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# Do potentially successful students in tertiary enabling programs have any common characteristics that underpin resilience and persistence? If so, how can this information help future enabling students?

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*There is a high attrition rate for students studying enabling courses that do not have academic entrance requirements. The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has an enabling tertiary preparation program (TPP) that has a large cohort of distance education students as well as a substantial on-campus cohort. Previous research has been done to establish why large numbers of students do not complete the enabling TPP programs. Most research has been impeded by the poor response rate to questionnaires presented particularly to students who have discontinued their studies. Once students have made up their mind to discontinue their studies, they have diminished interest in responding to research that reviews their attitude, motivation and their reasons to drop out of the program.*

*This research will investigate if there are any common characteristics that exemplify a successful student. Students who were successful in completing TPP were sent questionnaires that examined their attitude and motivation throughout the course to find out what characteristics made them more resilient and persistent compared to their less successful colleagues. The response rate of the completing students was much greater than the response rate of previous questionnaires that researched the attitudes and motivations of discontinuing students. It was anticipated that the findings of this research may be of interest to the TPP teaching staff and when developed may assist in the better management and support of future enabling students.*

The Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) is designed to prepare students from non-traditional pathways to succeed in undergraduate courses at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). If students are successful in this enabling program they are awarded direct entry into the majority of undergraduate programs. The program is comprised of three (3) units: Communication, Study Management and Mathematics. The main unit of study is Studying to Succeed (TPP7120) which encompasses both Communication and Study Management and the minor unit of study is an appropriate level of Mathematics. The TPP is a fee-free bridging program. Although these students are enrolled at the university, they are a group of students that are very different from students in the undergraduate programs (Bedford, 2007). Engaging these students and providing them with a rich educational experience is complex but pivotal for their success not only in TPP but also in their future undergraduate studies (Klinger & Wache, 2009).

The attrition rates for most enabling courses that do not have minimum academic entrance requirements are more than 50% (Bennett et al. 2012). When students were surveyed to find

out what caused so many to discontinue their studies, the response rate was very low (often less than 5%). Once students have made up their mind to discontinue their studies, they have diminished interest in responding to research that will review their attitude, motivation and their reasons to drop out of the program (Porter, 2004). The low return rates devalue the reliability of any conclusions or recommendations presented in the research.

To find out if potentially successful students in tertiary enabling programs have any common characteristics that underpin resilience and persistence, an online questionnaire was incorporated on the Moodle TPP7120 Study Desk (course website) during the last few weeks of the semester.

Previous research by the authors focussed on how to better engage students using online resources and whether this enhanced engagement was reflected in the final results and the rates of retention (Orth & Robinson, 2011). The research found that there were groups of students who did not significantly engage yet were still very successful in the program. Conceivably, there were other factors that contributed to student success. This research will investigate if there were any common characteristics that exemplify a successful student. The attitudes, motivations and the learning environments of successful TPP students were analysed to find out what possible characteristics may have helped them to be more resilient and persistent. Persistence research into undergraduate (Krause & Coates, 2008) and postgraduate programs (Carroll, Ng & Birch, 2013) have identified possible characteristics that warrant further investigation to ascertain whether students in enabling programs show similar characteristics.

## **Background, theory and literature review**

There are many fundamental differences between enabling students and traditional undergraduate students. These differences were highlighted by the authors in a previous paper (Orth & Robinson, 2011). Tertiary preparation students usually have less developed academic skills than their undergraduate colleagues and require generous support to complete their enabling courses successfully (Mehrotra, Hollister & MCGahey, 2001). Many TPP students have not completed their final year 12 of secondary education, with a significant percentage (approximately 30%) completing year 10 or less. Even the enabling students who have completed year 12, have usually selected a non-tertiary entrance pathway that would not have emphasized the academic skills essential for success at university (Bradley, Nguyen & Taylor, 2004). Enabling students may be less developed socially compared to main stream students (Hupfield, 2007). This lack of social development in academic and non-academic communication with their peers and teachers at a secondary educational level can extend into their tertiary enabling studies. Low self-confidence, lack of academic development and the inability to withstand the frustration of being new in an exceptionally different environment will influence student resilience and persistence (Tinto, 2002).

As the TPP is a fee free program, students enrol, not only with the confidence that if they pass TPP, they can enter university, but also with the knowledge that if they fail or drop out, there will be no fees to pay. This lack of financial penalty may not be an incentive to continue studying when the work becomes more complex or the assignment load too onerous. More than 50% of TPP students are under 30 years of age, have not been successful in a traditional secondary education, have yet to develop strong tertiary academic skills including good communication skills, have low academic self-efficacy and have yet to experience the rigours of fulltime work (Whannell, Whannell & Chambers, 2011). The differences outlined are reflected in the high attrition rates associated with enabling courses (Crosling et al., 2009).

Most research on attrition has considered first year undergraduate students (Holder, 2007) and indicates that the high attrition rates may be reduced if support is provided at a personal level as well as at an institutional level (Tinto, 1993). Some institutional programs that were considered to be important include: a comprehensive orientation that fosters interaction and collaboration between students and teaching staff, easily accessible information that encourages the use of student support services and provides sufficient information about campus activities, and the provision of introductory basic academic skills that new students require to succeed (Cao & Gabb, 2008). These programs did make a difference to the attrition rates of first year undergraduates (King, 2005).

Other research has focussed on personal characteristics. Student attitude (Cereijo, 2006), recent educational experience (Rovai, 2003), motivation (Holder, 2007), health (Stewart-Brown et al., 2000), the time available for study, the ability to organise (Macqueen, 1998), home-life complexities (Yum, Kember & Siaw, 2005), whether first student in family (Crosnoe, Mistry & Elder, 2002), self-efficacy (Zimmerman, Bonner & Kovach, 1996), connection with peers (Krause & Coates, 2008), confidence to solve personal and academic problems (Brooman & Darwent, 2012), initiative to become involved in non-academic university activities (Rau & Durand, 2000) and age (Rovai, 2003) were some of the personal characteristics that may have an effect on student persistence and resilience. The vulnerable, less academic enabling student may be less responsive to specialised support because they often have to cope or manage the negative aspects of more than one of these personal characteristics (Crosling et al., 2009).

### **Methodology into the research**

A questionnaire that consisted of 30 items was constructed and placed on the TPP7120 Study Desk for Semester 1, 2013. Several questions were closed and students had to choose the best response using a 5 point Likert scale. The responses ranged from Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. This scale was reduced to a simple 3 point scale to allow for easy comparison. The three (3) final questions were open ended and were included to allow the students to comment on any aspect that they thought was relevant to the research but had not been reviewed earlier in the questionnaire. These responses together with the responses from personal interviews will be evaluated in a future qualitative analysis to identify any recurring themes that might be relevant to the research.

Students were reminded by email and on the forum to complete the questionnaire. Students in Correctional Centres and students who did not have access to the TPP7120 Study Desk were therefore not included in this research.

As this questionnaire was not accessed by students that had already dropped out of the program, it is not possible to determine whether the characteristics shown by many of the successful students are not also evident in the unsuccessful student group. Therefore, this research is limited to the discussion of trends exhibited by successful students rather than trends over a broad range of TPP students.

### **Survey results**

The demographics of the respondents have been included to identify the nature of the students who completed TPP and to verify that they were generally successful students. There were 59 respondents to the questionnaire out of a possible 220 students who completed TPP. This is a healthy 27% response rate. The ratio of male to female respondents was 16 (27%) to

43 (73%) with the majority in the age range of 18 to 50 years as illustrated below in Table 1. Half of the respondents attended on-campus classes and 54% were the first in their family to study at university.

**Table 1: Student age range**

Under 18	18-25	26-35	36-49	50+
1	15	22	18	3

The final grades for the respondents are shown in Table 2. Students who were awarded an A or a HD were grouped as a “Distinction”. Students who were awarded a B or a C were grouped as a “Pass”. These groupings were organised in this way to simplify the analysis. The grades reflect that the majority of respondents completed the program successfully. In semester 1 2013, 61% of TPP7120 students who responded to the questionnaire were awarded a distinction compared to 24% of the total number of TPP7120 students who were awarded a distinction that semester. A significant number of students (22 or 37%) who achieved a distinction in TPP7120 also achieved a distinction in mathematics.

**Table 2: Respondents final grades achieved in TPP7120 and Mathematics course**

		Mathematics Grade			Total
		Fail	Pass	Distinction	
TPP7120 grade	Fail	1	3	0	4
	Pass	4	11	4	19
	Distinction	0	14	22	36
Total		5	28	26	59

Students were asked what grade they believed they might be awarded. As the questionnaire was usually completed in the final week of the course just before the exam, most students by then had a judicious opinion of their ability. Comparing students’ predicted grade against actual grade achieved for both TPP7120 and Mathematics, showed that predicted grades matched final results fairly closely with some students tending to underestimate their ability. These realistic expectations are illustrated in Table 3 and Table 4 below.

**Table 3: Predicted grade verses awarded grade for TPP7120**

		Predicted Grade for TPP7120			Total
		Fail	Pass	Distinction	
Awarded TPP7120 Grade	Fail	0	4	0	4
	Pass	2	16	1	19
	Distinction	0	20	16	36
Total		2	40	17	59

**Table 4: Predicted grade verses awarded grade for mathematics**

		Predicted Grade for Mathematics			Total
		Fail	Pass	Distinction	
Awarded Mathematics Grade	Fail	1	4	0	5
	Pass	3	21	4	28
	Distinction	1	6	19	26
Total		5	31	23	59

The information in Tables 3 and 4 together with the responses in Tables 5 and 6 indicate that these students had strong self-confidence when compared with many students in enabling programs or in their first year of university (Krause & Coates, 2008). Most respondents indicated that they possessed sound reading skills but were less confident with their mathematics ability prior to the commencement of the course.

**Table 5: Individual evaluation of English reading ability when starting the course**

Very Good	Good	Average	Weak	Very Weak
41%	37%	15%	4%	3%

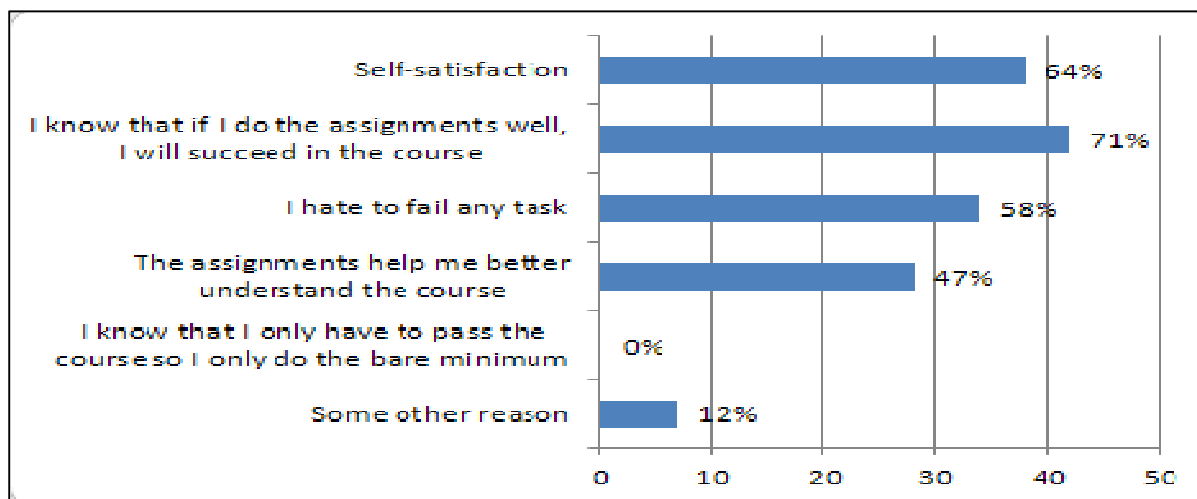
**Table 6: Individual evaluation of mathematics ability when starting the course**

Very Good	Good	Average	Weak	Very Weak
7%	24%	40%	22%	7%

Table 7 indicates that 75% of students considered themselves to be strongly motivated to succeed in their studies while Figure 1 shows the primary motivation to achieve high grades in TPP assignments.

**Table 7: Individual evaluation of level of motivation to succeed in TPP**

Very Strong	Strong	Average	Weak	Very Weak
31%	44%	25%	0%	0%



**Figure 1: Individual evaluation of motivation to achieve high grades in assignments**

The majority of the respondents had decided on their future career and knew which undergraduate degree they wanted to enrol in upon completion of the TPP. This information is illustrated in Table 8. This knowledge would focus their motivation and complement their determination to succeed.

**Table 8: Knew the future undergraduate course required for chosen career before starting TPP**

Very sure	Had several viable options	No not sure	No idea
49%	44%	4%	3%

The recommended time needed to study both TPP7120 and Mathematics is 20-25 hours per week. There was no observable relationship between hours spent studying TPP and the awarded grade for this successful group of students.

**Table 9: Hours studied and awarded grade for TPP7120**

		Hours study per week for both courses						Total
		<8	8-13	13-18	18-23	23-28	>28	
<b>TPP7120 Result</b>	<b>Fail</b>	0	2	0	2	0	0	4
	<b>Pass</b>	0	7	5	5	2	0	19
	<b>Distinction</b>	2	5	8	9	6	6	36
<b>Total</b>		2	14	13	16	8	6	59

**Table 10: Hours studied and awarded grade for mathematics**

		Hours study per week for both courses						Total
		<8	8-13	13-18	18-23	23-28	>28	
<b>Mathematics Result</b>	<b>Fail</b>	0	1	2	1	1	0	5
	<b>Pass</b>	0	9	6	9	2	2	28
	<b>Distinction</b>	2	4	5	6	5	4	26
<b>Total</b>		2	14	13	16	8	6	59

Students who had internet access were encouraged to visit the Study Desk several times a week. Although accessing the Study Desk may not measure deep engagement, it does indicate that the student has been present and that there is potential to engage. Table 11 illustrates that all of the respondents regularly accessed the Study Desk. Table 12 demonstrates that a significant number of students (36%) preferred not to make any comment on the forum with 70% making 3 comments or less throughout the semester. Although there was no obvious relationship between either student activity on the Study Desk or the number of forum comments made with the grade awarded at the end of the semester, it was evident that these students endeavoured to be well informed on course matters throughout the semester.

**Table 11: Number of times per week that students accessed the Study Desk**

never	1-5	6-10	11-25	More than 25
0%	39%	29%	29%	3%

**Table 12: Number of comments students made on the TPP7120 or Mathematics Forum per semester**

0	1-3	4-6	7-8	9-11	12 or more
36%	34%	14%	3%	3%	10%

TPP has not provided the paper study materials for TPP7120 and Mathematics for several semesters. Students who have difficulties when studying from the electronic medium can



request the paper study materials. Table 13 shows that 68% of respondents requested the paper study materials for both TPP7120 and Mathematics. This high demand for the paper study materials suggests that successful students recognise what they need to succeed and are prepared to follow up by requesting or printing the paper materials.

**Table 13: Student requests for the paper study materials**

none	requested both sets	Maths only	TPP7120 only
20%	68%	9%	3%

Successful students usually find academic or emotional support from family and friends (Crosnoe et al., 2002). As illustrated in Table 14, more than 70% of respondents indicated that there were at least 2 significant people with whom they could discuss the course or obtain help in order to complete the course successfully.

Response to the open-ended question “What would you say were the two most important reasons, thoughts, supports etc. that helped you survive and complete TPP?” indicated that family, friends and TPP staff (44%) were their greatest support with 46% stating that self-determination/discipline was a major factor. Some 13% of students claimed both of these factors as contributors. The majority of respondents (73%) indicated that they had personally contacted the TPP lecturers or support staff at least twice during the semester.

**Table 14: Number of friends or family that provided either academic or emotional support during the semester**

none	1	2	3	>3
7%	22%	34%	20%	17%

The analysis of the open-ended question “What were the greatest challenges to completing TPP?” revealed that 28 (47%) found managing their study time with family commitments to be their greatest challenge.

Chi-square tests were performed to measure the relationship between the grade achieved in both TPP7120 and mathematics against several of the responses to the questionnaire. Due to the small number of respondents that have not passed either TPP7120 or mathematics the Chi-square tests were not reliable. Generally, there was no observable relationship between grades achieved and any particular characteristic. However the contingency tables indicated that males were more likely to do better at mathematics, students with a positive attitude towards mathematics were more likely to achieve a distinction, and older students achieved better grades for TPP7120 than younger students.

Some 24% of students had studied at another institution in the last 12 months with more than 67% of students studying in the last 10 years. No significant relationship was evident between the grade awarded and how recently the students had studied.

A small percentage (19%) indicated that they had been involved in university activities that were not related to their classes and course work while 42% indicated that although they were on campus and could have become involved, they chose not to. The remaining 39% indicated that as external students they had no opportunity to become involved. Consequently, no

significant relationship was evident between involvement in other university activities and awarded grades.

## Discussion

The students who responded to the questionnaire were more persistent, resilient and successful than the whole cohort of TPP students for the semester. They exhibited a range of characteristics that may have contributed to their success. These attributes are articulated below.

- Strong motivation and self-determination demonstrated by the positive responses tabulated in Table 7 and Figure 1.
- Preparedness to allocate an appropriate amount of study time evident in their acknowledgement of the challenge of time management.
- Confidence that they will succeed, confirmed by their ability to accurately predict their final grades and their credible perceptions of their reading and mathematics ability at the start of the course.
- Acknowledgement that the support of family, friends and academic staff was one of the major contributing factors to their successful completion of the course. This was apparent in Table 14 where more than 70% of respondents indicated that there were at least 2 significant people with whom they could discuss the course or obtain help from in order to successfully complete their course (Krause & Coates, 2008).
- Awareness of a specific future career path or several viable course options before they had started TPP. Having a realistic career goal was a driving force that focused their motivation and determination to succeed. The majority of respondents (93%) had articulated one or two specific career paths they might pursue before they entered TPP. Many students expressed dissatisfaction with their present prospects and perceived that TPP provided a real opportunity to improve the probabilities of a more rewarding job and an enhanced quality of life.
- The capacity to be independent by recognising problems and forming a strategy to solve or manage the problem or potential problem. This was evident when they made conscious decisions to regularly access the Study Desk resources, to acquire the paper study materials, to make contact with lecturers when necessary and to better manage their time despite acknowledgement that time management was one of their greatest challenges.

These skills may be just as influential to successful course completion as the typical academic skills that most enabling and undergraduate courses provide. If the course planners acknowledge the importance of including activities to develop these attributes, difficult decisions based on pedagogy, resources, the nature of the student cohort and the time available to teach the course, will need to be made.

As the TPP is open to all mature aged students, without any required prerequisites, there is a high attrition rate. Whilst many students decide not to complete the program due to personal reasons, this may still leave them with feelings of inadequacy and disappointment. It would also reflect badly on their academic record if they fail to officially withdraw from the

program in time. Early intervention in the form of self-reflection as to whether the student has a sufficient support network, has adequate time to study, has managed to determine where to find basic academic support and whether they have the confidence to access this support when needed, should result in certain students taking the step to delay their studies to a later date instead of enrolling and then discontinuing their studies. To defer rather than to fail may be a better outcome for many students.

Older students tended to achieve better grades than younger students. Greater determination and motivation combined with superior problem solving skills and time management skills are often strong attributes in mature aged students (Pincas, 2007).

Some factors relating to retention that were discussed in other research were not supported by this research:

- Although 54% of respondents were the first in the family to study at university, no significant relationship was evident between first in family and the awarded grade. This may be explained by the fact that most of these students are adults and no longer reside with their parents or siblings. They would have made an independent decision to study TPP not directly influenced by their parent's attitudes or perceptions.
- No significant relationship was evident between involvement in non-academic university activities and the awarded grade. Further research is necessary to evaluate whether students who participated in non-academic activities believed that their involvement contributed to their resilience in TPP.

A critical component that was frequently mentioned in the qualitative responses was the strong support provided by the TPP staff. Students were appreciative of the academic and personal support given by staff, the delivery of clear and consistent academic and institutional information and the provision of a nurturing educational environment. Tinto (2002) described these conditions as essential components for student persistence and resilience.

As the questionnaire only targeted students who were completing the TPP, it cannot be concluded that students who do not complete the program exhibit opposing characteristics. However, the group trends as well as the open ended responses suggest that many of these characteristics have a positive effect on a student's ability to succeed.

## **Conclusions**

Most successful students in this study demonstrated specific characteristics that nurture persistence and resilience. These characteristics include strong motivation, determination, adequate foundation academic skills, confidence, an accurate assessment of ability, independent learning skills, problem solving skills, a definite career path, self-efficacy, access to genuine support, consistent engagement with the course, robust time management skills and a positive attitude towards their lecturers, course and university. Many students would possess several of these skills prior to entering the TPP. The TPP has the opportunity to develop these important skills in every student by providing specialised content, focussed activities, genuine reflection and the appropriate support.

An alternative perspective would be to encourage prospective students to reflect on the specific characteristics that many successful students possess and realistically evaluate their chances of success at university given their present circumstances and personal attitudes. It

may be more appropriate to defer their studies to a later date when they have better developed some of the characteristics discussed in this research or when their lives have become more amenable to successful tertiary study.

These successful students were aware of the services and support provided by the lecturers and TPP staff and made use of these services. The majority of respondents indicated that the members of staff were very supportive.

## Recommendations

This research has revealed personal attributes that promise success in enabling education. Creating activities that promote the development of these attributes may be just as influential to successful course completion as the typical academic skills that most courses provide. Key attributes highlighted in this report that could be developed include personal motivation, self-efficacy, time management skills, problem solving skills and consideration of a viable career path.

Opportunities will need to be created for potential students to realistically assess the likelihood of success by comparing their current skills and circumstance with those outlined in the discussion above. In certain cases it may be more appropriate to defer studies. This plan of action may not be compatible with the retention strategies of the university but it may be more beneficial for the prospective student.

Successful students generally have a positive relationship with the lecturers and the TPP support staff. Proactive structures and processes must be instilled into the course so as to support, maintain and grow this productive and supportive relationship between staff and students.

Further qualitative analysis of the personal comments made by the respondents as well as structured personal interviews with these students some 6-12 months into their undergraduate studies may substantiate the outcomes of this research.

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