

The National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA)

# Declaration on Enabling Education in Higher Education



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## Introduction

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This paper outlines the shared commitments and approaches to Enabling education across the Australian Higher Education sector. Enabling education has evolved over time into a diverse mixture of forms and funding arrangements according to the context; however, the function has remained stable.

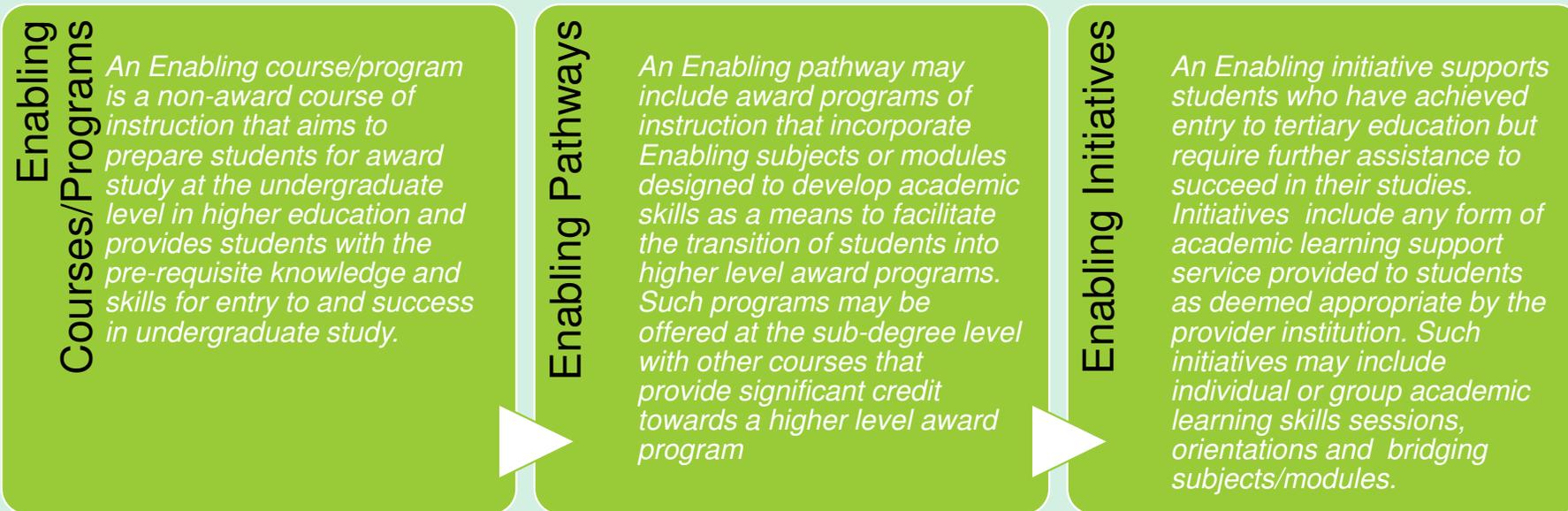
Given the growing institutional diversity of entry or pathway courses/programs \* and Enabling initiatives, the need for a shared understanding of what constitutes Enabling education within the Australian context has become important.

The term 'Enabling' has been used in the Higher Education literature in Australia since 1990, with the release of the *Fair Chance for All* agenda (DEET, 1990) and increasing focus on equity within Higher Education. The history of these developments has been chronicled in Hodges et al. (2013), Habel et al., (2016) Bennett et al., (2015) and Pitman et al. (2016).

However, there appears to be no formally consistent definition of Enabling education in Australian Higher Education.

Enabling education is considered by the National Association of Enabling Educators Australia (NAEEA) to include: Enabling Courses, Enabling Pathways and Enabling Initiatives.

*\* The term 'course' is used interchangeably with 'program' within this document*



Non-award Enabling entry courses are normally subjected to regular forms of review and rigorous university course accreditation protocols, as befitting self-accrediting institutions and as overseen by TEQSA and the *Higher Education Standards Framework*. University Enabling courses are not part of the *Australian Qualification Framework* and thus are not restricted by learning outcomes or volume of learning stated in that framework.

The time is right for the above clarification of Enabling education so that we can:

- Support and further develop effective quality assurance processes across the sector
- Facilitate comparison between courses and encourage cross-institutional sharing
- Assist in the clarification of funding protocols
- Raise the public profile of the role of Enabling in the higher education sector as a mechanism for access, social mobility and career transformation

## History and developments over time

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Currently, across the sector, Enabling education is understood to encompass a wide range of both academic support strategies and academic courses/ pathways, which provide access to and *enable* a diversity of students to achieve success in higher education studies. Recent research by Pitman et al. (2016, p.4) identifies that 'Students from recognised equity groups who articulate via an Enabling course generally experience better first-year retention rates than those articulating via most other sub-bachelor pathways. This access may be via special entry schemes, preparatory and bridging courses, a series of skills and orientation workshops, or academic learning support initiatives.

In more recent times, in some institutions, and in response to the government cap on Enabling load, generic preparatory subjects have been increasingly embedded into sub-degree or similar courses, providing an even wider range of Enabling pathways.

Currently, an:

***“Enabling course*** means a course of instruction provided to a person for the purpose of Enabling the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award, but does not include:

- (a) a course leading to a higher education award; or
- (b) any course that the Minister determines is not an Enabling course for the purposes of this Act.” (Department of the Attorney General, 2003, p. 384)”

Australian universities interpret and subsequently implement this definition in a variety of ways. This is considered important to meet the diverse needs of students in different areas and to tailor courses to different institutional contexts. In the current higher education environment, the essence of defining Enabling revolves around the function, form and funding of the program.

### Function

In exploring function, it is clear that Enabling courses prepare and develop students for undergraduate award level study. Their aim is to open access to higher education for those who have not qualified through schooling and are traditionally underrepresented in tertiary education.

Non-award Enabling courses may be of a generic or a discipline specific focus, or a combination of both. These courses feature appropriate preparation and access to further study as their major objective but also provide benefits for society and the individual.

There are a growing number of sub-degree pathways that now embed Enabling subjects into their award. The non-Enabling components of the pathway accrue credit towards a higher undergraduate degree. (Note that traditional diploma and associate degree courses do not fall within this category because the majority of these pathway award courses do not include preparatory Enabling subjects as part of the award.)

Enabling courses are for domestic students. Courses which provide International students access award studies (e.g. International Foundation Courses) are regulated under the ESOS Act and attract international student fees.

Some 'Enabling like' or supplementary courses assist students who are enrolled within Awards to receive academic learning support. These supplementary courses generally provide preparation after undergraduate program enrolment and are offered through academic learning support initiatives, which serve to promote retention and success.

Traditionally, entry-Enabling and supplementary-Enabling courses were intended to address the outcomes of prior disadvantage, including significant difficulties in schooling. These entailed more than the provision of the essential skills and knowledge required for success in higher education and often emphasised issues of confidence building, awareness of the Higher Education environment and experience of the culture of higher education. They were intended to be of a transformational nature, enculturating students into a higher education environment.

## Form

Enabling courses take a variety of forms matched to the requirements of the offering institution and the prospective student populations. University Enabling courses are not part of the Australian Qualification Framework and thus are not restricted by learning outcomes or volume of learning stated in that framework, which supports responsiveness to demography and diverse student needs across Australia.

Enabling courses for university entry can vary from four weeks to two years. The length of the program is often associated with the level of students' preparedness for university studies. Some courses are open entry, while others have entry requirements. The length of the program is often associated with the level of students' preparedness for university studies. Curriculum design of these courses is varied and may focus on a generic model or a discipline specific format.

In recent years, some universities have packaged together Enabling subjects with diploma subjects to provide a diploma. It is important to note that the Enabling components should not be counted towards an award, but instead enable progression into and through awards.

Some universities claim structured support initiatives as part of their Enabling load. In the past these have been called supplementary courses/services/initiatives. These courses do not lead to university entry but provide academic assistance during undergraduate study.

Supplementary Enabling components or modules taken during undergraduate study for support only are not deemed full courses but are provided drawing on Enabling loading. The quality of these supplementary modules is scrutinised through more general university processes and are not counted towards an award, but instead enable progression into and through awards.

## Funding

Although some fee-paying courses are currently referred to as 'Enabling' although they do not fit the definition and do not attract Enabling funding, by far the majority are offered fee-free to students as legislated and supported by Enabling funding arrangements. This funding is defined under the HESA (2003) Act and means that students pay no fees in accordance with a widening participation agenda.

This government funding is entitled 'Enabling provision' and is restricted to universities which have been allocated 'Enabling load'. The number of places available at each university is capped.

The requirements under this funding model are that students cannot be given advanced standing for subjects completed under the 'Enabling provision'.

Universities which package together Enabling, and award subjects may only claim Enabling funding for the non-award Enabling components. The award subjects are not fee free and are subject to *Higher Education Contribution Scheme* fees (HECS). The Enabling subjects are not be able to contribute to credit or standing in an award.

## New Definition

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Whether it is offered as a full course of instruction before an undergraduate award or is utilised to enable support and progression during an award program, Enabling funding may only be used to support study that is not counted towards an award. Enabling funding must only be used to enable progression into and through awards, and must not count towards an award.

These non-award courses are crucial for students who have not gained entry to university for many reasons, including for those from disadvantaged or under-represented social backgrounds. Enabling courses continue to grow in importance as students seek alternative pathways into university study.

The majority of Enabling courses under consideration are based in universities which are self-accrediting bodies monitored by TEQSA through the Higher Education Standards Framework (<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/teqsa-contextual-overview-hes-framework>)

Using the HES as the framework, the following should be implemented in the provider university.

### Quality assurance

- Courses must be approved and accredited through the university of offer policies or TEQSA (HES Domain 5.1)
- Courses are monitored and reviewed in accordance with the university of offer policy (Domain 5.3)
- Courses have appropriate academic integrity processes in place in line with university of offer policies (Domain 5.2)

### Student participation and attainment

- Admission requirements and processes are clear including requirements to progress to specific awards (Domain 1.1)
- Orientation is offered to all students and provided to assist all students in transition to Enabling studies (Domain 1.2)
- Student progression within Enabling is monitored and reported on, along with students' progression to awards with the university of offer (Domain 1.2)
- Alignment of student learning outcomes with assessment is appropriate and benchmarked with Enabling offerings (Domain 1.4)
- Clear definitions around successful completion of Enabling (Domain 1.5)

## Learning Environment

- Clear alignment between university policy and practices in Enabling courses around facilities and infrastructure, students' wellbeing and safety, and students' complaints and grievances (Domain 2)

## Teaching

- Design of courses must be explicit in course documentation, including theoretical underpinnings. Design should be accessible to expert review (Domain 3.1)  
Teaching staff who teach in these courses must have relevant qualifications and be exposed to leadership from a senior academic (Domain 3.2)
- The providers should be able to demonstrate that the learning resources are appropriate for an Enabling course (Domain 3.3)

## Other

- The providers should abide by all other university policies in relation to governance and information (Domains 6 and 7)

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