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# Identifying factors that motivate re-engagement with education

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*This study presents data collected from students commencing an enabling program at an Australian university in 2013. Students were asked to identify the three most important reasons for them undertaking the program. The responses identified focussed on four main factors: future educational and career aspirations; a desire to have new experiences; the need for new skills and knowledge; and academic and personal support needs. Results showed that younger students straight from school saw the program as an opportunity to secure entry to their degree of choice. Mature students who had a gap of some years in their education career saw the opportunity offered through the enabling program more in regard to gaining new skills and experiencing university study before embarking on their full degree program.*

In higher education there has been a considerable amount of research done on the relationship between the motivation of students and their success. Much of this work has focussed on the success of students completing their studies, and overcoming difficulties while enrolled in a program. However there is little work that looks at what motivates students to commence studies in the first place. This is of particular interest to those involved in enabling type pathway programs that seek to attract non-traditional students (i.e. those not entering directly from successful completion of secondary schooling).

This study looks at the motivational factors that encourage students who have not been successful in previous educational environments, to re-engage with new educational opportunities. Commencing students across four programs at UniSA College, a provider of pre-degree pathway programs, were surveyed at the beginning of 2013 and asked about why they chose to enrol into an enabling program. The responses were then analysed to identify factors that were important in motivating these students to re-engage with university studies.

## UniSA College Cohort

UniSA College is part of the University of South Australia and runs a suite of programs designed to provide pathways for students into university who don't have the required entry qualifications to enter a degree program directly. The programs consist of a Foundation Studies program which is a free open access one year program for Australian students aged 18 years and over. The College also runs a series of diploma programs which require the attainment of some educational qualifications prior to entry

but which are set below the equivalent degree entry requirements. The diplomas are two year programs which include foundation courses as well as first year degree level courses.

The student cohort at the College consists of domestic students and students on permanent or humanitarian visas, i.e. it does not take international students. Students range in age from 18 years to over 60 years, but the two dominant groups consist of firstly school leavers, and secondly those traditionally identifying as mature age students (i.e. those returning to study after some years).

The research questions being addressed in this paper are:

1. What motivates a person to undertake a pathway program offered by a university?
2. Are there differences between groups of students based on demographic or educational distinctions?

Understanding these different motivational factors can assist university programs to engage different groups within the community and also develop mechanisms that will best support their success at university. Ultimately this may also assist in improving retention and success statistics after they enter their degree (Corts & Stoner, 2011, p. 776)

### **Motivation to re-engage with university studies.**

Understanding what the underlying factors that influence engagement and success at university are is of great interest to many researchers and practitioners. The traditional model of students completing high school, achieving a university entrance ranking and then continuing to a degree program (with or without a gap year) may not actually be the obvious pathway for many school students. A number of studies have shown that many students disengage with their studies while still at school and don't see that post-secondary education as either an option or attractive.

Horyna & Bons-Raake (2012, p.709) noted that "According to the Alliance for excellent Education (2009), approximately one-third of all students in the United States exit high school without obtaining a diploma." Leaving school prior to completion seems to be a significant barrier to engagement in further education with Woolcock and Ferguson (2011, p.3) identifying that "...just under seven percent of people who left school after completing year ten held a qualification higher than Certificate IV".

At the same time however, commencing an undergraduate degree straight from high school is not necessarily an indicator for success. Kimmel et al (2012) highlighted that around 30% of university students entering a degree straight from school dropped out in their first year and were unlikely to return to complete their studies. Whether an adult returns to university to complete a degree or chooses to commence studies to gain entry for the first time, understanding of motivating factors to reengage with education is still limited. A number of studies have looked at adults returning to university and as noted by Kimmel et al (2012) it may be a mix of different factors weighted to an individual's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Various factors that have been identified in different studies include developmental factors such as a sense of accomplishment, pursuit of interest or new experiences, wanting a career change, seeking financial gains or promotion and wanting to be a role model for other family members (Timarong, Temaungli & Sukrad 2002, cited in Kimmel et al 2012; Mbilinyi 2006). This last factor is important as students who engage in higher education tend to come from families whose parents also undertook post-secondary education (Margolin, 2000, cited in Horyna & Bons-Raake 2012, p.715)

At the same time a number of barriers to entry to education faced by adult students have also been identified. Ritt (2008) identified a number of key factors that can affect negative effects on students engaging in study including distance from school, commitments to family and work and past negative educational experiences.

Finally there may be some explanation in what goals a student is looking to achieve when education is related to employment and career aspirations. For example, Shin and Kelly (2013) looked at vocational identity as a link between career goal setting and success at college. They cite Holland, Daiger & Power (1980) when defining vocational identity as “the clarity and stability of people’s interests and abilities and their capacity to explore, plan, and establish goals” (Shin & Kelly 2013, p.141) They explain that vocational identity development can lead to a number of positive outcomes, including making appropriate choices to fulfil educational needs (Shin & Kelly 2013). While career aspirations have an element of extrinsic motivation the researchers also noted that intrinsically motivated individuals are more able to engage in goal oriented activities and that when career goals and educational goals are aligned students maintain a greater desire to complete their studies successfully (Shin & Kelly 2013).

It is recognised that individuals will have different motivating factors influencing their decisions to attend university and these differences may vary between different demographic groups (Corts & Stoner 2011) as well as those with different career aspirations (Shin & Kelly 2013). This research looks to explore different motivational factors between groups of students attending a pathway college program.

The survey was conducted amongst 650 Foundation Studies and Diploma Students enrolled at UniSA College at the beginning of 2013. Out of 650 potential participants 280 completed the survey (response rate 43%). Out of 280 survey participants who completed the survey 42.1% of them were male and 57.9% were female (Refer to Table 1).

**Table 1: Distribution of survey participants based on their gender**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Male	42.1%	118
Female	57.9%	162
Total	100%	280

In terms of their age distribution, a vast majority of them (78.2%) were below 25 years of age. Ninety-six percent of the survey participants were below 41 years of age leaving only 3.8% belonging to the 41-60 years age bracket (Refer to Table 2).

**Table 2: Distribution of Survey Participants Based on Their Age Group**

Age Group	Response Percent	Response Count
17-24 years	78.2%	219
25-30 years	10.4%	29
31-35 years	4.6%	13
36-40 years	3.2%	9
41-45 years	1.8%	5
46-50 years	0.7%	2
51-55 years	0.7%	2
56-60 years	0.4%	1

UniSA College offers three Diploma programs in Arts, Science and Technology and Allied Health. In addition the College offers seven strands of the Foundation Studies program in Applied Science and Engineering, Business, Education, Arts and Social Sciences, Health Sciences, Information Technology, and Unistart. Out of 280 participants 91 (33%) of them reported that they have enrolled themselves in the Education, Arts and Social Sciences Strands, followed by 21.7% in Diploma of Science and Technology and 18.1% in Health Sciences strand of the Foundation Studies program constituting almost three quarters of the responses (Refer to Table 3).

**Table 3: Distribution of survey participants based on enrolled program**

Enrolled Program	Response Percent	Response Count
Diploma of Allied Health	1.1%	3
Diploma of Arts	5.4%	15
Diploma of Science and Technology	21.7%	60
Foundation Studies (Applied Science and Engineering)	5.1%	14
Foundation Studies (Business)	6.9%	19
Foundation Studies (Education, Arts and Social Sciences)	33.0%	91
Foundation Studies (Health Sciences)	18.1%	50
Foundation Studies (Information Technology)	3.6%	10
Foundation Studies (UniStart)	5.1%	14

When asked about their level of previous education the majority of the survey participants (61.7%) responded that they had completed Year 12 (Refer to Table 4). This implies that the majority of these students have probably enrolled at UniSA College as a pathway to university as a result of not having a sufficiently high score to enter a degree program directly. Eleven percent of respondents reported that they had only completed Year 11, while thirteen percent of the participants had completed Certificate III (Refer to Table 4).

**Table 4: Distribution of survey participants based on level of their previous education**

<b>Level of Previous Education</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Primary School	0.4%	1
Secondary School - Up to and including Year 10	5.5%	15
Secondary School - Completed Year 11	11.3%	31
Secondary School - Completed Year 12	61.7%	169
Certificate I or II	7.3%	20
Certificate III	13.9%	38

### **Motivational Factors that Attract Participants to UniSA College**

When the participants were asked to identify their top three reasons for enrolling at UniSA College more than half of them (54.7%) reported that they had enrolled themselves at UniSA College as a pathway to a university degree program (Refer to Table 6). Almost 49% of the respondents also mentioned that they had enrolled at UniSA College because of their inability to enter into a university degree program directly. Guaranteed entry into a university degree program was identified by 44.6% of the survey respondents as one of the top reasons for enrolling into UniSA College. Preparing themselves for university studies also came up as a top reason for enrolling at UniSA College as 45.7% of the survey respondents ranked it as a top priority.

**Table 5: Distribution of survey participants based on their selected factors for enrolling at UniSA College**

<b>Top Three Reasons for Enrolling at UniSA College</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
As a pathway to a university degree	54.7%	146
Did not gain entry into a university degree directly	48.7%	130
To be guaranteed entry into a university degree	44.6%	119
To prepare myself for university	45.7%	122
To see what university is like	24.0%	64
To improve my skills	24.0%	64
Improved career opportunities	18.4%	49
For the extra support	14.2%	38
The program has no course fees	10.1%	27
General interest in the area	9.7%	26
Quality of teaching	2.6%	7

### **ANOVA Results**

Analysis of Variance tests were conducted to find out whether the survey participants' identification of a key reason for their enrolment at UniSA College varied significantly based on their gender, age group, enrolled program and level of previous education (Refer to Tables 6-8). The ANOVA results based on participants' gender showed that there was no significant difference amongst the participants' selection of a key reason as their top three reasons for enrolling at UniSA College. F-values for all individual

analyses were less than 2 (0.024 to 1.345) and they were not significant at 5% level of significance. This means participants' gender has not played any significant role in selection reasons for enrolling at UniSA College.

ANOVA Results for main reasons for enrolling at UniSA College by Age show that respondents differ significantly in their selection of 'Did not gain entry into a university program directly' (F = 5.730, P< 0.000), 'The program has no course fees' (F = 2.965, P <0.005), 'For the extra support' (F = 2.391, P<0.022), 'To prepare myself for the university' (F= 4.388, P<0.000), 'Improved career opportunities' (F = 8.245, P<0.000), and 'To improve my skills' (F = 2.912, P< 0.006) as one of the top three reasons for their enrolment at UniSA College (Refer to Table 6). This means that participants' age has played a significant role in selection of the above six reasons as one of top motivators for enrolling at UniSA College.

**Table 6: ANOVA results for main reasons for enrolling at UniSA College by age**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<i>Did not gain entry into a university program directly</i>	Between Groups	8.940	7	1.277	5.730*	.000
	Within Groups	60.628	272	.223		
	Total	69.568	279			
<i>The program has no course fees</i>	Between Groups	1.730	7	.247	2.965*	.005
	Within Groups	22.667	272	.083		
	Total	24.396	279			
<i>For the extra support</i>	Between Groups	1.904	7	.272	2.391*	.022
	Within Groups	30.939	272	.114		
	Total	32.843	279			
<i>To prepare myself for the university</i>	Between Groups	6.957	7	.994	4.388*	.000
	Within Groups	61.614	272	.227		
	Total	68.571	279			
<i>Improved career opportunities</i>	Between Groups	6.962	7	.995	8.245*	.000
	Within Groups	32.810	272	.121		
	Total	39.771	279			
<i>To improve my skills</i>	Between Groups	3.442	7	.492	2.912*	.006
	Within Groups	45.930	272	.169		
	Total	49.371	279			

\*Significant at 5% level of significance

ANOVA Results for main reasons for enrolling at UniSA College by Enrolled Program show that the survey respondents selection of 'To see what university is like' (F = 1.784, P<0.080), 'To be guaranteed entry into a university degree' (F = 3.229,

P<0.002), ‘To prepare myself for the university’ (F = 2.786, P<0.006), and ‘To improve my skills’ (F = 1.771, P<0.100) differ significantly based on their enrolled program (Refer to Table 7). This means that participants’ enrolled program has played a significant role in selection of these four reasons as one of the top motivators for their enrolment at UniSA College.

**Table 7: ANOVA Results for main reasons for enrolling at UniSA College by enrolled program**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<i>To see what university is like</i>	Between Groups	2.469	8	.309	1.784*	.080
	Within Groups	46.902	271	.173		
	Total	49.371	279			
<i>To be guaranteed entry into a university degree</i>	Between Groups	5.954	8	.744	3.229*	.002
	Within Groups	62.471	271	.231		
	Total	68.425	279			
<i>To prepare myself for the university</i>	Between Groups	5.211	8	.651	2.786*	.006
	Within Groups	63.360	271	.234		
	Total	68.571	279			
<i>As a pathway to a university degree</i>	Between Groups	3.471	8	.434	1.771	.083
	Within Groups	66.401	271	.245		
	Total	69.871	279			

\*Significant at 5% level of significance

\*\*Significance at 10% level of significance

ANOVA Results for main reasons for enrolling at UniSA College by participants’ level of previous education show that respondents differ significantly in their selection of ‘Did not gain entry into a university program directly’ (F = 5.194, P< 0.000), ‘The program has no course fees’ (F = 3.725, P <0.003), ‘For the extra support’ (F = 2.579, P<0.038), and ‘Improved career opportunities’ (F = 2.395, P<0.038) as one of the top three reasons for their enrolment at UniSA College (Refer to Table 8). This means that participants’ previous educational attainment has played a significant role in selection of these reasons as one of top motivators for enrolling at UniSA College.



**Table 8: ANOVA results for main reasons for enrolling at UniSA College by level of previous education**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<i>Did not gain entry into a university program directly</i>	Between Groups	6.023	5	1.205	5.194*	.000
	Within Groups	63.545	274	.232		
	Total	69.568	279			
<i>The program has no course fees</i>	Between Groups	1.553	5	.311	3.725*	.003
	Within Groups	22.844	274	.083		
	Total	24.396	279			
<i>For the extra support</i>	Between Groups	1.476	5	.295	2.579*	.027
	Within Groups	31.367	274	.114		
	Total	32.843	279			
<i>Improved career opportunities</i>	Between Groups	1.665	5	.333	2.395*	.038
	Within Groups	38.106	274	.139		
	Total	39.771	279			

\*Significant at 5% level of significance

## Discussion

As can be seen from the results above a number of key motivating factors emerged from the responses of the survey. The most important factor appears to be ‘further educational aspirations’ as around half of all respondents had entered the College because they had not gained entry directly to a degree. These respondents saw the option of a pathway which offers a guaranteed entry to their degree as a prime motivator. The development of skills was also important as over 45% stated that they wished to use this opportunity to prepare themselves for university and 24% wanted to improve their skills. Gaining new experiences was identified by 24% of respondents who wanted to see what university was like, while 18.4% sought to improve their career opportunities. Finally gaining additional support was identified by 14.2% and 10.1% were motivated to enrol in the program based on price. Generally the motivating factors of educational and career aspirations, personal skill development and support and seeking new experiences support the findings of previous research. As noted earlier in this paper, seeking new experiences and developing a sense of accomplishment have been found in previous studies as important motivating factors for students to re-engage with studies.

However there were some significant differences between groups based on age, program enrolled and previous levels of education. When looking at age, the respondents that rated ‘did not gain entry to a university degree program’ higher, were predominantly those aged between 17 and 24 (55.25%). Conversely, those that rated more highly factors such as ‘to prepare myself for university’ and ‘to improve my skills’ were aged 25 and above. In fact around 75% of respondents aged 25 years and above rated needing preparation for university as a key motivating factor for enrolling

in their enabling program. A desire to improve career options was rated most often by those aged 36 years and older, while those aged between 25 to 35 years valued the fact that the program is free. This again is in line with previous research which has often found career aspirations and similar external motivating factors as important.

When looking at responses based on the type of program in which participants were enrolled there were also significant differences in some results. Not unexpectedly, those enrolled in a diploma program cited the main reason for enrolling was to seek a guaranteed entry pathway to a degree program. Those students who successfully complete the two year diploma are automatically offered a place in second year of a degree at the university. Those respondents enrolled in a Foundation Studies program were more likely to cite the desire 'to see what university is like' and 'to prepare myself for university' as main motivating factors. Again this notion of preparation and a way to try university in a supported environment, perhaps to negate a previous bad educational experience, are apparent with this cohort.

Finally the level of previous education was also a determining factor in identifying different motivations for undertaking an enabling program. Those that had completed Year 12 of high school or a Certificate from an RTO were most likely to cite 'did not gain entry to a degree' as the main motivator. This result is closely linked to the results above for 17-24 year old cohort. Those respondents who indicated they had only completed Year 11 of high school were significantly more likely to cite 'need for extra support' as a main motivator (33%). Those looking to improve career opportunities were more likely to have only completed Years 10 or 11 (27% and 33% respectively) or a Certificate III (26%).

Generally the results show that there is some differences in main motivating factors for individuals to attend a university pathway program. Those students who have recently completed Year 12 or a certificate from an RTO but have failed to gain entry directly to university see this pathway option as a viable way to achieve the goal of entering their degree program. Mature aged students aged 25 year and over or those who have not completed Year 12 are more likely to see the value of such pathway programs as offering a taste of university and a way to prepare themselves by developing new skills before they enter a degree program in the future. The results reported here support a number of previous research findings around the study of motivation for seeking further study experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This study has presented results from a survey conducted with 280 new students entering a university enabling pathway at the commencement of 2013. The results of the analyses show that there are many students who complete Year 12 but do not have the required scores to gain entry to university directly. However their desire to attend university appears to be strong as they are willing to take an additional year of study through an enabling program to gain a place in their desired degree. This demonstrates the need for such programs to cater for school leavers who have the aspirations to study for a degree at university but require additional opportunities to gain the required entry qualifications to do so.

Older students who are returning to study after some years see great benefits in having the additional support and the opportunity to develop the required skills to be successful that such programs offer. Universities that provide frameworks for skills development and a safe environment to experience a university study program should benefit from increased engagement with those in the community who wish to return to studies to improve their career opportunities.

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