

## EVALUATION REPORT

“Enabling retention: processes and strategies for improving student retention in University-based Enabling Programs” CG10-1697

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### **1. Project aims**

The project aims were clearly defined and it was evident that they guided the design and conduct of the project throughout, as follows:

1. Investigate the nature and patterns of student attrition across the programs of the five participating institutions to compare attrition patterns from each and identify systemic similarities and differences to patterns of student attrition in undergraduate degree programs;
2. Develop a suite of appropriately targeted evidence-based intervention strategies to improve student retention rates in university-based enabling programs on the basis of the information obtained from our investigation;
3. Develop guidelines of best practice to accompany the suite of strategies;
4. Effectively disseminate the strategies and guidelines for their use nationally and internationally.

As the project unfolded it became clear that an additional outcome which would support the ongoing achievement of the second, third and fourth aims was the establishment and ongoing evolution of a community of practice amongst enabling educators across Australia. This outcome could well be considered an additional, fifth aim of the project given its significance in terms of stimulating the further development and ongoing refinement of effective intervention strategies to enhance retention and completion amongst enabling education students. It also addresses one of the project’s key findings relating to the paucity of research in this area and the need for greater recognition of the significance of enabling education and enabling educators across the sector.

### **2. Evaluation process**

The external monitoring and evaluation of the project was planned to occur at three distinct mile stones, as outlined in the project application:

1. By means of examination of and commentary on relevant documentation communicated to the evaluator electronically at the end of Phase Two. It was expected at this point that: all of the student surveys would have been administered and all of the resulting data would have been centrally collated and distributed to the Project Team; the development of the intervention strategies to improve retention and completion would have commenced; and dissemination would be underway by means of at least one conference presentation and submission of at least two articles to relevant journals for publication.
2. Attendance at the Showcase Event planned for July 2012 in order to contribute to analysis and commentary on the project findings and future activities in response to presentations by team members of findings and outcomes to that date.

3. As in (1) above, review and analysis of all relevant documentation available at the end of Phase 4, by which time it was expected that the suite of evidence-based intervention strategies and related guidelines would have been developed; and that widespread dissemination of this aspect of the project's expected outcomes would be well underway by means of the project's website, newsletters, regional workshops including at non-participating institutions, delivery of conference papers and submission of journal articles.

### **2.1 Overall approach**

The evaluation methodology was planned from its inception as predominantly formative. Such an approach more likely to increase the relevance and usefulness of the evaluator's contribution, an ongoing contribution rather than an end-of-project summative judgment having the potential to enhance the processes and outcomes of the project. In addition, in maximizing the potential for project learning throughout its lifespan, such an approach to evaluation was more appropriate to a Teaching and Learning project.

### **2.2 Timing**

As outlined in the application and summarized above, the evaluative process was not programmed to commence until the end of Phase 2 of the project at which time it was expected that all the questionnaires would have been administered and all data collected and centrally collated. Regrettably this timing did not allow for involvement in or contribution to the project design in either its research or administrative aspects. The overall evaluation would have been more comprehensive and its value to the project enhanced by earlier involvement, when advice could have been given about various matters, most particularly the necessity to make provision in the budget for project management and a few key elements of the research design briefly mentioned below. Attendance at the Project Planning meeting in October 2010 would have been useful, another opportunity to raise the issue of project manager with the whole research team in order to explore solutions which at that stage might have been achievable. Further, the opportunity to meet every member of the team, and to engage in preliminary face-to-face discussions would have been very useful in terms of clarification of the research design and its intentions and to ensuring shared understandings. It would also have provided a firm foundation for communications thereafter which, except for the Showcase events in August 2012, were necessarily exclusively electronic or by telephone. Evaluative involvement not having been envisaged at the design or early planning stages, the appointment of the external evaluator occurred on time in late October 2011 as specified in the project timetable set out in the application.

### **2.3 Evaluator's involvement/input**

The conduct of the formative evaluation occurred throughout the life of the project, although commencing rather later than ideal as noted above. The openness of communication and preparedness to include the evaluator throughout, rather than this being confined to specific and necessarily limited points of the project, underpinned the effectiveness of this process. Timely evaluative input, albeit almost entirely electronically communicated, was facilitated by inclusion in the flow of documentation and ongoing discussions between the Research Team members, about the processes of the project, the management of the unexpected practical difficulties encountered, and importantly, the interpretation of data as this emerged.

The resulting iterative character of the monitoring and formative evaluation methodology was crucial to its effectiveness and to implementing the evaluator's intention that her evaluative input would be of value to the project. It enabled on-going, timely input, based on a deeper understanding of the project objectives, an appreciation of the significance and unavoidability of the practical challenges faced, and the implications of emerging outcomes. The nature of this involvement would have been impossible without mutual trust, respect, good will and the shared sense of purpose which developed between those engaged in the project's conduct. All of the latter were tested by the practical difficulties faced due to the absence of a project manager, and stretched by the disruption and significant delays caused by changes to the programs and key personnel experienced in three of the five partner institutions. Nevertheless the inclusive communication process survived these major and potentially destructive obstacles. As a result, and through this process, the evaluator was able to interrogate with a view to clarifying draft documentation and to make suggestions about the interpretation and analysis of findings as well as providing additional references deemed useful for illuminating the context of the research. This methodology continued to be the dominant mode of engagement and contribution for the evaluator, effective throughout the entire life of the project. It proved to be particularly valuable at intensive periods such as the analysis of findings and drafting of the final research report, during which the Research Team used an iterative, inclusive process offering useful opportunities for contributions by the evaluator.

There were three notable departures from this methodology when the evaluator was able to engage in a face-to-face rather than virtual mode. The first of these, the Showcase event held in Sydney in August 2012, was crucial as the only face-to-face team meeting involving the external evaluator. It was also invaluable as an opportunity for intensive engagement by the evaluator with the findings to date, their analysis, the distillation of indicative outcomes, and plans for the future conduct of the project. The evaluator subsequently provided notes to the Team of her contribution to and further thoughts on the discussion at this occasion (see End Note1). The Showcase event also provided a very timely introduction to the Research Team and to the project itself for the newest Edith Cowan representative, John O'Rourke, who was faced with the challenge of taking over responsibility from a series of previous and often short-lived institutional representatives. The comprehensive induction to the conduct of the project and discussion of its findings to that point in time clearly provided an invaluable springboard into the project for the newest member of the Team. This opportunity to meet face-to-face also provided a firm foundation for the future reliance on electronic and occasional teleconferencing communications between members of the Research Team. Both these outcomes were critical as well as extremely timely given the intensive period of iterative analysis and report writing which was to follow the Showcase event in the concluding months of the project.

The second and third departures from the overall reliance on the formative evaluative contribution being reliant upon the Research Team's iterative, inclusive electronic communication processes were also important for the effectiveness of the evaluation process. These departures occurred through the evaluator attending the two regional Tasmanian workshops held in Hobart and Launceston on 8th and 9th of November 2012 respectively. The evaluator was a full participant rather than a remote observer at these occasions, enabling active engagement with the stimulating

and generative discussions following presentations by the Team Leader. Topics and issues canvassed focused most especially on the project's early findings and their implications to that point, including comparison with any available relevant Tasmanian data and experiences, both anecdotal and evidence-based; an exploration of relevant intervention strategies suggested in response to these findings and sharing of effective processes and approaches to enhancing engagement, retention and completion between the enabling educators present; and, for the evaluator especially, an opportunity to make suggestions with a view to enhancing the relevance and analytical strength of future workshop presentations. Once again, follow-up notes were provided by the evaluator to the Research Team (see End Note2) as a contribution to the refinement of future workshop presentations. These notes were especially focused on the analysis of findings and identification of their implications which characterized this phase of the project, intended as a useful contribution to the ongoing evolution of the Team's shared understandings of these findings and their implications as well as their distillation, the latter being critical for the drafting of final research report and the Team's expected individual and collaborative contributions to the relevant literature.

The two Tasmanian workshops which the evaluator attended were only the second and third of what turned out to be a very active, well attended and unexpectedly full program of regional workshops, a program which is to this date still ongoing with several planned well beyond the life of the funded project. As a result of the timing of the Tasmanian workshops, this early and formative feedback was in time to be useful to the series of subsequent and future regional presentations by the Team Leader. Timely circulation of electronic copies of the Team Leader's continuously refined presentations to this series of workshops became a useful mechanism at a crucial stage of the project. Each refreshed presentation necessitated the gathering together and updating of the findings, still emerging at this late stage due to the practical difficulties in administering the questionnaires at three and to some extent four of the institutions. This sharing of the presentations, across the Research Team and with the external evaluator, was especially useful in terms of keeping track of and contributing to evolving understandings about what was being learnt, the interpretation and analysis of findings, the identification of intervention strategies, and the generation of other outcomes, most significantly the potential to establish a community of practice. It was also a timely and effective mechanism for contributing to the distillation of all of the above. Involvement with the early part of the process of drafting the final research report, through circulation of electronic drafts and participation in Research Team teleconferences provided another important such opportunity.

### **3. Evaluative commentary**

#### **3.1 Research design**

**Timeframe:** The size of the project was both a tremendous strength in terms of the project's potential value and the implications of its findings to the sector and individual institutions, and also an issue for the overall research design and its subsequent management. More time was required than anticipated given the sheer size of the task, and the processes required for the data to be gathered from each of the five participating institutions, and then centrally collated, distilled and analysed made the timeframe as envisaged unrealistic. The timeline should have been longer, even without the series of disruptions and interruptions caused by program and

personnel changes in three of the five institutions (the impact of which is further noted below under the heading of Project Management). These extent and impact of these changes were certainly out of the ordinary and had an accumulative impact which could not have been foreseen. Nevertheless some such program and personnel changes, although more modest, could have been anticipated given the nature of enabling education and the level of churn within it, and given the project's widely flung institutional focus.

Of greater significance for the timeline is that key outcomes anticipated from the project, each potentially of significant value to the sector and individual institutions, depended upon and could not realistically be generated until after the completion of the processes of data collection, analysis and distillation of findings. Thus the dissemination of these findings underpinned the series of regional workshops and other processes envisaged to generate engagement with the project's implications, the identification of evidence-based intervention strategies, and the generation of an ongoing and sustainable community of practice. It is certainly the case that relevant and highly engaging workshops were run by the Team Leader despite these being reliant upon early, indicative and limited results which had been only partially analysed, and so were suggestive rather than definitive of findings.

It is also true that the generation and distillation of the findings was unexpectedly delayed by the series of institutional disruptions suffered by the project. But even without these disruptions and delays, the period allocated for the generation of these tangible and potentially enduring, far-reaching outcomes was insufficient, certainly by several months and perhaps even by a year. Had such an extended timeframe been built into the project's design, the Team would have had time and opportunity to generate much more widespread interest in and contribution to the analysis of the project's findings and their implications. It would also have enabled the generation of intervention strategies firmly based on these findings by means of a series of newsletters, a regularly updated website, and ongoing and more comprehensively informed regional workshops. Further, given sufficient time, the insights, intervention strategies and other outcomes from these discussions could have been disseminated across an ever-widening network, composed of enabling educator practitioners in higher education and other tertiary institutions, researchers in enabling education and related fields, educational policy analysts, equity practitioners and theorists, and other stakeholders who together could have formed the basis for a solid, enduring and widely flung community of practice.

Project manager: The nature and size of this project dictated the need for a dedicated project manager. The failure to provide for one at the design and planning stage was the single most inhibiting factor in its conduct, both in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of project management overall and its leadership and outcomes. In the absence of a project manager, the Team Leader's time and attention was necessarily taken away from research leadership to undertake the multitude of tasks which should have more appropriately been undertaken by a project manager. Many significant logistical and communication challenges arose from the size of the project, most of all the number of institutions involved, their geographic spread and the institutional variations in program design and administrative procedures. Additional logistical and communication challenges arose from the collaborative and iterative nature of the project's conduct, the extensive span of its stakeholders, and

its reliance on a range of communication technologies both to manage the project and to achieve its expected outcomes – primarily email, teleconferencing, website development and update, and dissemination through production and the widespread distribution of e-newsletters. All of the above required a high level of coordination, often intensive and quite complex communication processes, as well as promptness and efficiency of administrative procedures, all of which would have more satisfactorily been achieved with a dedicated project manager. The impact of this for the project overall is further covered under the heading of Project Management below.

Research-related design issues: Since the overall intentions and primary objectives of the research were very clear from the outset, they were well embedded in the research design: viz to identify and better understand the patterns of attrition characteristic of enabling education programs, to identify factors which contribute to retention and completion, to generate a series of effective and evidence-based intervention strategies supported by guidelines of best practice, and to establish and support the ongoing development of a community of practice which would, amongst other benefits, generate more such strategies and refine them over time. While the last of these objectives was not specified in the original statement of aims, it emerged during the course of the project as both significant for the project aims and relevant to the sustainability of the project's focus and outcomes over time. All of the objectives, including this additional one, have an underlying primary objective of improving access to the benefits of higher education for an increasing number and wider range of members of the Australian community, including and especially for those for whom this has not been a realistic or relevant option, by means of increasing the effectiveness and positive impact of enabling education pathways into award level programs.

The intentions and nature of the expected findings from the student Study Process Questionnaires (SPQ) do not initially appear to relate to the fundamental aims of the project, especially in terms of elucidating what contributes to and counteracts the high rates of enabling students' attrition. Had the evaluator been appointed in time to contribute to the research design this would have been interrogated further to ensure the time and resources devoted to this element of the research data collection was justified in terms of the project's aims. Following some discussion of this element with team members, it seems there is some likelihood that the findings from the SPQ may contribute insights into the relationship between enabling students' study motives and strategies and the likelihood of attrition or completion. Since these insights are not apparent at the time of writing this report, the efficacy of the inclusion of the SPQ in terms of research design and aims will only become clear from the section of the final report covering this element. In addition, there is confidence amongst those most familiar with this field that the findings from the SPQ will make a useful contribution to the wider literature in this area. The latter potential outcome from the SPQ is outside the timeframe for the evaluation as this aspect of its impact can only become apparent over time. However assuming this expectation is fulfilled, the inclusion of the SPQ would have been justified on this basis alone.

The remaining student questionnaires were well designed given their intention. However perhaps the issue of whether or not to sample the student cohorts could have been considered at the research design stage, given the size of the project,

particularly the size of the cohorts at the University of Newcastle, and the impact of this in terms of the time and resources required for data gathering, compilation and analysis. Even if this had been considered, given the dearth of research in Australian enabling education, it is likely that the significance of the full data set for the sector, for the literature as well as for the project might have outweighed the savings of time and resources which sampling would have achieved.

As the research proceeded, it became clear that the institutional variations in program design and procedures would cause ongoing difficulties for the project in terms of the comparability of data. Since this could have been anticipated, consideration at the research design stage might have been useful, although in the absence of strictly comparable data, the broad pictures and patterns of attrition, retention and completion obtained are nevertheless useful and suggestive of underlying causes and solutions. While much of the research design was based firmly and appropriately on an earlier study at the University of Newcastle, more use could perhaps have been made of internal institutional research into retention and attrition within enabling programs at the other participating institutions. For example, the University of Southern Queensland has been conducting such internal investigations for some years with insights gained from these influencing the design and delivery of its enabling programs. Finally earlier design consideration could have been given to the approach which would be taken to mapping of the qualitative and quantitative data collected by the project to facilitate interpretation and analysis related to the project's aims. While this was achieved quite satisfactorily in the later stages of the project, earlier consideration might have saved time and better informed the overall methodology adopted.

### **3.2 Project management**

The size and nature of project threw up a range of practical challenges including:

- the number of institutions involved;
- and their geographic spread;
- variations in program design, including entry requirements, modes of delivery, record keeping protocols, and definitions;
- wide institutional differences in terms of lines of authority and senior level responsibility for enabling education, financial authorizations, administrative requirements etc causing time consuming processes within and between participating institutions;
- significant changes to program design and structure, including turn-over of key personnel involved in the research, at three of the five partner institutions;
- insufficient timeframe for the entire project, exacerbated by these changes causing (amongst other issues) contraction of the later stages of the project essential to the achievement of key deliverables ;
- double role of the Research Leader who necessarily assumed responsibility for the time-consuming role of project manager as well as leading the research;
- lack of clarity about financial requirements most notably the Multi-Institutional Agreement (MIA) and different requirements for this to be finalized across the institutions;
- significant outcomes, most notably the identification of intervention strategies, development of best practice guidelines, establishment of a

community of practice, would ideally have been pursued towards the end of the project when all findings had been distilled and analysed. In the event, these important outcomes had to be pursued simultaneously rather than after the finalization of the findings, which compressed the time available for engagement and discussion between the Team and wider interest group;

- editing complications caused by the grant authority editorial guidelines allowing for a range of approaches to referencing according to institutional practice and preferences.

Mention has already been made to the problems caused for the project due to the absence of a dedicated project manager. Even on a part-time basis, a project manager could have held together the multiple communication threads, performed the range of reporting and compliance tasks, attended to the large administrative task involved in printing, distributing, collecting and collating the data returns from each of the institutions, identified the correct channels and personnel to streamline intra-institutional returns to the project, speedier replacement of personnel lost to the Project Team and maintained an effective contact point within each participating institution throughout and despite other changes.

The size of the project and especially its multi-institutional focus meant that the Team Leader was taken away far too often from his primary responsibilities for the conduct and leadership of the research, including the type and frequency of communications required to maximize each Project Team member's effective involvement and contribution. The multiple variations between institutions in program design and in internal protocols and procedures, especially for data collection and financial management, added to this problem. And the severe disruptions caused by significant personnel and program changes at three of the five institutions (UNE, UniSA and ECU) made project management many times more complex and time consuming. While these issues would have caused difficulties and challenges regardless of the appointment of a project manager, they could have been dealt with in a more timely manner and with much less disruption to the overall research project had it been possible to provide for this role.

Other complexities and challenges were compounded by, for example, delays in the provision of student questionnaires caused by administrative hitches which, with more dedicated administrative and project management support, could have been avoided. At certain stages of the project, the accumulated impact of these problems were such that serious consideration could perhaps have been given to reducing the number of participating institutions. Nevertheless, as with the question of sampling, the value to the sector of the project's findings from such a widely dispersed set of institutions almost certainly outweighs the administrative efficiencies which could have been achieved by such a decision.

The sector encourages collaborative research involving several institutions, and values the impact of such inter-institutional cooperation in terms of enhanced teaching and learning outcomes. Given the many administrative, communication and procedural challenges arising from projects involving more than one institution, consideration should be given at the national level to the development of processes, pro formas and protocols to simplify, streamline and achieve consistency across participating institutions with respect to grant-related administrative and financial requirements. In addition, budgetary provision for the appointment of a project



manager should be a requirement for such inter-institutional grants except in rare and carefully considered circumstances.

The fact that a significant amount of the Team Leader's time and attention was necessarily taken away from his core role in terms of research leadership, in particular in ensuring the productive involvement and effective and timely communication with all Team Members, could have seriously endangered the overall conduct of the research and its outcomes. That it did not do so was a result of the extraordinary efforts made by all members of the Team and most especially by the Team Leader, but at an unreasonable personal and professional cost. The significance and beneficial impact of the Team Leader's consistently inclusive communication strategies has already been mentioned above. This almost certainly mitigated against the potentially destructive impact on the conduct of the project of the practical project management difficulties faced by the Team and the Team Leader. Ensuring the efficient and comprehensive provision of all relevant initial documentation in electronic format to all Team Members, the productive flow of subsequent documentation, including the Team Leader's workshop presentations, the circulation of early drafts of all key documents to maximize consultative input, and the series of teleconferences in the later stages of the project strengthened Team cohesion and ensured effective contributions to the analysis of the findings and their implications.

### **3.3 Departures from planned processes**

The administration of the series of student questionnaires in three of the five institutions was unavoidably disrupted and significantly delayed, in several instances for a year, by the unexpected changes to programs and personnel noted above. In addition, administration of the Concluding Questionnaire proved impossible at UniSA and the return rate was very poor at the USQ, as already reported and explained by the Team Leader. The value and relevance of the data which was eventually collected was not reduced by these delays. However the collation of data from the entire institutional set, its final and comprehensive analysis, and hence the distillation of the project's complete findings was necessarily delayed as well. The comparison of data across institutions and analysis of their implications would clearly have been undertaken much earlier had not the delays prevented this, allowing more time for discussion and further development of shared insights and understandings.

The negative impact of this process limitation was counteracted by the Team Leader's effective strategy of sharing his evolving workshop presentations to explore early thoughts about the project's findings and to suggest some of their implications. This engaged Team Members in a productive and iterative process to discuss findings and further develop insights based on data available to that date, analysis which was tested and refined as further data emerged. While the final analysis of findings following the completion of all data collation was necessarily contracted, the introduction of this early analysis and iterative process meant that the Research Team had by then already developed some shared understandings of what the data was indicating. Since the data collection and collation delay significantly reduced the time available for identifying the project's findings and exploring their implications, the Team was under pressure during these final and important stages of the project. However the fact that this early consideration and initial discussion had already occurred greatly assisted the Team to agree much more speedily than would

otherwise have been possible on the final analysis of findings and identification of their implications.

The development and regular updating of a project website and the production and distribution of a series of newsletters to interested stakeholders were envisaged in the project plan as important tools for both the dissemination of findings and the identification and refinement of intervention strategies. The development of the project website was undertaken in mid 2012, a year later than planned due to the institutional disruptions and delays to data collection already noted. It went live in late 2012 and has had only minor updating attention since then due to the other pressures on the Team during the final months of the extended project timeframe. The first newsletter was on the cusp of finalization a little after the launch of the website, but the Team decided not to proceed with its production and distribution. By late 2012 it was evident that the successful conduct of the initial regional workshops and initiation of an expanded series of subsequent workshops would more effectively achieve all that had been envisaged for the newsletters; that is, in terms of generating interest in the issues being explored by the project, engaging a wider community of practice in the analysis of its findings and in identifying their implications, both for individual institutions and for the sector more widely, and the generation of effective intervention strategies and principles of best practice in this field. Both strategies, the website and the generation of newsletters, may well be revisited if they are deemed effective supports for further dissemination activities beyond the funded life of the project, and for the generation and maintenance of an active enabling educators' community of practice.

The dissemination of findings by means of conference presentations and publication of articles was similarly and understandably delayed by the delay in the collection, collation and analysis of data. Nevertheless the Research Team delivered a paper and ran a workshop at the biennial New Zealand conference of enabling educators held in Auckland in early December 2012. And before the full commencement of the project, in September and October 2010, the Team Leader had already generated some international interest in its research objectives through a series of presentations in the United Kingdom. This interest was further widened with two more such presentations in June 2011, in Dublin and at the 20<sup>th</sup> annual conference of European Access Network (EAN) held in Amsterdam. It can also be assumed that this initial international interest could be further strengthened through subsequent publications upon completion of the project findings, and perhaps through subsequent updating of the website. Such further activities will be important in sustaining the project's objectives and outcomes over time, most importantly the identification and dissemination of effective intervention strategies, the development and refinement of principles of best practice in enabling education, and the establishment, maintenance and growth over time of a robust community of practice amongst enabling educators across the Australian higher education sector and beyond, most especially in New Zealand. Finally the recent launch of a national Australian association of enabling educators and the biennial national conference of enabling educators to be held in Newcastle in November of this year will each offer important opportunities for further strengthening the viability and widening the applicability of these project outcomes.

#### **4. Findings**

4.1 The Research Team's detailed analysis of the total data collection was occurring as this report was being prepared. It is not therefore possible to comment on data-derived findings beyond the broad patterns already evident at various stages of the project, and as distilled by the Team Leader in workshops presentations. Even with respect to these broad patterns, caveats are required due to definitional inconsistency across institutions, significant variations in core elements of programs such as entry requirements, mode of delivery and design, and large variations in rates of returns both between institutions and across the various questionnaires. Nevertheless the broad patterns observable with respect to persistence/non-persistence and various demographic characteristics are sufficiently marked to be of interest within participating institutions and across the sector. As an example, whether or not students are from a Low SES background seems to be of little relevance to whether or not they persist, whereas their age, the length of time since they last studied and whether or not they are the first in their family to undertake higher education all do appear to be relevant factors. Further research is required to determine whether or not such characteristics of themselves have an impact in terms of persistence/non-persistence or whether they are likely indicators of other factors more directly relevant to non-persistence, such as time pressures, lack of confidence, and students not feeling they belong, all of which could well undermine their engagement with their studies. Nevertheless, and even without the benefit of the completed data analysis, the project has met its first aim in elucidating the nature and patterns of student attrition in enabling programs. It has also provided clear pointers towards those factors most effective in encouraging persistence and completion.

Amongst the most significant findings are those relating to the initial as compared to the subsequent attrition from enabling programs, including those students who enroll but never appear, a common phenomenon across all participating institutions and programs. The Research Team's discussion of and explanation for this distinct pattern compared to undergraduate programs has significance and relevance to institutions and to the sector. It also has important implications at both practical and policy levels with respect to the design of and nomenclature applied to enabling education programs and students, record keeping and reporting systems and definitions, future research, and policy and program development. The project has highlighted the paucity of research in the enabling education arena and highlighted the relevance of this being addressed, a matter of some urgency given the sector's priorities in terms of increasing and hence inevitably widening participation. This relative lack of research relates, in some degree, to the level of churn in this part of the sector, in terms of staff employment levels and tenure and frequency of program restructuring, all suggestive of insufficient attention and significance being given at senior policy and management levels to enabling education and enabling educators. As a result, the potential of this project to generate and support the development and expansion of a robust community of practice interested in further research is of significant value to the sector, and should be recognized as such. When the project and its funding concludes in late May 2013, this particular outcome becomes reliant on the good will and personal commitment of individual enabling educators, many of whom already appear over-stretched and under-resourced. Anything which can be done at the national level, to encourage and strengthen this aspect of the project's outcomes, should be seriously considered as a pressing priority.

## 5. Outcomes

By the concluding stages of the project, it had achieved some significant and potentially enduring outcomes as briefly outlined below. Overall these research findings, analytical insights and other outcomes will be of value and relevance to the sector at the national level as well as to individual institutions well beyond the five participating ones. This includes institutions not currently involved in enabling education since the project's outcomes will support the achievement of increased and widened participation in higher education by prospective students many of whom share some of the characteristics of enabling students. As mentioned above, the value of these outcomes and their longevity and spread would be strengthened by supporting the Research Team's plans to continue the expanded program of regional workshops beyond the life of the project, to disseminate their research findings and to further develop and refine effective intervention strategies at the same time building an expanded community of practice.

The outcomes of most relevance and significance to date have largely although not exclusively been achieved through the conduct of the regional workshops, as follows:

- Ongoing national and to some extent international dissemination of findings through various conference and seminar presentations, the project's website, and most importantly through the Team Leader's presentations at the regional workshops and resulting discussions;
- Development and distillation of research-informed and practitioner-tested insights into the nature and causes of enabling students' persistence, completion and non-persistence;
- Generation of a range of empirically-based effective intervention strategies to support enabling students' persistence and completion;
- Development of principles of best practice and cost-benefit models to underpin and guide the development of further such intervention strategies suitable for supporting retention and completion by a range of students and in various contexts and programs, with the potential to be developed into nationally applicable guidelines;
- Generation of widespread interest in and active engagement with the aims, findings and outcomes of the project across the sector;
- Identification of a widely dispersed cohort of interested, research-informed enabling educators across the sector providing a solid basis and fertile ground for the establishment, maintenance and ongoing evolution of a robust and active community of practice amongst enabling educators, including the generation of future collaborative research projects in this field.

## 6. Measures to promote sustainability of the project's focus and outcomes

Continuation and expansion of the program of regional workshop presentations beyond the life of the project will be the most significant vehicle for sustaining the majority of the outcomes listed above: viz, the further generation of research-informed insights into the nature and causes of enabling education students' persistence/non-persistence and completion; analysis and distillation of the implications of these insights for program design, provision of student support, communication strategies, administrative and other institutional processes;

identification of an expanding suite of effective intervention strategies to support enabling education students' persistence and completion, underpinned by the principles of best practice; development, trialing and refinement of nationally applicable guidelines of best practice in enabling education; establishment, maintenance and ongoing development of a national community of practice in enabling education, with international links, and the capacity to generate further research projects; the enhancement of teaching and learning in enabling education throughout Australia supported by all of the above; and thereby, improved rates of persistence, completion and progression to award level study by enabling students across the sector.

The Team Leader has already put in place plans for the continuation of the workshop program throughout 2013 and into 2014, and planning for some locations has already commenced. However these plans, and the organization of further workshops, including the further evolution of the presentations which are at their heart, are reliant upon the individual good will of the Team Leader and depend on his availability for this ongoing activity. Hence the outcomes referred to above are similarly dependent on his commitment and availability in terms of their sustainability and further development. The recent establishment of a national enabling educators association and the holding of the national biennial conference of Australian enabling educators in late November this year both offer the potential and practical mechanisms to widen engagement with and contribution to the sustainability of these valuable outcomes. In this context, consideration should be given at the national level to providing appropriate support to the new association so that it can become a robust vehicle for the further generation and sustainability of the project's outcomes.

## **7. Lessons learned from the project**

The lessons learned have been flagged above, and are nationally applicable rather than being particular to this project. These lessons are that collaborative inter-institutional teaching and learning research projects are both immensely valuable and predictably difficult. The challenges encountered by such collaborative projects can and should be counteracted at the national level by:

1. Requiring budgetary provision for the appointment of a project manager as a grant condition;
2. Through sector-wide consultation, the development of nationally agreed administrative, editorial (specifically referencing systems) and financial protocols and processes to simplify, streamline and speed up all grant-related reporting and compliance activities within institutions, the acceptance and application of which at the institutional level be similarly a grant condition for collaborative teaching and learning research projects.

## End note 1

*Notes of the External Evaluator's comments to the Research Team following the Showcase event held in Sydney on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

### **Background/contextual factors**

#### **1. Size and complexity of the research**

- Number of participating institutions
- Geographic spread, range of structural arrangements within institutions
- Differences between programs within and across institutions affecting the comparability of data
- Changes in personnel within the Research Team
- Structural and course changes in at least one participating institution
- Consequent difficulties and complications in data collection
- Overall location of Enabling Education within Higher Education – structural as well as levels of resourcing and influence, including the level of flux
- Issue of research in Enabling Education – issues of inadequate time, expectations, load, support and encouragement
- Time pressures on all research team members (related to previous two dot points)
- Lack of administrative/project management support resulting in time and work pressures on Team Leader and possibly communications issues arising from this situation
- Time frame for research – perhaps unrealistic given its size and complexity and resource pressures
- Logistics overall arising from most of the above – sheer practicalities of conducting the research, obtaining and analyzing the data

#### **2. Significance of the research project**

- **For the sector as a whole**, especially given:
  - national targets for overall increase to 40% of the population with higher education qualifications and of Low SES to 20% participation rate across institutions
  - pressures on all institutions to increase and widen intake, hence from sections of the population currently under represented, especially Low SES background
  - concerns within institutions re high attrition and low rates of completion and progression into degree level study from enabling programs
  - possibility of new interest in these issues at the national level, given all of the above
  - current inadequate understanding of the issues involved in enabling programs across the sector, with expertise and experience highly concentrated within easily definable institutions and no easy mechanism for this to be recognized and spread
  - current comparative dearth of research re enabling education, at institutional and national levels – also internationally? EG amount

of research and analysis re undergrad retention/attrition compared with that on enabling programs

- **For institutions, both those which offer enabling education and those which don't currently (but may well need to introduce them)**
  - issues of resourcing, reporting (internally and externally), quality assurance and accountability
  - motivation to achieve better outcomes for enabling program students
  - institutional need to meet national targets, and therefore to attract, retain and achieve successful outcomes for a wider cross section of students at degree level
  - commitment of enabling staff to understand better factors which cause attrition and approaches which encourage retention and progression

### **Progress to date**

3. **Data now largely collected and analysed** (indicative of good progress overall especially given the practical issues the team has had to deal with)
  - some remaining pragmatic issues to sort out, especially whether UniSA's participation is now viable (how to establish this definitively and what to do if it is not);
  - data related research issues to be determined by the team re:
    - determining what the findings mean from the approaches to learning questionnaires, and how this will be used in terms of project outcomes (strategies? Best practice guidelines?)
    - identifying and isolating the most meaningful patterns in the data, given the amount of data and issues of comparability;
    - differentiating the particularities of attrition/retention as these particularly apply to enabling students;
    - deciding how this data is to be used;
    - and how it is to be reported, internally (responsibility of each team member) and externally (responsibility of whole team)
  
4. **Significant project for the research team**
  - Issue of the high proportion (about a third typically?) of enabling students who enroll but never turn up or disappear almost immediately
  - Pivotal to the findings, analysis and reporting of the project, and potentially its most significant and impactful outcome
  - Challenge is to:
    - clearly quantify, describe, analyse and suggest explanations this characteristic of enabling education retention/attrition data
    - challenge and re-define the concept of attrition as it applies to enabling students, and especially to differentiate between this initial phenomenon in enabling education and later attrition which can more properly be described and addressed as attrition – possibly using such notions of “apparent enrolment”, “real attrition” and “actual commencers”
    - conceptualise and further develop the nature, content, purposes and structure of the initial enrolment stage of an enabling program

for prospective students' exploration and decision making, and the subsequent real enrolment and transition into the actual course

### **Next steps**

- **Retention/success strategies**
  - A critical 'deliverable' for the project in terms of the purposes of the research, expectations of the funding body and the imperatives canvassed above
  - Managing the initial collection of strategies
  - Analysis/selection by the team to ensure the project outcomes will include evidence derived strategies rather than a grab bag of good ideas (useful as that would be)
  - Analysis/explication re what connection there is between these particular strategies and the findings from the research, from the data, from the team's analysis, always with a clear, sharp focus on the retention/attrition issues which are particularly relevant to enabling students
  - Team decisions and development of mechanisms for the dissemination of the strategies – also a critical project outcome
  - Team decisions re how to disseminate, when, to whom, how to sustain communication over time (beyond the life of the project?), whether and how to ensure wider dissemination over time, whether to encourage feedback and additions to the initial collection from a wider group
  - Relationship between the dissemination process and the development of a community of practice (see below) which will be maintained over time
  
- **Development of the Best Practice Guidelines**
  - Process, clarification of intentions, how managed and by whom (eg sub-group of research team)?
  - Starting point might be the identification by the research team of particular principles and characteristics of best practice in terms of retention and success arising from the research findings and analysis
  - Important to ensure that as these principles and characteristics relate most particularly to enabling students, as opposed to all students
  - Could be 'road tested' through the process of disseminating the strategies, perhaps by initially grouping these
  - Development and refinement of the Best Practice Guidelines could also contribute to and form an effective and worthwhile basis for the development of the community of practice
  
- **Community of Practice**
  - Significant project outcome, equally important in terms of potential impact as the strategies and guidelines
  - Decisions to be made re how to expand the initial group in order to develop such a Community of Practice



- An initial project to kick off such an expansion could well be through the dissemination of, and seeking feedback to refine and categorise the strategies for improving retention in enabling programs to provide motivation, energy, direction and purpose to the establishment of the community of practice, similarly with the Best Practice Guidelines
- Role of the website, newsletter and regional workshops in this process should similarly be explored, with each offering useful opportunities for the expansion, strengthening and purposeful development of such a Community of Practice
- Further thought needs to be given to how the Community of Practice can and will be maintained, sustained and expanded over time, especially beyond the life of the project, who will lead and manage this, initially and subsequently (eg a system of rotating responsibilities might be considered useful) – might be fruitful to explore models from existing Australian higher education online groups, such as EdEquity, and international enabling education communities of practice (the European Access network?)
- **Immediate priorities** – who is going to lead, manage, contribute to the following?
  - Refinement and establishment of the **website**
  - Setting up and running the **regional workshops**
  - Preparing and disseminating the **newsletter**
- **Significant challenge** is the timeframe within which all of the above has to happen, including expenditure of the budget

## End note 2

*External Evaluator comments to the Team Leader and other members of the Research Team arising from the two workshops held at University of Tasmania, November 8<sup>th</sup> (Hobart) and 9<sup>th</sup> (Launceston) 2012*

### Comments/suggestions on the draft presentation:

- Over twenty specific comments relating to the Research Team Leader's presentation slides – not reproduced here because of their highly contextual nature

### General:

- Policy context , previous research (esp Clarke et al 2000) and federal review (2001)
- Definitions – official and unofficial
- How to measure success – definitional (retention, completion, progression to award course/programs) and wider benefits (eg informed decision making)
- Being clear about the intentions of enabling programs is pivotal to making judgments re their impact, therefore clarify what these are at the national and institutional level

- Important to re-state the original purpose which is to address the negative educational impact of disadvantage
- Need to clarify the negative educational impact of disadvantage (and other characteristics of enabling students) so we can directly address the educational implications of these characteristics
- Clarke et al use the term “non-participating/inactive students”
- Background – enabling category introduced in 1988 and used since then in official govt stats HECS exempt when HECS introduced in 1989)
- 1999 DETYA tender to review of the effectiveness of the program
  - Clarke et al research and unpublished report...many issues discussed and conclusions reached are still relevant:

**Some extracts from the EIP funded unpublished research by John Clarke and David Bull et al (2000) entitled “The Cost Effectiveness of Enabling and related Programs in Australian Tertiary Education”<sup>1</sup>:**

“there is significant scope and need to improve the administration of the university programs and their reporting – particularly in eliminating non-participating / inactive students.” Clarke et al, 2000, Ch 9

“Another issue relates to the existence of legitimate reasons for students needing to repeat Enabling study or to withdraw from Enabling study which do not necessarily reflect poorly on the programs themselves but rather reflect explainable outcomes of the impact of the disadvantage experienced by the groups being targeted.

There is clearly a greater need for dialogue between the stakeholders in Enabling provision to ensure that these issues are widely understood and allowed for in any consideration of program performance.” Clarke et al, 2000

Any consideration of the ‘performance’ of Enabling programs carries with it a number of stipulations and caveats. For example, as Enabling programs commonly cater to mature age students, there is a need to consider the performance of Enabling students against the normal performance of adult learners, which as Hester (1994) describes is well documented as reflecting good pass rates but high drop-out rates and low completions. This performance profile reflects the difficulties of studying as an adult – attempting to balance study with concomitant responsibilities over a period extended by the need to study part-time and under circumstances which prevent the close contact with the institution that promotes mutual understanding and commitment. Disadvantaged adults also carry the baggage of their disadvantage, be it expressed as a lowered self-esteem and confidence, a lowered awareness of higher education culture and processes through being the first in the family to attend university, the lack of certainty about the value of further education, the physical manifestations of educational disadvantage, or the impact of past or continuing financial problems.

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