock on effects; and 3) peer support (see Table 6).

Table 6. *Positive study experiences*
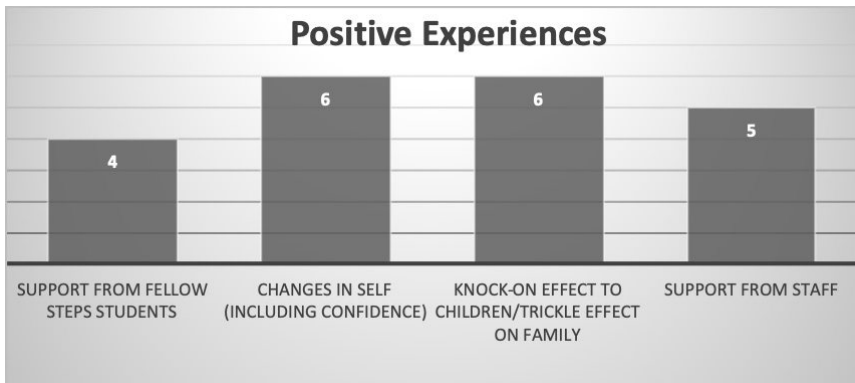
Changes in self

Almost all participants reported an improved self-confidence after undertaking the enabling program. Alice shared that she felt relaxed about entering her undergraduate studies due to feeling '*academically prepared.*' Faye mentioned her personal confidence

increased due to receiving sound grades, even though she was very anxious during her studies. Furthermore, she felt a sense of pride when an assessment task report she wrote about a community benefit was submitted to the local Mayor. Beatrice discovered that she had the capacity to study and that experiencing small successes helped her stay committed. She shared that previously *'it can be the littlest rock thrown and that's what will topple me.'* Desley found that she worked better in an external environment and would use the campus library as a *'place of work',* adding that the academic setting increased her self-confidence. Elizabeth said she had gained noticeable confidence during her studies and after leaving a domestic abuse situation*:*

> *'I was very broken spirited; I was not game to make any sort of decisions or ask any questions … I was meek, I was the wallflower, you didn't see me, but I've gained a lot of confidence and I've grown as a person'.*

Cathy described that she felt more secure in herself, with an improved self-confidence that enabled her to rise above negativity from people who knew her outside of the university. She said her family and friends were amazed that she was studying a psychology degree at university:

> *'It's not like you realise you write yourself off, but you really do… you don't aim real high and I think the enabling program really showed me it is possible for me to get into a better position'.*

Knock-on effect

Another positive impact identified by the single mothers was the trickle effect onto their children. Alice spoke of how her autistic son chose an enabling program over TAFE after watching her achievements and seeing how supportive the staff were during the program. Alice felt that the enabling program was so valuable, she tried to convince her mum to

study the course too. Faye talked about the trickle effect on her children in terms of establishing effective study habits in the house;

> *'I've started noticing my daughter, who is in year 11, is actually putting more effort into her work. I don't know if that's from my example or she's just getting a little bit more motivated, but it could be.'*

Desley echoed a similar sentiment about the positive impact of seeing their mum as a student;

> *'my boys are 14 and 12, and, it's definitely inspiring them to study, further study. They did have intentions, but I think it's also inspired them even more.'*

Peer support

Another positive theme identified was the support received and sense of connectedness to fellow students. Alice spoke positively about her supportive student peers '*because no-one really at home understands the stress of that or understands due dates...the girls at university, are my best supports I think, you know, because they understood.*' Specifically, she spoke about the encouraging support from her study group, particularly in regards to achieving success in maths. Faye, Elizabeth, and Georgina echoed the same sentiments with the latter saying that her major positive of the enabling program was '*making some friends and not just being known for a mum, just having my own identity again*'.

Advice for prospective students

When asked what advice the single mothers would offer to prospective students, they made several recommendations. Elizabeth's advice was straight to the point; *'Do it, just do it. It's hard work but if you want it enough, you'll do it...*

it's probably the best thing I ever did.' Faye shared that enabling education was '*life changing*' and although she was dependent on student welfare right now, after completing her undergraduate degree, she knew she would be in a much better financial position. She acknowledged the value of the enabling program stating that '*if I'd jumped straight into my degree, I would be completely lost and unprepared.*' Alice encouraged prospective students to take the step to enrol as it's '*definitely doable*'. As a single mother, Georgina's advice stressed the importance of time management and accepting that challenges will arise and to use the supports around you to overcome them. Cathy offered some practical advice for student-mothers saying they need to '*get rid of every bit of clutter in your life… basically you'll end up wasting the time you could spend with your kids…yelling at them and trying to clean up your house.*' Importantly, Georgina noted that enabling education is not all about academic success: '*if you fail, you fail, it's not the end of you as a person*'. Georgina highlighted that even if you failed a subject, undertaking the enabling program was worth it.

Discussion

Stereotypically, there is a stigma attached to the term 'single mother' that might make someone think of a welfare dependent, uneducated, unskilled, irresponsible, and unmotivated woman (Haleman, 2004; Hasche, 2017). However, this research discovered that the single mother participants were dedicated, motivated and resilient. The research focus underpinning this study, sought to give depth to the competing discourses that single mothers face during an enabling program, and the networks and strategies that can provide support. The main conclusion drawn from the findings is that whilst all students face challenges during their studies, single mothers, face unique hindrances; physically (time, family, childcare demands), cognitively (academic skills and prior learning experiences) and emotionally (confidence and self-belief) when studying.

Enabling programs fill a social equity gap, by encouraging non-traditional students to develop the knowledge and skills required to successfully complete a higher education degree. These single mothers shared that their enabling education experience was much more than academic skill development. They felt enveloped by support, giving the student-mothers hope that they have the capacity to accomplish a degree and gain improved employment, all whilst enhancing their self-efficacy and being positive role models for their children.

There is limited literature about single mothers in the enabling space and the higher education arena that seeks to consider ways to improve the support offered to this unique cohort. This paper aims to add to this gap, by analysing the narratives of these seven single mothers to identify their specific challenges and sharing the strategies that those around them can employ to help overcome these barriers. Some practical support recommendations that became evident included earlier access to lecture timetables in order to pre-arrange childcare, decluttering of household study areas, and making use of academic library spaces as a motivating environment for study. Financial security is a major concern for many single mothers, and transparent access to Centrelink's family services as well as more financial study support from the government would help to ease their financial concerns. Variables such as available day care places and government financial assistance impact the day-to-day support choices for student-mothers. Another strategy to support single mothers is to build into enabling programs, the development of time management skills and personal growth learning, to enhance their personal lives as single mothers present with unique external circumstances. Unfortunately, external disruptions, such as family and child custody disputes, are not within the scope of the universities to assist, but supports such as counselling, academic tutoring and student support services are highly valued by single mothers. These added university services give student-mothers a space to share their concerns and

seek guidance and support through the challenging times as a student. Research reports that young children can have a negative impact on their mother's studies in terms of degree completion (Hernandez & Rabia, 2014; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005); however, this study demonstrated that mothers who were able to implement study strategies that encompassed family commitments can set themselves up for success.

Despite the many challenges the single mothers faced such as struggles with ex-partners, children with learning difficulties and sickness, their own mental health issues, unsupportive family members, and problems navigating online education, with persistence they were able to successfully manage their studies and valued the support they received from fellow students and university staff. Many participants reported a significant increase in their confidence levels whilst completing the enabling program. Some challenges noted by the single mothers were similar to mothers with partners, but they did identify a number of unique obstacles including difficulties in arranging suitable child-care, improved access to Centrelink family services to assist with financial difficulties, and a request for this government agency to provide better financial support for single student-mothers to ease them of work burdens so they could dedicate more time to their studies. The transformative nature of enabling programs cannot be undervalued. For these women, they have hope that they can negate financial stress by gaining a higher education qualification and establishing a career in a profession of choice. In doing so, not only will it assist their financial status, but it will encourage generational change, with their children positively influenced to strive for higher achievements in their own lives.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the experiences of seven single mothers in their student journey through an enabling program. The participants in this study assigned a high value to their studies, acknowledging education as an opportunity to gain preferable employment, yet many felt the pressure of the extra responsibilities to blend their roles as student and parent. Research by Katz (2013, p. 273) indicated that single mothers' "survival narratives" detailing the financial, social, and emotional challenges of pursuing an education while on welfare, demonstrated the need for employing different strategies to persevere through this challenging period. Institutional support structures of earlier access to timetables to enable childcare planning, study spaces, awareness of the difficulties, and additional support service provisions were all perceived as positive supports. However, the supports that single student-mothers need are generally external constructs that the university does not have control over.

This study of single mothers entering university via an enabling program recognised that these seven women created their own personal 'survival narratives' and by employing specific strategies unique to their circumstances, they ultimately achieved a successful student-mother experience. Their identity transformed from being a single mother embarking on study, to self-perception of a highly capable individual who, against odds and adversities, successfully completed an enabling program, achieving their dream of higher education. Their survival narrative could be encompassed in one word: 'hope'. Hope for improved career prospects; hope for independence; hope for financial security; and hope that their role modelling, positively influences their children's opportunities for the future.

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About the authors

Anne Braund is a lecturer in the STEPS enabling program at CQUniversity. Within the School of Access Education, Anne also coordinates academic communication support for undergraduate students through to Research Higher Degree candidates. Anne was awarded a Women in research scholarship to complete her master's thesis investigating the obstacles that hinder women's promotional opportunities within Education Queensland. Previous to Anne's lecturing role, she worked with English Schools Foundation, Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong in the design and delivery of English Diploma Programs.

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5008-4415
Email: a.braund@cqu.edu.au

Trixie James is a lecturer within the School of Access Education STEPS program at CQUniversity. Trixie's research interests centre on the support and engagement of under-represented adults in the tertiary sector, with special interest in student engagement, quality teaching practices and positive psychology. She completed a Masters of Learning Management in Executive Leadership with a minor thesis that investigated enabling students' successful transition into undergraduate studies. Trixie is currently a Doctoral candidate continuing her focus on students' progression in enabling programs.

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9591-2480
Email: t.james@cqu.edu.au

Katrina Johnston is an Associate Lecturer in the School of Access Education CQUniversity, teaching computing skills in the STEPS enabling program and providing computing support to undergraduate students in the Academic Learning Centre and she also teaches in the Digital Media program at CQUniversity. Katrina's background is in the Digital Media industry as a Graphic Designer and she holds a Masters of IT Mobile Application development. Katrina's research interests involve both the support and engagement of under-represented adults in the tertiary sector.

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1411-2981
Email: k.johnston@cqu.edu.au

Louise Mullaney is a former lecturer in the STEPS enabling program at CQUniversity and currently a high school educator at Mercy College, Mackay. Louise's educational experience spans across high schools and primary schools throughout Queensland and England in several subject disciplines. As a past lecturer, her research interests were within the enabling discipline with a particular focus on mothers (particularly single mothers) and the factors to their success or failures in pursuit of their undergraduate studies.

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8796-5320
Email: louise_mullaney@mercymackay.qld.edu.au

COVID - 19 the catalyst for a new paradigm in vocational education and training

Susan Bandias

Rajeev Sharma

Alana Anderson

This paper examines the response by a Vocational Education and Training (VET) provider in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia to the travel and social distancing restrictions brought about by COVID-19. The paper commences with a description of the impact of COVID-19 on the VET sector. The paper then describes the VET regulatory environment prior to February 2020 and the responsibility of VET providers to comply with the requirements of the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), in the delivery of VET programs to domestic and international students. A discussion of the lack of a specific vocational education pedagogy, the complexity of delivering VET programs online as well as current research findings in this area follows.

A description of the College provides the context to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of programs in the Northern Territory VET sector. The paper describes how the College, which had a high international student cohort, migrated their courses online in order to remain viable in the highly volatile

and unforeseen circumstances brought about by COVID-19. In order to ascertain the effectiveness of the online delivery of course offerings, a questionnaire and a series of face to face and telephone interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. The mixed method approach employed in this research was consistent with contemporary social and educational research. The paper concludes with the call for a new paradigm and policy shift in Vocational Education and Training post COVID-19.

Keywords: *vocational education and training, online, COVID-19, Northern Territory, international students*

Introduction

COVID-19, the highly infectious respiratory virus was first detected in Wuhan, China in November 2019. The spread of the virus was rapid, extensive and unprecedented.   In March 2020, in an attempt to minimise the spread of the virus, Australia's Federal Government implemented wide ranging travel and social distancing restrictions. The education sector was particularly adversely affected by the embargo that closed Australia's borders to international travellers (Go8, 2020). The requirement of people to maintain a physical separation of 1.5 metres also made face to face delivery of educational programs difficult.   In a relatively short space of time the post compulsory education sector, comprising Vocational and Higher Education, experienced a significant loss of student enrolments and consequent income. The lucrative international student market that had become, for many education providers, a significant revenue stream diminished almost overnight (Doughney, 2020; IBISWorld, 2020). In order to remain financially viable and to comply with social distancing requirement, many institutions in the post-compulsory education sector embraced online learning as their main mode of delivery (IBISWorld, 2020). This transition from face to face classes to computer mediated instruction was particularly challenging for the Vocational Education and

Training (VET) sector.

Consequently, the key objective of this paper is to ascertain the effectiveness of the online delivery of VET courses in Australia by exploring the experiences of students and staff of a selected College as an exemplar. This was considered in the context of challenges presented by COVID19. The paper explored the following research questions:

1. What is the student perception of online learning?

2. What is the student experience of online learning?

3. What are the views of staff of online learning?

The primary data for this research was collected by using a mixed methods approach. The methodology of combining both quantitative and qualitative data is consistent with contemporary social and educational research as it encompasses multiple perspectives and often results in a more informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results (Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2011).

Literature review

Vocational Education, as distinct from Higher Education, has customarily focused on the development of practical, work orientated skills (Misko, 2006). Assessment in the VET sector is highly oriented towards demonstrated competence, or the ability to perform work related skills that conform to industry standards (Ewing, 2017; Griffin & Mihelic, 2019; Williams & Batement, 2003). As Griffin and Milelic (2019:10) postulated, "the integrity and ultimate success of the [VET] sector is based on students demonstrating they are competent in skills that can be transferred directly to the workplace". Consequently, the delivery and assessment of VET qualifications has traditionally been via face to face delivery.
In 2003, research revealed that "....the available statistics show very small numbers undertaking [VET] modules in an

online mode" (Hill et al., 2003). As of 2017 the proportion of VET qualifications conducted online was still relatively small. It was estimated that approximately only 8.6 per cent of all VET program commencements were in courses delivered fully online (Griffin & Mihelic, 2019). Entrenched perceptions of how VET should be delivered and assessed helped to constrain a more significant adoption of online learning (Bound, 2011; Brennan et al., 2003; Griffin & Mihelic, 2019) .

The regulation requirements of the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) also restricted the online delivery of VET qualifications to international students (Australian Skills Quality Authority, 2019). It is important to note that VET providers were compelled to comply with the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (ESOS Act); the National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018 and the National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011, which stipulated that international students were required to attend a minimum of 20 scheduled course contact hours per week (Australian Skills Quality Authority, 2019). ASQA also specified that two thirds of the VET units of competency must be provided face to face. This requirement unambiguously excluded online delivery and distance education as the main means of delivery. Consequently, only a few VET providers with a high international student cohort embraced online learning as a mode of delivery. However, in March 2020 ASQA announced that they did not intend to pursue regulatory action against providers that were implementing online learning in response to the COVID-19 travel and social distancing restrictions (Australian Skills Quality Authority, 2020). This announcement changed the landscape of VET delivery overnight.

Vocational education, pedagogy and online delivery

In the delivery of vocational education a range of pedagogies are utilised. Some of these are explicit and embody formative classroom learning. Others are much less so and encompass a range of approaches that include, but are not limited to, work experience, on the job tuition and simulations (Ewing, 2017; Lucas, 2010). Unlike higher education, vocational education includes... learning which is formal and informal, assessed and not assessed and can be experienced in a range of settings and learned in a variety of ways. However, evidence suggests that serious consideration of pedagogy is largely missing in vocational education (Lucas et al., 2012). Consequently, the role and nature of a vocational education specific pedagogy is a much contested topic (BIS, 2010; Lucas et al., 2012). As NCVER stated (2010:9), "Defining VET [pedagogy] is a topic that prudent commentators avoid".

According to Dickettes (cited in Lucas et al., 2012:23), "There is currently a lack of widely accepted vocational pedagogy, partly because the sector is constantly changing, so the ground rules for vocational education change". The relaxing of the regulatory environment around the delivery of online education to international students has added another dimension to the complexity of this issue.

A 2019 report commissioned by NCVER, revealed that the online delivery of VET has mixed outcomes (Griffin & Mihelic, 2019). According to the report, VET online is characterised by higher subject withdrawal rates and lower course completion rates (Griffin & Mihelic, 2019). However, the employment outcomes for graduates of online courses were similar to, or slightly better than, those of graduates of courses delivered via other modes. Nonetheless, online delivery and effective vocational education are not mutually exclusive. There are many commonalities between successful online delivery and best practice vocational education and training.

Griffin and Mihelic (2019:3) identified five key factors that contribute to good practice in online course delivery: positive, supportive training providers, students with realistic expectations, well-structured and up-to-date resources catering to a range of learning preferences, effective student support systems, and skilled, empathetic trainers with good problem-solving skills. Lucas et al (2012:117) postulate that effective vocational teaching "... requires a blend of hands-on or first-hand learning with critical reflection, collaboration and feedback in the context of strong relationship between teacher and taught.

As Lucas et al (2012:59) argued:

> *Perhaps even more importantly than the choice of any specific method is the engagement of the learner in whatever is being learned. This depends fundamentally on the quality of human relationship established between teacher and taught. It requires understanding of the learner's needs. It requires the presence of teachers who model the kinds of behaviours required to produce desirable outcomes. And it requires high levels of trust and the creation of an environment in which mistakes and errors are expected and seen as a source of learning. Drawing on the identified key factors that contribute to good practice in online delivery, a private VET provider in the NT, at the height of the COVID pandemic, migrated its face to face courses to an online platform. The following exploratory study details the student and staff experience of implementing, teaching and studying VET online.*

A registered training organisation in the Northern Territory

The College for this study is a private VET provider that delivers courses from its main campus in Darwin, Northern Territory. The College was established in October 2010 and commenced its face to face courses with a modest enrolment

of two domestic students. They initially delivered security courses; first aid; and training and assessment. By end of 2011 they had 15 qualifications on scope. As of 2020 they had scope registration for 28 qualifications. The registration included courses from the Training and Education Training Package, Business Services Training Package and Community Services Training Packages. As of April 2020, the College had 592 students and they employed seven permanent staff and eight part time consultants to assist with the training of their students.

 In 2017, the College applied for registration on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS). The application took 12 months to submit and gain approval. Once registered, the College aggressively marketed its courses to international students. As of January 2020 their enrolment included 145 international students from 45 different countries. International students constituted approximately 24.5 per cent of their total student enrolment. The CRICOS courses they offered include Advanced Diploma of Leadership and Management, Diploma of Leadership and Management, Diploma of Project Management, Certificate IV in Project Management, Certificate III and Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care, Certificate III in Individual Support and Certificate IV in Ageing Support. They also offered the Diploma of Community Services. Prior to COVID-19 all courses were delivered face to face. As a direct response to the measures mandated by the NT and Federal Government to mitigate the contagion of COVID-19, the College suspended the delivery of all of their face to face programs in March 2020.

Online delivery at the college

In order to remain financially viable, the College's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) applied for a grant from the NT Government [COVID-19] Small Business Survival Fund, to migrate their term two 2020 courses on to Moodle, an

online learning platform. A local consultant with extensive experience in online curriculum development in the post compulsory education sector, was employed to project manage the design, development and implementation of nine qualifications. All courses had a relatively high international student cohort.

Knowledge and experience of the VET sector enabled the consultant to design a Moodle learning management system that was logical, interactive and vocational education specific. Consistent with best practice instructional design, the online courses embodied a constructivist approach (Davey et al., 2019). The sites also had an applied learning focus.

According to Downing and Herrington (2013):

> *The term 'applied learning' evokes images of learning trade skills with your hands. Theoretically, it is most closely aligned with experiential learning (Dewey, 1938, Kolb, 1984), and is commonly associated with vocational and post-compulsory education. Applied learning pedagogy emphasises connections between what is being learnt and the 'real world' of work, focussing on the knowledge and skills that will be required in the discipline.*

The online sites utilised both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. Discussion boards, videos, "live" classrooms, multiple choice quizzes and extensive web and print based resources complemented regular student teacher online interaction. Consequently, the learning sites were media rich, interactive and designed to accommodate a range of learning styles (Davey et al., 2019).

A team based approach was adopted in the development of the sites.   Trainers, administration staff, students and the College management collaborated with the developer to produce the online courses that would meet the needs

of multiple stakeholders. This approach enabled the integration of the factors identified by Griffin and Mihelic (2019:3) that were key to the successful delivery of online learning. As Davey, Elliott and Bora (2019:17) posited, collaboration promotes positive outcomes. Therefore a systematic approach was adapted to determine if "...applied learning principles were being enacted successfully within the [online] program and students were satisfied with their experience" (Downing and Herrington, 2013:244).

The migration of nine qualifications on to Moodle enabled the College to meet its term two teaching and learning commitments via an online learning environment. Eight of the qualifications were delivered entirely online and one was delivered in a mixed mode. Eight trainers were based in Darwin and one trainer taught online from New Zealand.

Methodology

Primary data for this research was collected by using a mixed method approach. The mixed methodology is consistent with contemporary social and educational research. Broadly speaking, a mixed analysis involves using quantitative and quantitative data analysis techniques within the same study (Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2011). It is a synthesis that contains ideas from qualitative and quantitative research and involves mixing or combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study (Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2011). According to Salehi and Golafshani: Quantitative method includes numerical values and measurement which help researchers to describe and determine some patterns, such as human's social patterns, using deductive logic. Qualitative method deals with interpretation and exploration which guide researchers to understand and explain events and occurrences, such as human phenomenon from the social patterns (2010:187). Although mixed methods research is not a new research paradigm it has, according to Onwuegbuzie, Turner and

Johnson (2007), arisen because of an inherent "tension" between quantitative research and qualitative research methods. Qualitative research, alone, has received criticism in the past with issues based on questions of clarity, methodological transgressions and insufficient justification for the mixing of methodological approaches (Goulding, 1999). However, neither a qualitative nor a quantitative methodological approach has universal applicability (Patton, 1980). Thus, combining both methodologies and interpreting both primary and secondary data, together is expected to be more fruitful. Mixed methods recognise the importance of traditional quantitative and qualitative research but also offer a third paradigm choice that often results in a more informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007:129).

The advantages of employing mixed research methodology have been well documented (Pole, 2007; Rossman & Wilson, 1985; Sieber, 1973). A widely recognised significant advantage of incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data analysis in a single study is that it can provide for stronger inferences because the data are looked at from multiple perspectives (Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2011; Pole, 2007). Mixed methods also enable the researcher to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions (Pole, 2007); triangulate the research data (Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2011); and examine processes and experiences along with outcomes (Klassen et al., 2012).

Primary data to explore the research questions was collected through a self-reporting questionnaire and in-depth interviews. A short questionnaire was developed to seek the views of students. The survey questions were adapted from a study conducted by Downing and Herrington (2013:244) to determine if "...applied learning principles were being enacted successfully within the [online] program and students were satisfied with their experience". A five-point Likert scale was used for respondents to express their level of agreement with the statements. The following aspects

of student perception and experience with online learning were highlighted in the questionnaire:

1. Easy access and use of online learning;
2. Logical structure of online learning;
3. Variety and relevance of online learning materials;
4. Opportunity for regular interaction with teaching staff;
5. Opportunity for regular interaction with other students;
6. Opportunity for sharing personal experiences with peers and teaching staff;
7. Learning and assessment tasks linked to a real-world setting;
8. Opportunity to develop academic skills;
9. Meeting personal learning needs;

A self-selected cohort of 30 students across six online courses initially participated in an online survey. An analysis of the student demographics indicated they were representative of students enrolled in the online courses. Twenty-two students complete the survey which indicated a response rate of 66.6 per cent. Approximately 27.3 per cent of survey respondents were enrolled in Certificate III Early Childhood Education and Care, 18.2 per cent were undertaking a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care; 18.8 per cent were enrolled in Certificate IV in Ageing Support and the remaining students were enrolled in either the Diploma of Community Service or the Diploma of Leadership and Management. All of the survey respondents were international students studying full time.

A series of face to face and telephone interviews were also conducted with students and staff to collect qualitative data. The self-selected interview participants included students, trainers, key management personal and administration staff. A total of 25 interviews were conducted over the course of four weeks. The interviews were conducted by the principal researcher. In order to enhance the validity and

credibility of the research findings the data was triangulated through interviews, a questionnaire and observations.

Research findings and discussion

Quantitative data: As indicated in Table 1, the student's perception and experience of online learning was generally, very positive. Approximately 73 per cent of survey respondents indicated that their learning needs were met whilst studying online. With the exception of a minority of students, the survey participants found that online learning was easy to access and use, it was logically structured and provided a variety of relevant learning materials. Significantly, the online environment provided opportunities for interaction and collaboration with teaching staff and other students. More than 85 per cent of students indicated that the online material provided relevant, real world learning experiences and assessment tasks. In excess of 68 per cent of respondents indicated they had also developed academic skills in the online environment.

Table 1: *Students perceptions and experience of online line learning*

	% Strongly Disagree	% Disagree	% Neither Agree or Disagree	% Agree	% Strongly Agree
Online learning was easy to access and use	9.09	4.55.	4.55	45.45	36.36
Online learning was logically structured	9.09	4.55	9.09	40.91	36.36
Online learning provided a variety of relevant learning materials	9.09	0.00	9.09	50.00	31.82
Online learning provided an opportunity for regular interaction with teaching staff	4.55	13.64	9.09	31.82	40.91
Online learning provided an opportunity for regular interaction with other students	9.09	27.2	0.00	45.45	18.18
Online learning provided an opportunity for sharing my own experiences with peers and teaching staff	4.55	4.55	13.64	45.4	31.82
Online learning provided learning and assessment tasks that reflect the way knowledge will be used in a real-world setting	4.55	4.55	4.55	63.64	22.73
Online learning provided an opportunity to develop academic skills	4.55	13.64	13.64	45.4	22.73
Met my learning needs	4.55	4.55	18.18	36.36	36.36

Qualitative data:

Despite some initial trepidation on behalf of the trainers, the staff and students adapted quickly to the online environment. The trainers had regular, scheduled live online workshops which promoted a high level of student engagement, interactivity with the learning material and enabled staff to develop a rapport with students.

According to the students comments the benefits of studying online included, "It is more study friendly; It's an awesome platform for students to connect with trainers in spite of this COVID; [Enables] self-discipline and responsibility; [The material is] Practical." Students also mentioned the flexibility of studying online– their comments included "Flexible Accessible learning materials, Flexible schedules; More flexibility; More work gets done [because of the flexibility]."

The students description of the online study experience is captured through comments such as:

> *Great and manageable since instructor is effective and Moodle is easy to use; Fantastic because they still giving us opportunity to interact in the class; Good. Group assignments required us to interact with fellow students; Had no trouble with Moodle platform; It was great experience for me; I'm really loving this online learning.*

It is important to acknowledge that the online environment was not the preferred mode of delivery for all students. Some students preferred the face to face learning experience. Adverse student comments included "Sometimes [studying online] is very boring; Many hindrances at home; I prefer face to face lessons; It's good but I still prefer to go to class."

From the trainers perspective most interviewees felt that the transition to online learning environment was successful. Comments indicated that although some trainers experienced "...a big learning curve" in adapting to the online teaching environment the benefit to students outweighed their initial misgivings. Trainers acknowledged that whilst it was "...harder to build a rapport with students online" and staff had to "...work hard to keep students engaged" the trainers were "extremely satisfied with the students enthusiasm."

As indicated in the literature, a trainer's knowledge, attitude and commitment is integral to the successful transition to the online environment (Lucas et al 2012:59). As one trainer reported "[Success] relies on a teacher's perseverance and passion to engage students online". The trainers also reported that "students felt supported [in the online environment}; staff had more contact with individual students. [I was able to provide] individual support through more out-of-class contact".

From an administration and management perspective the introduction of the learning management system precipitated a new and effective business model for the College. According to a key stakeholder responsible for Domestic and International Operations, the online platform enhanced the facilitation and administration of courses including student enrolment, the delivery of learning materials as well as the management of assessment items. The platform also enabled greater visibility of student progress through the tracking of attendance and engagement online. Both staff and senior administration also reported a significant drop in the student attrition rate. The College maintained 100 per cent of their student enrolments when they went online.

Conclusion

In 2020, the travel and social distancing restrictions instituted to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 provided the catalyst for the College, a NT VET provider with a significant domestic and international student cohort, to implement an online learning platform. Prior to COVID-19 the VET regulatory environment restricted online delivery and distance education as the main means of educational delivery. Consequently, the online delivery of VET programs nationwide was relatively small. However, in recognition of the impact of social distancing restrictions on the delivery of post-secondary education, the regulatory regime relaxed the restrictions around online learning in the

VET sector.

In order to remain financially viable and to meet their commitment to their enrolled student cohort, the College engaged the services of a consultant with extensive experience in online curriculum development. In consultation with key stakeholders an online platform was developed that embodied best practice instructional design, curriculum development and applied learning. A total of nine qualifications were migrated online. The courses went live in April 2020.

The findings of this exploratory study indicated that the majority of students and staff adapted quickly to the online environment. Furthermore, the qualitative data indicated, the key to the success of the project was the commitment, passion and knowledge of the trainers; an emphasis on connections between what is being learnt and the 'real world' of work; and a collaborative problem solving approach that sought pedagogical and technical solutions to the challenges encountered (Davey et al., 2019; Downing & Herrington, 2013; Lucas, 2010).

Whilst the findings of this study posit a positive response to studying online, the small cohort involved in the study and the limited scope of the courses involved prohibit a generalisation of the findings to the broader VET sector. Additional research is required to extend this study and to inform the direction of VET online. However, this exploratory paper has highlighted complex and dynamic environment of the VET sector where the nexus of theory and practice is fundamental to the pedagogy of vocational education regardless of the mode of delivery.

For the foreseeable future the educational environment precipitated by COVID-19 will remain volatile and uncertain. The COVID-19 induced extraordinary events caused chaos and uncertainty placing the entire VET sector in a period of massive flux. Registered Training Organizations (RTOs) were forced to review and recalibrate

their course delivery strategies to use and allocate available resources to accommodate this changing environment. Consequently, as VET online becomes the 'new normal' further research in this area is warranted. As evidenced by this study not all students will embrace online learning and not all VET courses will migrate easily into the online environment. However, efficient online delivery is dependent upon many factors including the effectiveness of lecturers to engage students in the online environment, access to reliable internet services, understanding how to use technological tools, and student's capabilities to adjust to a different mode of delivery (Grimmer, Pollard, and Rolls, 2020).

The VET sector in Australia is not immune to challenges. Historically, the VET sector challenges included the reduction of Commonwealth and State funding, deregulation of the VET industry, and the demise of many TAFE institutions. Although the sector has a short-term uphill battle to economic recovery, it can be profitable and sustainable with appropriate changes to course delivery. In the coming years, there will be opportunities for VET providers to regroup and review to deliver services that their domestic and international customers want. However, in order to remain viable, VET practitioners, managers and students will have to incorporate a paradigm that includes effective, engaging online course delivery that meets the needs of all stakeholders.

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About the authors

Dr Susan Bandias is currently an Adjunct at Charles Darwin University (CDU). Prior to her retirement in 2019 she held a number of senior roles at CDU including Senior lecture, Course and Discipline coordinator as well as Chair of the Business School Research Committee. She has taken a leading role in community engagement and successfully combined her professional interest in the social implications of information technology communication (ICT) by actively engaging with the professions, the local and the national community. Her contribution to the education sector, public policy research and the broader community was recognised with an "Exceptional Service Award" by the Australian Computer Society.

Charles Darwin University

Susan.Bandias@cdu.edu.au

Dr Rajeev Sharma is a Marketing academic at the College of Business and Law of Charles Darwin University (CDU). Rajeev has more than 35 years of teaching experience. He has taught in many institutions and countries including Australia, India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nigeria and Papua New Guinea. He is a Fellow of the Australian Marketing Institute (AMI) and a Certified Practicing Marketer (CPM).

Dr Sharma has researched and published in many international journals. He has also presented research papers at International Conferences in London, Lyon, Rome, Freiburg, Cape Town, Bali, Amsterdam, Prague, New Delhi, and Las Vegas.

Rajeev.Sharma@cdu.edu.au

Alana Anderson is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Alana Kaye College. Prior to starting up Alana Kaye College in 2011, Alana worked extensively in both private and public enterprises around Australia in Human Resource Management and Development.

Alana's training and lecturing experience includes Higher Education, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Corporate Training. Her expertise is in Strategic Planning, Business Planning, Leadership and Management training and the ongoing development of trainers in the VET sector.

Alana@alanakaye.edu.au

The role of Learning Neighborhood Programme in achieving the necessary life skills for adult learners in Saudi Arabia to confront the COVID-19 crisis

Obaidalah H. Aljohani

Sarah M. Alajlan

In today's world of accelerated progress and change, the skills to solve problems, think critically, communicate effectively, and manage lives are essential for people to flourish in the 21st century. The purpose of the study is to explore the role of Learning Neighborhood Programme for achieving the necessary life skills that adult learners need to help them during the present pandemic. The research also investigates if there is a difference, by gender and number of courses, to confront the COVID-19 crisis and the benefits that participants received during the pandemic. A self-administered questionnaire was utilized. The results illustrated that the adult learners who enrolled in the Learning Neighborhood Programme perceived the benefit of life skills by practicing these skills during the crisis. Additionally, the results revealed differences for both life skills based on the number of courses that learners had taken during the present pandemic for people who took five or more courses.

Keywords: *Learning Neighborhood Programme, life skills, Saudi Arabia, COVID-19*

Introduction

Today's events have been unusual. In the past, there were other epidemics; however, the way people reacted to coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is unique (Matias, Dominski, & Marks, 2020). The COVID-19 disease was discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, central China. By March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified the disease as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). On March 2, 2020, the first corona-virus case was reported in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Health, 2020). Before that date, Saudi Arabia took several audacious and early precautions in order to prevent the virus' spread. The country suspended all sporting activities; lounges; and commercial complexes, except for essential jobs and health regulations, to maintain social distancing. The Saudi Arabian government also suspended education at all schools and universities, relying on online platforms for every education level. Informal education transformed the classes to online courses that were offered by the Learning Neighbourhood Programme (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Saudi Arabia's Learning Neighbourhood Programme provides many courses, such as vocational skills, literacy, and life skills, for adult learners. In this research, life skills are the focus; according to the WHO (1993), to prepare people very well, learners should have the knowledge and skills which enable them to stay healthy, have positive attitudes about themselves, and actively participate in societies while effectively dealing with the challenges of everyday life. These skills help adult learners to achieve sustainable development for life in order to apply what they have learned in their lives, in general, and to enable individuals to deal effectively in times of crisis. In addition, the Learning Neighbourhood Programme provides learners with a life skill that contributes to pushing them towards productive work in an attractive manner, raising awareness of problems, contributing to the culture of societies, and interacting with life requirements.

Therefore, the research's purpose was to explore the role of the Learning Neighbourhood programme for achieving the necessary life skills that Saudi Arabia's adult learners need during the COVID-19 crisis. The research also investigated if there is a difference, by gender and the number of courses, regarding the Learning Neighbourhood Programme's role when acquiring the necessary life skills that could enable adult learners to confront the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, the research explored the benefits that participants received during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Learning Neighbourhood Programme

The Saudi Learning Neighbourhood Programme has played a very important educational role since it was established for both men and women. Neighbourhood Programme Learning is informal education. The programme started in Jeddah City in 2006 in order to meet the local communities' needs, especially for women who were less fortunate in terms of education or vocational training (Alsuker, 2015). The programme's goal is to support people who are upgrading their cultural, health, social, and economic levels; to provide them with the skills to qualify for the labour market, enabling people to participate in their families' and societies' economic and social growth; and to face any challenge or crisis in their life. The Neighbourhood Learning Programme provides many courses, such as foundation studies in literacy, numeracy, and recitation of the Holy Quran, in addition to professional classes, such as cosmetics, food processing, party planning, gift wrapping, and flower arrangement. The programme also teaches life skills, such as communication, critical thinking, and problem solving as well as languages, such as English (Ministry of Education, 2018). Courses are taught at public schools within the community and are free for anyone to attend. Now, the Neighbourhood Learning Programme has spread to all regions of Saudi Arabia and is available to both males and females. (Alsuker, 2015).

The Learning Neighbourhood Programme is facilitated by

volunteers. The Ministry of Education enlists individuals, particularly teachers and school employees, who have the necessary training; those people instruct classes for the Learning Neighbourhood Programme. When necessary, the Department of Adult Education teaches people how to work with the adults who attend the classes (General Department of Continuing Education, 2018).

The Learning Neighbourhood Programme's vision is to provide a creative curriculum that reflects the different areas of life, therefore supporting people to be productive citizens and obtain knowledge that can help them to be more effective in their community. The programme's objectives are to craft a plan to broaden adult education that includes basic literacy and continued study, to increase the literacy rate in the slums, to create a pattern of volunteering that improves society, to encourage people to enhance their abilities, and to promote education as a tool for life and for addressing difficulties (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Life skills

Helping people to acquire life skills is hard. Instructors must have the expertise to utilise hands-on approaches (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2012). "Life skills education needs to adopt interactive, responsive, and participatory methods that challenge people to find new ways of relating to one another" (UNESCO, 2012, p. 87). Life skills is a modern concept in the Arab world. The concept arose in response to life, societal, and educational developments, and this idea keeps pace with the era of inclusive development and the technological knowledge revolution (Al-sabbagh, 2004). Life skills refer to the abilities that everyone needs to make the most out of life. Usually, these life skills are linked to the way we manage our lives and live better as well as how we help people to achieve their aspirations (Altuwairqi, 2017). Life skills are defined by the World Health Organization (1993) as the capabilities of adaptive and positive behaviour which enable individuals to effectively

deal with the demands and challenges of daily life. Examples of these skills are managing emotions, solving problems, thinking critically, making healthy choices, communicating effectively, and managing lives in a healthy and productive manner (World Health Organization,1993).

These skills may include knowing how to keep a job; understanding why you are behaving in a specific way; or knowing how to deal with people, problems, circumstance changes, or daily stresses (Altuwairqi, 2017). The phrase "life skills-based education" is defined as developing knowledge and skills related to social and health issues as well as using sequential, interactive teaching and learning methods which provide opportunities to practice and to strengthen psychosocial and interpersonal skills in a culturally and developmentally appropriate way. Life skills add to personal and social development as well as contributing to the prevention of health and social problems and to the protection of human rights (Adewale, 2009). In fact, any competency that can be useful in our lives could be considered a life skill, whether the trait is utilised at school, at work, or in our personal lives.

Significance of the study.

This study is significant for the field of adult education because it provides new knowledge about how learners deal with crises, such as COVID-19, by using life skills. This research may also provide important information for education policymakers and planners so that they consider the adult learners' needs and interests in Saudi Arabia's Learning Neighbourhood programme. The programme needs to be in line with the challenges of daily life and must adapt to the changes taking place at the political, social, cultural, and health levels. This study is also important to identify the necessary life skills in a way that contributes to disseminating these skills and to increasing their use in adult-education programmes.

Theoretical framework

John Dewey (1916) stressed the importance of enabling individuals to become lifelong learners because education does not stop at a certain stage or age. People who are working to develop sustainable societies need analytical abilities in order to recognize the responsibilities for purchasing and creating things as well as being guardians and leaders for modifications due to the intricate connectedness among people (Glasbergen & Smits, 2003). Dewey believed that education is based on learning through "hands-on" dialogue, discussion, and critical thinking (Gutek, 2014). Therefore, individuals need to constantly develop their intellectual and practical skills in order to solve problems rationally and scientifically. Accordingly, John Dewey criticised the traditional "old school," technique, which makes students passive learners, because this approach does not help learners to develop their knowledge or to face the challenges of daily life (Dewey, 1915).

Dewey (1991) emphasized that the aim of education is to enable people to continue their learning as well as to provide them with the skills that can help them to grow, to adapt to their environment, and to face challenges and difficulties in life. Dewey's thoughts are consistent with the life-skill goals that adults have in the Learning Neighbourhood programme. Therefore, Dewey's progressive education theory was selected to achieve the study's goals. The life skills chosen for this study were solving problems, thinking critically, communicating effectively, and managing lives in a healthy manner.

Dewey believed that the main key in the learning process is teaching "problem solving" skills. Hence, through a problem-solving process, learners become ready for real-life situations (Dewey, 1991). Critical-thinking skills is a complex concept that is related to a number of behaviours that are taken in different situations. Dewey (1933) defined critical thinking skills as "active, persistent, and

careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p.118). There is a strong link among communication, problem solving, and critical-thinking skills. According to Klassen and Dwyer (2015), "Problem solving is the heart of critical thinking, but communication is its soul. If you can't communicate clearly, you can't think critically" (p.77). Additionally, critical thinking helps people to manage stress and can even improve their health as well as giving individuals more incentive to perform.

Methods and procedures

The study was designed to answer the following research questions: What is the role of the Learning Neighbourhood Programme in developing life skills (solving problems, thinking critically, communicating effectively, and managing lives in a healthy and productive manner) for adult learners in Saudi Arabia who are confronting the COVID-19 crisis? Does the role of Learning Neighbourhood Programme with helping the adult learner develop life skills to confront the COVID-19 crisis differ according to gender (male or female) and the number of courses? What benefits have participants received during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Population and sample

The study was conducted in Taif, a tourist city located in western Saudi Arabia. The director for the Department of Adult Education in Taif provided a list of individuals who were studying in the Learning Neighbourhood Programme during 2020. The total population consisted of 917 students (358 males and 559 females). The study was administered between May 20, 2020, and June 30, 2020. The questionnaire was constructed using Google Docs and was distributed by email messages and social media, such as WhatsApp and Twitter. The analysis for the 601 adult learners (206 males and 395 females) who participated in this study is given in Table 1.

Table1

The Analysis of the Study Sample (Gender and Number of Courses)

		Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	206	34.3
	Female	395	65.7
Number	1-2	93	15.5
of Courses	3-4	196	32.6
	5-or More	312	51.9
	Total	601	100.0

Instrument

A questionnaire was used as the primary tool for this study. The study's measurement items were obtained by reviewing the literature. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: the first part was the demographic information and asked about gender (male or female) as well as the number of courses (1-2,3-4, or 5 or more). The second part of the survey included 24 questions with 4-item life-skill scales: (a) critical thinking, (b) problem solving, (c) communicating effectively, and (d) managing lives in a healthy and productive manner. To clarify, making a rational decision about what to do in a situation is a critical-thinking skill. Coping with issues encountered when trying to solve problems in a positive way, such as analyzing a situation, getting information, thinking of options, revising options, and applying the correct solutions, is problem solving. When people are able to present or to receive various types of information, such as thoughts and feelings, with others as well as expressing what is happening around them, they have effective communication skills. Skills managing lives in a healthy and productive manner based on daily habits that help people feel energetic, be healthy, stay positive, and be less stressed, reducing the risk of disease and can even improve people health. The third part of the survey had an open-ended question that allowed the participants to give responses in their own words.

Reliability and validity

The questionnaire was developed in English. Then, the survey was translated into Arabic by translators who had mastered both languages in order to ensure that each item had equivalent statements in both languages. Creswell (2008), defined content validity as "the extent to which the question on the instrument and the scores from these questions are representative of all the possible questions that a researcher could ask about the content or skills" (p. 172). Thirteen expert panel members, specialists in the field of adult education, reviewed the items. The expert panel members were asked to provide their opinions about the items' clarity or ambiguity as well as how the items represented each life skill. The panelists were informed about the study's goal and the meaning of each life skill so that they could provide any comments, suggestions, or corrections to improve the questionnaire. The items that the panelists found acceptable were kept, and the confusing or ambiguous items were deleted.

After the panelists' review was completed, a pilot test was conducted using the revised survey; 20 individuals who had similar characteristics as the study's participants provided comments about clarity and ease of understanding. All 20 individuals completed the questionnaire and gave satisfactory comments about the items' clarity. The correlation coefficient for each item with the entire questionnaire was 0.39-0.86, and between the items and each scale was 0.44-0.88, indicating acceptable statistical significance. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to examine the instrument's reliability. The overall Cronbach Alpha result was 0.86, indicating high reliability for the survey questions.

Results

Findings for Research Question One

What is the role of the Learning Neighbourhood Programme in developing life skills (solving problems, thinking critically, communicating effectively, and managing lives in a healthy and productive manner) for adult learners in Saudi Arabia who are confronting the COVID-19 crisis? Means and standard deviations were used to answer research question one. The total mean score of 3.85 and a standard deviation of .172 indicated a high level of life skills that the Learning Neighbourhood Programme provided the adult learners to help people in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 crisis. The finding illustrated that communicating effectively was the highest-ranked item, with a mean of 3.88. The next-highest rated items were thinking critically, with a mean of 3.87; managing lives in a healthy and productive manner, with a mean of 3.84; and solving problems, with a mean of 3.81, respectively. The adult learners' perception about the role of the Learning Neighbourhood Programme for achieving the necessary life skills to help them during the COVID-19 crisis in Saudi Arabia are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 *The Mean and Standard Deviation of the Four Life-Skill Factors*

Rank #	Life-Skill Factor	Mean	Std. D.	Level
5	Communicating Effectively	3.88	.210	1
1	Thinking Critically	3.87	.226	2
3	Managing Lives in a Healthy and Productive Manner	3.84	.230	3
4	Solving Problems	3.81	.295	4
	Total Score	3.85	.172	

Findings for Research Question Two

Does the role of the Learning Neighbourhood Programme helping adult learners develop life skills to confront the COVID-19 crisis differ according to gender (male or female) and the number of training courses? A T-test was employed to examine if there were a significant difference between males and females regarding the Learning Neighbourhood

Programme's role to help adult learners develop life skills to confront the COVID-19 crisis. The results revealed a statistically significant difference in communicating effectively, thinking critically, solving problems, and the total score due to gender, all in favour of males. On the other hand, there was no difference in managing lives in a healthy and productive manner (Table 4).

Table 4 *Independent T-test Result for Gender*

	Sex	N	Mean	Std. D.	T	df	Sig.
Thinking Critically	Male	206	3.94	.105	5.660	599	.000
	Female	395	3.83	.261			
Solving Problems	Male	206	3.91	.161	5.815	599	.000
	Female	395	3.76	.335			
Communicating Effectively	Male	206	3.93	.167	4.311	599	.000
	Female	395	3.85	.225			
Managing Lives in a Healthy Manner	Male	206	3.86	.303	1.306	599	.192
	Female	395	3.83	.180			
Total Score	Male	206	3.90	.115	5.917	599	.000
	Female	395	3.82	.188			

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was utilized to see if there were a statistically significant difference based on the number of training courses. The results revealed a statistically significant difference for all factors (thinking critically, solving problems, communicating effectively, managing lives in a healthy and productive manner, and the total score). The findings for the one-way (ANOVA) results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 *Summary of the One-Way ANOVA Table for the Number of Courses*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Thinking Critically	Between Groups	2.143	2	1.072	22.429	.000
	Within Groups	28.569	598	.048		
	Total	30.712	600			
Solving Problems	Between Groups	5.125	2	2.563	32.518	.000
	Within Groups	47.127	598	.079		
	Total	52.252	600			
Communicating Effectively	Between Groups	.570	2	.285	6.598	.001
	Within Groups	25.848	598	.043		
	Total	26.418	600			
Managing Lives in a Healthy Manner	Between Groups	1.676	2	.838	16.717	.000
	Within Groups	29.984	598	.050		
	Total	31.660	600			
Total Score	Between Groups	1.988	2	.994	37.876	.000
	Within Groups	15.696	598	.026		
	Total	17.685	600			

To show the statistically significant differences between the means, a post-hoc analysis was used. The results revealed that there was a significant difference at .05 level between 5 or more courses, and both 1-2 and 3-4 classes, favouring 5 or more courses, for thinking critically, managing lives in a healthy and productive manner, and the total score. There were also significant differences at the .05 level between 1-2 courses and 3-4 courses. The differences favoured 1-2 courses. The post- hoc analysis also showed significant differences at the .05 level between 5 or more courses, and both 1-2 and 3-4 courses for solving problems. The differences favoured 5 or more courses. There were also significant differences at the .05 level between 5 or more courses and 3-4 courses, favouring 5 or more courses, for communicating effectively. The results of the post hoc analysis are shown in Table 6

Table 6 *Post Hoc Comparison Results by the Number of Courses*

		Mean	1-2	3-4	5 or more
Thinking Critically	1-2	3.79			
	3-4	3.82	.02		
	5 or more	3.93	.13*	.11*	
Solving Problems	1-2	3.79			
	3-4	3.69	.10*		
	5 or more	3.90	.11*	.21*	
Communicating Effectively	1-2	3.87			
	3-4	3.83	.03		
	5 or more	3.90	.03	.07*	
Managing Lives in a Healthy Manner	1-2	3.82			
	3-4	3.77	.05		
	5 or more	3.89	.07*	.12*	
Total	1-2	3.82			
	3-4	3.78	.04		
	5 or more	3.90	.08*	.13*	

Findings for research question three: open-ended question

What benefits have participants received during the COVID-19 pandemic? To answer this question, a matrix table was used to analyse the participants' responses. After coding the data, the researchers categorised the responses into four common themes: family togetherness, striving for change, awareness, and increased spirituality. In terms of family togetherness, the participants confirmed that they had more time to interact with their family or people they love, that they had more time to communicate with their children, and that they had time to teach and play with their children. One participant confirmed, "During the pandemic, my communication with my family increased better than before. I became constantly reassured about my family." In terms of striving for change, the participants stated

that they paid more attention to prioritising their tasks during COVID-19, controlling their own needs and feelings, improving their personal skills, and applying what they learned. For example, a participant stated how he/she was making good health habits and nutrition a priority during the COVID-19 crisis. Also, the participants confirmed that, during the pandemic, they enrolled in many courses to develop their life skills so that they could deal with the virus effectively.

For awareness, the participants stated that they saw their ability to make decisions and to have self-reliance and that they realised the importance of hygiene and disinfection during a pandemic. For example, one learner said, "During this epidemic, I began to look at things around me with a different perspective and more logical in order to make the final and appropriate decision."

In terms of increased spirituality, the participants affirmed that approaching Allah through prayer and supplication gave them the calm needed to overcome this crisis. One participant mentioned, "Reading the Quran and praying gives me strength and improves my psychological state during home isolation, and I always invite my family to read the Quran and pray."

Discussion and conclusion

Life-related skills are multiple and comprehensive. The emergence of this concept is the result of life requirements that have resulted from scientific changes and cognitive acceleration. The life skills that were emphasized in this study are critical thinking, problem solving, communicating effectively, and managing lives in a healthy and productive manner. The study included both male and female participants who were taking life-skill courses at the Learning Neighbourhood Programme in Taif, Saudi Arabia. The study's purpose was to illustrate the benefits of the life skills that adult learners needed to help them during the COVID-19 crisis in Saudi Arabia; the skills were provided by the Learning Neighbourhood Programme. This study

was limited to the city of Taif, to adults who studied at the Learning Neighbourhood Programme, and to the time of COVID-19.

The results revealed that the adult learners who enrolled in the Learning Neighbourhood Programme perceived the benefit of the life skills practising these skills at a high level during the COVID-19 crisis. This result was consistent with the goals of Saudi Arabia's the Learning Neighbourhood Programme. Some of these objectives were to provide individuals with life skills that enabled them to become self-directed learners in order to empower them to contribute to society and to develop self-confidence as well as how to act when facing difficulties (Ministry of Education, 2018). Kumar (2017) indicated that people need knowledge about life skills in order to act with confidence and competence. This result agreed with the International Labour Office (2021) which confirmed that, during the COVID-19 crisis, a number of people, stakeholders, and training providers were forced to rethink how to deal with the crisis, such as utiliszing an individual's skills. Orgilés, Espada, and Morales (2020) indicated that children who did not enroll in the Super Skills for Life Program, which "provided children with skills to build emotional resilience and coping strategies for daily and difficult life situations," (p. 88), had high anxiety, mood and sleep problems, and more cognitive alterations during the COVID-19 pandemic than the children who enrolled in the programme.

Among the four life skills, the adult learners who enrolled in Learning Neighbourhood Programme had the highest mean for communicating effectively. Most survey respondents reported that their knowledge from a life-skill course in the Learning Neighbourhood Programme enabled them "to clarify any misconceptions that my family members might have regarding the pandemic" and "to listen to my family members and hear their concerns about what is happening around them." Dewey confirmed that communicating effectively with others is very important because it can help people to gain an active "mind" through the engagement

process of "thinking" to resolve a problem as well as liberating people from the overwhelming pressure of events, enabling people to live in a world with a meaningful life (Nathan, 2004). The ability to communicate effectively is very important in the Islamic perspective. The Holy Quran, stated, "We did not send any messenger except [speaking] in the language of his people so that he might clearly convey the message to them" (Quran, n.d., Ibrahim, Verse 4, p. 14). This verse illustrated that achieving success and reaching others in order to achieve the mission requires effective communication. When communication is not clear and understandable, there may be misunderstandings; the listener may ignore the conversation, or conflicts may arise among individuals. According to Reddy and Gupta (2020), during crises, individuals need to improve their communication. Success in containing the COVID-19 crisis depends on effective communication, whether from the government to people, media to people, people to people, doctor to patient, or within families.

Thinking critically was the second-highest skill for the adult learners who enrolled in the Learning Neighbourhood Programme, followed by managing lives in a healthy and productive manner, and solving problems. According to Carlgren (2013), when giving a generation hope for a success in the 21st century, it is necessary to promote skills for solving problems, thinking critically, and communicating effectively. Alajlan and Aljohani's (2019) study indicated that learners who have critical-thinking skills have the ability to discuss and to solve problems; therefore, these skills connect with each other. "The acquisition of these skills would also help at-risk people gain the confidence to compete in the workforce, make healthy choices, overcome hardships, and persevere" (Carlgren, 2013, p. 12). According to Halpern and Dunn (2021), critical thinking is an important skill that could be useful when facing a crisis, especially COVID-19, and solving new problems that require a different approach.

The second question found that there was a significant

difference in communicating effectively, thinking critically, and the problem-solving skills that adult learners practised in the Learning Neighbourhood Programme in order to confront the COVID-19 crisis. The direction benefitted males. According to the International Labour Office (2021) almost 2.7 billion people, which represent around 81% of the world's workers, were affected by this pandemic. Traditionally in Arab communities, women don't participate financially, which makes the man the only breadwinner (Kia, 2019). Therefore, men used critical-thinking strategies and communicated with other more than women in order to find a solution to this problem during the COVID-19 crisis.

There was no significant difference for managing lives in a healthy manner, as perceived by the adult learners who practised the life skills in the Learning Neighbourhood Programme, to confront the COVID-19 crisis. This result was logical because, as a result of fear surrounding this epidemic outbreak, whether on the personal or family level, both men and women may adhere to the instructions and precautions that the government put in place to confront the pandemic.

Additionally, the results revealed that there were statistically significant differences for the perceptions of adult learners who practised life skills with the Learning Neighbourhood Programme in order to confront the COVID-19 crisis; the differences were seen for both life skills based on the number of courses that students took. The benefit of the direction was for people who took 5 or more courses. The result indicated that continuity and succession planning for courses are great ways to help learners master these skills and to change for the better. By answering the open-ended question, the participants clarified that there were many benefits which they obtained during this crisis, such as, family togetherness, striving for change, awareness, and increased spirituality. Conducting a qualitative study in order to understand adult learners' needs is essential to provide the necessary life skills that fit with today's world of accelerated change. Life-skill programmes should

be activated more widely because they have proven their effectiveness during crises.

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About the authors

Obaidalah H. Aljohani, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Leadership and Educational Policies at Taif University in Saudi Arabia. His areas of research interest are andragogy, comparative and adult education, transformative learning theory, and lifelong learning. He presented many papers at conferences both in his country and abroad in the field of adult education, as well as published articles in various journals.

Co-author

Sarah M. Alajlan, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Leadership and Educational Policies at Taif University in Saudi Arabia. Her research interests are adult learning, self-directed learning, continuing education, critical thinking, international and comparative education, and andragogy.

Contact details

Taif, Saudi Arabia.
Address correspondence to Obaidalah H. Aljohani, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Leadership and Educational Policies, College of Education, Taif University, P.O. Box 888, Hawiyah, Taif, Zip Code 21974, Saudi Arabia
email: dr.aljohani@outlook.com

Book Review

Out of the ruins: The emergence of radical informal learning spaces

Robert H Haworth & John M Elmore (editors)

PM Press, 2017

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274pp

Reviewed by Meghan O'Brien

Deakin University

This book presents a collection of works written by leading radical and informal educational theorists and activists. The premise of the collection resides in the exploration and emergence of 'radical informal learning spaces' as alternatives to the political and social imaginaries of mainstream state schooling, which is characterised as an affiliate of the global corporate capitalist regime. Further, the collection offers some guideposts for the pedagogical route to a reimagined form of self-empowerment and participatory democracy.

Haworth's introduction outlines his personal journey of unease with the underlying motivations and mouldings of the mainstream educational institution and offers a distinction between education and learning which he discovered upon his introduction to punk discourse. Following, Haworth sets the scene with a call for a re-genesis of education, and a reorientation from the current educational goals of privatisation, hyper-individualisation and obedience of the working class in Western society, towards a radical openness that values critical reflection, dialogue and relationships. Haworth calls for wide scale questioning of the processes and ideas that uphold systems

of dominance and drive us to embrace ideologies and systems of control (e.g., working class people in the US voting against universal health care), and education's complicity in this process.

Many of the authors use the term 'deschool', which refers to a conscious deconstruction of the assumptions and ideologies inherited from the mainstream education system, of note: hierarchical thinking and acceptance of authority and dominance. This is an especially important process in adult learning spaces, as awareness of 'moulding' and 'conditioning' is critical to understanding and challenging the socio-political conditions that maintain intersectional class, gender, racial and environmental inequalities. Section 1 of Out of the Ruins titled 'Critiques of Education' has a theoretical focus on important philosophical and age-old questions regarding the historical and enduring purpose, motivations, and interests of hegemonic, state-ordered education. Followingly, Section 2: 'Constructing a Theoretical Framework for Educational Praxis' offers a range of strategic frameworks for facilitating and maintaining radical learning spaces across different fields of study. However, the transformative power of Out of the Ruins lies in the last two sections named 'The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces "Using the Institutional Space without Being of the Institution"' and 'Of the Streets and the Coming Educational Communities'. These sections offer an extension of anti-capitalist system critiques of neoliberal education institutions, by depicting a range of radical adult learning spaces both within, outside and against institutional contexts in the Global North. Those participating in adult education and pursuing horizontal pedagogy, teacher, and student alike, will find great value in this collection as a source of both inspiration, wisdom, and warning of the limitations for future educational projects and encounters. Despite the pearls of wisdom scattered throughout each of the chapters in Out of the Ruins, I have reviewed one or two chapters from each section in the collection that I feel offer significant value to those working in adult education, across formal and informal settings.

The Critiques of Education section consists of two accordant pieces that take a stark philosophical stance against the market-based orientation of education and claim the widely held notion of education as a benevolent force, is a self-subordinating illusion. However, the two authors arrive at vastly different conclusions as to how an educational re-genesis could emerge. I have chosen to focus on the more optimistic of the two; John Elmore's 'Miseducation of the Authoritarian Mind. This piece outlines how the historical evolution of compulsory education has been constructed to serve the interests of the elite and mould an obedient future labour force. To reinforce this point, Elmore describes two (not mutually exclusive) authoritarian personality types that are endorsed in neoliberal classrooms; the sadistic authoritarian, who pursues domination and control, and the passive-authoritarian, a submissive character that aims to become part of a larger unit, to receive commands and not carry a burden of responsibility. Both characters are motivated by a fear of loneliness, inferiority, and powerlessness, that is ingrained through the microcosm of the compulsory classroom. Elmore alludes that liberatory education and radical pedagogy can act to increase critical consciousness is the most direct counter to authoritarian ways of knowing in wider society that maintain power structures, to 'lead the way out of the ruins' (p.33).

'From the Unlearned Un-man to a Pedagogy without Moulding' in the Theoretical Framework for Educational Praxis section, Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson make a potent contribution to adult learning in the collection, through their deconstruction of 'moulding' in education as a process by which desired skills are imparted to students 'in a direction desired by the knowing subject', followed by a proposition of alternatives to this widely adopted education model. The authors postulate that 21st Century educational institutions have their roots in 'nationalist projects', using the example of universities advertising 'graduate attributes' as a product for the consumption of industry.

The third and fourth sections of Out of the Ruins present

a diverse portfolio of experiences and models of 'radical informal learning' projects from a range of participant, facilitator, and founder perspectives. These examples not only present radical 'deschooling' alternatives to the standardised colonial model of education, but also include honest discussions about the foreseen and unforeseen limitations of the projects, often exacerbated by the internalised assumptions about education discussed in the first few chapters. Whilst I would love to explore all the works in this collection, such as Jeff Shantz's 'Anarchists against (and within) the Edu-Factory: The Critical Criminology Working Group' which 'espouses the benefits of the 'free school' movement, or Dana William's 'Teaching Anarchism by Practicing Anarchy: Reflections on Facilitating the Student Creation of a College Course', this is beyond the scope of this review. Thus, I have selected two chapters that resonated with me, as a recent graduate of a post-graduate education course at the beginning of my teaching career, to evaluate their usefulness for adult education practitioners. The final two sections provide exceptional value to people and communities in adult education that are wanting to embrace the challenges of facilitating post-modern horizontal pedagogies and reject the commodification and standardisation of an education system that continues to serve elite interests.

Sarah Amsler's 'What Do We Mean When We Say 'Democracy?' Learning towards a Common Future through Popular Higher Education stands out among the chapters within the Theoretical Framework section, as it provides a deep analysis of the skeleton of the liberation of human flourishing, community building, and living with agentic assuredness. Further, this section discusses the role of higher education institutions to facilitate this societal transition; to first find a consensus on what is meant by true democracy, then practice participatory democracy as an antidote to capitalist, hyper individualist ways of knowing. Despite higher education's traditions of critical pedagogy and radical thought, the colonisation of these institutions by capitalist rationalities has led to a contraction of access

that excludes many working classes from democratic spaces and transformative spaces that were once available. The question then becomes, how can we regenerate democratic possibilities within the modern day edu-factory? To respond to this question, Amsler draws on a case study; the Social Science Centre, a 'counter-capitalist learning space, an immanent critique of neoliberal education, and a contribution to the development of alternative forms of knowledge for democratising everyday life' (p.108) formed in response to defunding and neglect of the public library in a small English city. More specifically, Amsler unpacks the contents of an evening class that addressed the title question, and critically engages with the societal and pedagogical consequences of the students' diverse understandings of democracy, a concept that underpins the entire ethos of the project. The radically open but cooperatively governed character of the Social Science Centre practices democracy in three challenging ways. First, destabilising encounters and criticism are structured into the decision-making process and encouraged. Second, the centre insists on its members building cooperative relationships with others that are geographically, politically, and socially different. Lastly, the centre acknowledges that for people to understand the radical potential and people power of true democracy, the conditions for learning about democracy need to be democratised, as our democratic common sense has been distorted by our societal habits, privileges, inequities, and authoritarian conditioning.

In the penultimate section Of the Streets and the Coming Educational Communities, 'What is Horizontal Pedagogy? A Discussion on Dandelions' is a multi-authored annotated dialogue of a prefigurative educational experiment that transpired at the New York Occupy University. The project aimed to work against 'neoliberal-capitalist relations of [knowledge] production' by democratically constructing a curriculum in response to the question 'What is Horizontal Pedagogy?', using traditional activist methods of participatory facilitation. This piece offers a powerful and insightful example of inclusive horizontal

pedagogy, that emphasises questions and the process of questioning, rather than answers, because 'questions put into doubt the familiar, they create fissures in the familiar'. The participants all demonstrate a deep respect for the value and opportunity for growth and transformation that comes with uncertainty and use curiosity as a vehicle of learning. This approach meaningfully challenges many dominant institutional ways of knowledge production that place a higher value on objectivity and certainty as a way of increasing the trading and consumer capital of knowledge. As many informal adult education programs often have close ties to marginalised, oppressed groups, this chapter provides an inclusive example of how to empower individuals to control their own learning and facilitate spaces for true democracy where all voices can be heard.

In response to the increasingly one-size fits all model of education that serves to 'mould' individuals to be compatible with a globalised, classist, and capitalist society, Out of the Ruins highlights the socio-political danger of continuing the current education model and broadens the potential of education by giving detailed accounts of how to disrupt this system, and provide transformative, radical learning experiences that serve the interests of the people; not profit or power. Thus, this collection is of great value to facilitators in the adult learning space, as the narrative of the collection from critique to theoretical framework, to detailed accounts of alternative frameworks in practice, in both formal and informal settings, forces readers to deeply reflect on the urgency of change required. The authors' collective and inclusive tones encourage readers to critically engage with the values, purpose and objectives of education, to locate the incompatibilities between personal and political motivations and interests in education, and understand that systemic, large-scale alternatives to the standard educational model will be required to meaningfully shift the orientation of 21st Century education, in order to equip people with the innovation, creativity, and resilience required to address 21st Century challenges. The honesty displayed by the authors regarding the limitations,

challenges, and difficulty of constructing and maintaining truly democratic learning and honouring the agency of diverse groups of people is of great value to anyone with progressive aspirations to facilitate authentic student-led educational experiences. Out of the Ruins' emphasis on non-hierarchical models of communication is upheld in each of the chapters, and various educational strategies for negotiating democratic participation are available for critical educational practitioners to freely adapt to and trial in their own context.