ADEPT and Enabled: An Australian Case Study of Enabling Pedagogy as Innovative Educational Practice to Support Students from Underrepresented Backgrounds at University

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Abstract—As developed nations investigate how to best prepare for emerging challenges and upskill individuals as knowledge workers, there is an increased focus on tertiary attainment. In Australia, enabling programs are an educational intervention designed to provide a pathway to university for students from underrepresented backgrounds, wherein they gain academic literacies, build learner identities, and earn a score for undergraduate application. This paper investigates pedagogical innovation via these programs to determine why enabling pedagogy produces strong learning outcomes for new students and provides insights applicable to university education more broadly. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten undergraduate students who entered university via the enabling program pathway. Through thematic analysis, informed by the ADEPT framework for enabling pedagogy, their reflections provide deep insight into the student experience and outcomes. Responses focus on the role of enabling educators, inclusive attitudes, and clear expectations which work to support the development of effective learning strategies and a 'tool kit' for success at undergraduate and beyond. This research offers insight into the lived experience of university students from underrepresented backgrounds, while also identifying strategies which support transformative learning outcomes.

Keywords—enabling pedagogy, enabling programs, ADEPT framework, Australia, university, FEE-FREE Uni Ready

I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, educators and governments are investigating how to best prepare societies and workforces for the challenges of the 21st Century. In 2024, the Australian Federal Government conducted a review of the Higher Education sector and identified recommendations to upskill the populace as knowledge workers better placed to meet the demands of emerging industries. Importantly, in the *Australian Universities Accord* [1], the Australian Federal Government set targets for a minimum of 80% of working-aged Australians holding tertiary qualifications by 2050. This ambitious target requires innovative

strategies to support equitable access and attainment for certain demographic groups who are consistently underrepresented at university in Australia, specifically students from First Nations, low socio-economic status, rural or regional backgrounds, and students with disability. To further support this goal, in the Budget this May $350 million was committed towards FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses; the Government noted that this expansion of enabling program funding is designed to 'provide(s) more students with a high quality enabling pathway into higher education, focusing on students from underrepresented backgrounds' [2].

This paper reports on research conducted with students from underrepresented backgrounds who entered university via Australian enabling programs and have progressed to undergraduate degrees. Interviews with students identify what specific approaches best enabled their participation at university. To better understand how enabling programs actively support these students from underrepresented backgrounds, this paper explores and further documents an innovative educational practice, known as enabling pedagogy. This research stage forms part of a larger research project by Stokes, and this paper is informed by the ADEPT framework for enabling pedagogy [3]. Building on an evidence base, from research with enabling program students, staff, and alumni, the ADEPT framework guides educators and practitioners to embed approaches which support new learners at university. This research contributes to broader discussions on what pedagogical approaches serve to support students from underrepresented backgrounds to connect with and develop as independent learners at university. Through better understanding of student learning needs, this paper shares insights from enabling pedagogy to support student equity and pedagogical innovation in the context of widening university participation worldwide.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand why some individuals flourish and others disconnect from education, it is important to understand the way educational systems work to

reproduce privilege. Bourdieu [4] argues that educational institutions act to validate or recognize the 'cultural capital' of certain powerful groups. Burke *et al.* [5] observe that enabling approaches work to challenge misrecognition in education by focusing on capabilities. Embedded enabling pedagogy builds upon social justice and progressive pedagogies to strive toward participatory parity, which Fraser notes 'encompass(es) economic distribution, legal-cultural recognition, and political representation' [6]. In the work of Freire amongst others, critical pedagogy provides a lens to better understand systemic marginalization [7]. Freire offers hope and guidance in embedding literacies in ways which are relevant to people from disenfranchised groups, supporting students to 'read the word through a reading of the world' [7]. Critical pedagogy emerged from revolutionary contexts in South America, and Darder *et al.* evidence that this approach has proved useful for educators working with marginalized groups worldwide [8]. These theoretical perspectives inform the development of innovative pedagogy to support students from underrepresented backgrounds at university.

As part of a global move to widen university participation, bridging, pathway or foundation courses have emerged with curricula which Davis [9] observes focus on 'academic literacies, English language preparation, the development of study and research skills, and socio-cultural adaptation'. As Davis further notes, 'In England, access courses fulfill the role of providing access to higher education for "non-traditional" students, while in New Zealand, similar courses are referred to as bridging programs, [...and] the United States, community colleges provide a wide range of courses for "non-traditional" students seeking access [9]. As the Australian Government strives to increase access to education and the resultant life opportunities [1], the higher education sector can gain insight from innovative approaches and strategies used in enabling programs. The undergraduate retention rate for Australian students from, for example, low-socioeconomic status, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, rural and regional backgrounds are significantly lower than the sector average [1]. The participation and success of students from 'equity groups' at university is an important element of upskilling the population for knowledge work, while also supporting social inclusion [1]. Australian enabling programs are designed to provide students from support students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds, identified as Government-defined 'equity groups', with supported pathways to university, whereby they earn an entrance score for undergraduate application and build the skills and knowledges for success. In 2020, Department of Education, records, cited in Davis *et al.* [10], show that over 32,000 students enrolled in these programs. An emerging body of research highlights significant outcomes from enabling programs, including Pitman *et al.* [11] arguing that these pathways provide the best retention for students from equity groups transitioning into first year courses, Li *et al.* [12] identifying that alumni perform the same or better than peers at

undergraduate level, and Syme *et al.* [13] evidencing that these programs lead to greater undergraduate success than other pathways. Stokes has built upon sector research to develop the ADEPT framework for enabling pedagogy guides educators to provide accessible, dialogic, empowering, purposeful, and transformative learning [3]. This framework codifies enabling pedagogy and provides recommendations on what teaching approaches best support students from underrepresented backgrounds to transition into and succeed at university. The framework can be adapted to support students at all levels of university education.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This case study explores the experience of students from underrepresented backgrounds through semi-structured interviews with ten undergraduates who entered university via the enabling program pathway. The research was conducted at an Australian university in the unit which teaches enabling programs. The unit is a separate faculty within the university, designed to support widening participation by delivering pathway programs to Australian students, permanent residents, and students holding Humanitarian Visas. Merriam notes that, 'case study research is an effective methodology' to 'understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences' [14], and provides particular insight into diverse and underrepresented student needs, as Zucker states it, 'emphasi[ses] the participant's perspective as central to the process' [15].

To conduct effective case study research, it is critical to identify a well-defined case which fits the research aims. Merriam argues that selection must be 'purposive or purposeful [...] one has to select the case that will yield information that can best address the study's purpose' [16]. Creswell and Guetterman emphasize the importance of identifying an 'instrumental case', for study, where the case selection 'serves the purpose of illuminating a particular issue' [17]. This unit was selected due to the large and diverse student body, the open-access design of the enabling program, and the strategic orientation of the university. All equity groups are over-represented within this university's enabling program and there is some history of research about the program to draw upon. This institution was supportive of research with students that aims to better understand and improve the student experience. This unit provided a bounded, information-rich case study aligned with the research questions.

The target population of this research was enabling program students who had continued into undergraduate degrees. Ethics approval was sought prior to project commencement and the interviews formed the second stage of a mixed-methods project. In the first stage, reported on by Stokes in 2018 [18], students completed an optional survey at the enabling program Orientation and gave approval to be contacted for an interview at a later date. The university ethics committee and undergraduate Deans gave approval for the researcher to contact students for the follow-up interview. In this

second research stage, follow-up interviews were conducted. From those survey responses which indicated interest in a follow-up interview, purposive sampling was employed to identify ten enabling program alumni for interview. This sampling ensured that interviewees represented a range of life experience, graduate aspirations, and equity groups. Six men and four women were interviewed. The interviewees included school-leavers (n = 5) and mature-aged students (over 21 years of age at university commencement: n = 5). Interviewees came from diverse and intersectional student equity groups, including culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (n = 3), and low socio-economic status backgrounds (n = 8). Interviews were one to two hours duration, and pseudonyms were used throughout.

Interviewees had all completed the one year enabling program (or part time equivalent) and gone on to pass undergraduate subjects. Their success at university was often in contrast to previous educational experiences; five had left high school prior to completion, and the other five completed school without either the required entry score or desire for further study. Their previous experiences included overseas and interstate schooling, in private, public, and vocational education. They had all reconnected with education via the enabling program. Interview questions explored their educational journeys, what led them back to study, their expectations of university, successes, challenges, transition to undergraduate, and feedback on the enabling program. The interview transcripts were coded using nVivo. Guided by the work of Braun and Clark, Thematic analysis [19] was conducted to provide deeper understanding through identifying patterns in student responses, thereby offering insight into student experience and enabling pedagogical approaches. Analysis of data led to triangulation of themes and verified research insights. Interviewee responses conveyed patterns of experience that led to validation; Yin asserts the importance of this triangulation for credibility, as 'when the evidence from several different sources converges on the same finding, increase[es] the reliability of the finding' [20]. Due to the bounded and specific nature of qualitative case studies, Merriam [17] advocates replacing positivist notions of generalizability with recommendations for transferability, stating, '[…] much can be learned from a particular case […] what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations.' Therefore, the recommendations from this research focus on critical understanding and how the insights generated may be transferable to other contexts.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section documents enabling approaches which are distinct to other educational contexts, and provides insight for educators and practitioners working with students from underrepresented backgrounds at university. Interviewees identified effective practices in enabling programs, thereby offering insight into how enabling pedagogy delivers beneficial results. Through sharing the lived experience and educational journey of students in enabling programs in their own voices, we gain insight into why these approaches are particularly impactful for new students. Interviews conveyed the important role of enabling educators, enabling attitudes, clear expectations, and how these support students to develop effective strategies for university learning.

A. Enabling Educators, Enabling Approaches

All students reflected on their enabling program as a rewarding journey. In contrast to negative prior educational experiences, the interviewees consistently acknowledged the pivotal role of enabling educators in being crucial to their success. They noted marked points of distinction to other educational spaces, which indicates why this learning environment supports students to succeed when they have faced overwhelming challenges in other contexts. For example, Adam's parents instilled a strong value in education, and he completed high school; however, he did not achieve a leaving score that reflected his ability. His father's experience as a refugee to Australia shaped his own commitment to further study:

> He really wanted me to get into university, not just because it's his dream, it's just because like, when he came here, there was nothing, and he didn't get the opportunity to study at university. To get in, to study at university, to get a job, mostly get better work conditions, that's the reason why. I was like, yes, fair enough.

Through perseverance with support, Adam built his own sense of capability, alongside the academic literacies and disposition for university success, leading to a degree in Human Movement.

Many students had clear aspirations, and awareness of gaps in their own knowledge. George (Laboratory Medicine student) knew which areas he wished to improve through the enabling program:

> I wanted to brush up on my Maths for starters, and just get my foot in the door with just some more of the basic Science knowledge. I already knew how to make calculations, stuff like that, so I wanted to just bolster that and see what else I may have missed in school.

Interviewees particularly valued educators' inclusive attitudes, respectful culture, and use of dialogue to build shared understanding. The academics were accessible and clarified expectations through information and feedback. Alongside teaching content, the educators also shared learning strategies, which enabled the students to build effective academic practices.

B. Inclusive Attitudes

Hockings argues that inclusive approaches are effective educational practices which bear merit for all students [21]. For those who have lost trust in the education system, or do not see themselves represented strongly within it, inclusion carries extra importance in rendering learning environments accessible. The program was seen to prioritize inclusion, as Kate (Social Work student) recalls:

Right from the word go, the first tutorial I walked into, just, it felt much more like you had a place there, and much more like anyone's ideas were welcome. […] The classes tended to be smaller […] how welcoming it all felt and how included you felt […] it made me feel like everyone here is equal and everyone here is here for exactly the same reasons.

The educator's attitude was important in supporting the students to understand and be receptive to advice on how to improve their work. Eleni (Early Childhood Education student) noticed this enabling approach from a lecturer:

She was very, very helpful […] I said 'Oh, but my writing is terrible' and she said 'No, this person has written this with 10 years of experience, you have only been here for a few weeks! Just do this.' […] Slowly I started to develop my style.

Educator attitude may anchor students to studies amidst complex contexts. One student suffered considerably during her mother's extended battle with cancer, and it was the caring rapport built with staff which maintained her connection to the program until she could turn her focus to study again.

C. Clear Expectations

The enabling program provides a space for students to determine if they are a good fit for university, while also learning about the system and what is required to succeed within it. The university and its systems were unfamiliar: 'almost like going to a different planet' (Taylor, Performing Arts and Creative Writing student). Time and support were needed to understand academic culture. Ansah (International Studies and Social Work student) observed: 'I was new to Australia […] I didn't know how to study. […] I enrolled in [the enabling program] to get that basic understanding.' Damien (Psychological Science student) originally left high school for an apprenticeship, and reflected upon how maturity led him back to education: 'I really wasn't interested in learning back then. I was more interested in going out and partying […], whereas when I came here it was focused on learning.' Students particularly valued educators clarifying expectations. Dakota (Creative Writing and Literature student) recalled an enabling course which focused on assignments and how to 'actually write them to university standards. […] I very much liked that class because it taught me what I was to expect from being at university.' Clarification was achieved through articulating assignment expectations via course content, examples, and detailed marking rubrics, as well as opportunities to show drafts and discuss feedback. Staff consultation times were valued. Support offered through reviewing drafts, or via detailed assessment feedback, helped students understand how to improve their work in alignment with academic expectations:

I liked too how much feedback you got, because it really told you where you were going right, what needed improving […] previously you'd gotten a mark and that was about it. […] You got so much feedback from tutors that it made it very clear. (Kate)

Developing strategies and tools for success empowers students as learners. This supported beginning helped clarify university and academic expectations, which prepared students to manage these independently at degree level.

D. Developing Effective Strategies

Drawing upon advice from educators, students built a repository of tools and strategies for success at university. Hayden (Visual Arts student) recalled a lecturer who 'wrote an essay structure in my journal, and that really got my attention, and I actually made it into a Word document, and from that actually also help other people'. Eleni utilizes her lecturer's advice to progress on complex tasks:

I try and stay focussed – say 'you will get through this – put it down – go and have a shower or go and read something that you wrote well and come back to it.' […Chemistry lecturer] told me that, 'Come back in 15 minutes and it will make more sense.'

Students develop strategies to manage their own individual needs in the supported enabling environment, which then minimizes disruption at degree level. For example, students built connections to support services, such as scholarships and counseling. Hayden values the Access Plan he established with the Inclusion Unit, as it makes it easier to communicate his condition with undergraduate lecturers: 'If they ask any questions, I say "Here" and they just say "Hey, this is, these are the issues, we can deal with that"'. Students carry these navigational practices and individual learning strategies forward to undergraduate study.

E. A 'Tool Kit' for Success

Student interviews reflect the challenges of educational participation and the opportunities provided wherein disenfranchised individuals can identify a trajectory toward greater social inclusion, educational fulfillment, and graduate aspirations, or a chance 'to achieve my dreams' (Mark, Information Technology Student). Students who conduct purposeful work in their enabling program are able to investigate their aspirations with support from educators. The combination of these approaches has a transformative effect, wherein students build confidence in their capabilities, are empowered to succeed at university, and approach their degree study with a 'tool kit' of personalized study support strategies.

V. CONCLUSION

Interviewees shared their educational journey and transformational experiences, which offer insight into how enabling pedagogy works to support students from underrepresented backgrounds at university. These align with the ADEPT framework for enabling pedagogy and offer insight into why these approaches are effective. Enabling educators play a specific role in connecting students to education in meaningful ways. Inclusive attitudes support access and dialogue, students are empowered and build knowledge through purposeful

tasks, which support their transformation as university students, who embody positive learner identities and carry forward effective learning and self-management strategies for undergraduates and beyond. To extend this research, it would be relevant to investigate how enabling approaches can be applied to better support students from underrepresented backgrounds at all levels of tertiary education. This research highlights the transformative impact of university study, wherein individuals are supported to verify their aspirations and contribute new capitals to discipline areas and professional fields. In this way, widening university participation works to transform the individual and academy in the interests of participatory parity and broader societal transformation. Embedding enabling pedagogical approaches is a first step toward better supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds to flourish at university and build skills for future success.

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