

## **An exploration of factors associated with student attrition and success in enabling programs**

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University-based enabling programs (EPs) provide a tertiary pathway for up to twenty percent of undergraduate enrolments at Australian universities. Attrition from these programs and the resulting costs to students, universities and society at large is an important issue deserving research attention. This research project aimed to investigate the factors that impacted the attrition of students from EPs and compared their experience with those students who successfully completed an EP. The study used a qualitative methodology involving individual participant interviews with students who participated in EPs at the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia. The qualitative interviews supported existing research into the complexity of student attrition. The dominant themes emerging from the data broadly reflected the four factors identified in the existing literature; time pressures, personal circumstances, use of support services and level of student engagement. The use of qualitative interviews provided insight into the operation of these factors and assisted in developing pragmatic actions that could be taken to reduce attrition. The paper concludes that any attempts to reduce attrition in EPs must focus on developing more personal interventions with students as early as possible, aimed at addressing time management, providing more flexible study options, facilitating evening and mature age support and addressing self confidence. These implications lend further understanding to the reasons behind attrition and retention in EPs.

### **Introduction**

The literature on attrition in enabling programs (EPs) in Australia is limited. Most research on attrition studies is quantitative and related to students in undergraduate or postgraduate study in the higher education sector (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2012; Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney & Blackwell, 1984). The literature on retention is more mature, though also primarily focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students, rather than enabling students. Attrition is the antithesis of retention and is defined as “the proportion of students in a particular year who neither graduate nor continue studying at the same institution in the following year” (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012, p.225).

While the literature on undergraduate student attrition and retention is useful, the characteristics of mainstream undergraduate university students may be quite different from those of students undertaking EPs. For example, the typical characteristics of undergraduate university students include a: higher proportion of school leavers; higher socioeconomic status (SES); attendance mode more frequently full time; HECS debt being incurred by the student and increased financial and opportunity costs (Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Klinger, Murray, O'Rourke & Schofield, (2013). The majority of undergraduate students still enter university through traditional means, predominantly within one year of completing high school education. Recent exposure to formal

education contrasts starkly with the circumstances of EP students, who have frequently not completed high school, or have been away from formal education for some time. While the characteristics of undergraduate university students have gradually changed over the last thirty years in response to equity policy (Grebennikov & Shah 2012) these student characteristics are still distinct from those enrolled in EPs.

### **Characteristics of EPs in Australia**

Student cohorts for EPs are more frequently of lower socio-economic status (SES) and first in family to attend university (Cantwell et al., 2001). EPs provide the opportunity of entry to higher education for students who have not completed high school, or who desire a second chance at gaining an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Therefore these programs cater to a diverse range of demographic groups. Equity groups targeted include mature age students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with a disability, and people from rural and isolated areas (University of Newcastle, 2015). EP students vary significantly in their experience and exposure to prior academic learning. For many, their prior educational experience and attainment is low. In a 2012 survey of enabling students at three programs, 50% of survey respondents reported not finishing secondary school and 50% reported that their parents did not finish secondary school (Hodges et al. 2013, p.167).

The characteristics of EPs also differ significantly from those of undergraduate programs. Undergraduate programs attract tuition fees, have academic entry requirements (ATAR) and require HSC or equivalent educational experience. Most EPs have none of these requirements (Hodges et al., 2013). Similarly the characteristics of EP students may differ from those of undergraduate degree students. Hodges et al. (2013, p.27) identified four key factors differentiating EP students: (1) limited educational experience; (2) lower educational attainment; (3) lower level of financial contribution and (4) lower level of academic skills (knowledge, confidence and study habits). These differences create difficulties when it comes to reporting and evaluating performance and success rates in enabling programs, particularly when comparing these to undergraduate programs.

The academic performance of EP students once in undergraduate degree programs has been examined in several studies to see whether their performance varies from students entering by traditional means. Cantwell et al. (2001) found results consistent with earlier studies, showing only a marginal disadvantage in academic performance for enabling students, but a positive effect for mature age entry, where older students were seen to perform better than younger students in degree programs (Cantwell et al. 2001).

However, EPs have traditionally experienced higher rates of student attrition than undergraduate degree programs and this area of student attrition has received increasing academic focus in recent years.

## **EP attrition literature**

EPs experience higher rates of student attrition than undergraduate degree programs. Official rates of attrition in EPs in higher education have been relatively stable over the last six years at between 40% and 50%, compared to an average of 19% in Australian undergraduate programs (Hodges et al., 2013). Officially, retention is defined as the proportion of students enrolled at Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) census date. Unofficially, it is only the students who actually start the program, a proportionately lower number than those enrolled, who are counted by teaching staff. With no fees (in many EPs) and no risk, approximately 20% of enrolments become “ghosts” before their enabling program even starts. As a result, official rates of attrition frequently vary from effective rates. Additionally, attrition from EPs may not necessarily be a negative experience for students. For example, McInnis (2000) identified “positive attrition” whereby non-completion may still result in students achieving skills, goals, employment, or increased likelihood of further study later on. Hodges et al. (2013, p.5) identified that undergraduate measures of attrition and retention “do not provide useful insight into effective attrition in enabling programs”. The authors concluded that some attrition from EPs may be “desirable”, acting as a filter prior to an undergraduate program and possibly reducing attrition in undergraduate programs. Bennett et al. (2012) also examined student attrition in a part-time EP. They highlighted areas of difference from undergraduate programs and the wider higher education model of attrition, which does not take into account the complex nature of attrition within EPs. The authors go on to “challenge the wider, dominant discourse on student attrition, which does not consider the wider picture regarding the challenging circumstances and backgrounds of enabling students but entirely privileges the hard data” of raw attrition numbers. (Bennett et al., 2012, p.144).

There are few studies on the causes of EP attrition in Australian universities. Those studies that exist focus predominantly on analysis of available student attrition statistics. However, there are some key studies that provide insight into EP students’ perceptions and these are now addressed.

Bedford (2009, p.5) identified six key reasons for attrition in one EP: (1) time pressures; (2) advice from friends; (3) inability to remember information; (4) feelings of not belonging to the university; (5) not knowing what was required in order to pass and (6) poor study-management skills. Time pressures were identified by a large proportion (48%) of respondents in this study (Bedford 2009, p.5). Whannell et al. (2012, p.10) identified two distinct groups of discontinued EP students: (1) those with low motivation to study, poor study-management skills and no clearly defined long-term goal; and (2) those with changes in personal circumstances creating time pressures. As a remedy, the authors recommended early interventions in the orientation program and the initial weeks of the semester, including career advice, counselling and engagement programs (Whannell et al., 2012, p.11).

The results of the 2011 survey of discontinued students of five EPs showed a strong similarity to previous research. In order of prominence, the reasons for attrition were: (1) time pressures; (2) life events impacting on study, particularly for mature age students; (3) low utilisation of student support services; and (4) low engagement with staff and other students (Hodges et al., 2013, p.5). The authors provided key recommendations for addressing EP student retention including: re-engaging non-participating students; enhancing pre-enrolment processes; increasing provision of counselling services; further investigating appropriate enabling pedagogies; investigating the manifestations of time pressures on students to inform development of flexible course designs; and developing a community of best practice to research and address student attrition in EPs (Hodges et al., 2013, p.6).

The aim of this research was to explore the factors that impact the attrition of students enrolled in EPs and to compare their experience with those who successfully completed an EP. This research utilised a qualitative approach in order to develop a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding student attrition and retention in EPs. Qualitative research provides “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe” (Creswell, 2009, p.246) to events and is more appropriate when dealing with complex issues where little previous research exists.

The study addressed the broad research question: what are the factors influencing attrition and retention of students in EPs? To support the broad research question, propositions were developed from the literature. Previous studies indicated that personal time pressure was a crucial factor in attrition of students in EPs. For example, Bedford (2009, p.5) identified time pressures such as changes in employment or work hours as a factor in causing attrition for 48% of respondents in one study. Hodges et al. (2013, p.5) described the issue of time pressures as “a complex phenomenon with a multiplicity of underlying causes”. Therefore the following was proposed,

**P1.** *Personal time pressures contribute to attrition of students in EPs.*

According to Whannell et al. (2012), life events such as changes in personal circumstances may play a significant role in attrition. It was found that among students who otherwise had a strong motivation to study, after experiencing changes in their lives such as employment change, relationship stress or illness, their time and commitment to study was negatively impacted. Therefore, we posited,

**P2.** *An unexpected life event or change in personal circumstances contributes to attrition in EPs.*

The use of academic support and counselling services by students has been demonstrated to increase retention. Hartley et al. (2011, cited in Hodges et al., 2013) found that many students who did not complete their program were either unaware of or demonstrated lower use of student support services on campus. Hence,

**P3.** *Lack of use of student support services contributes to student attrition EPs.*

Social and academic engagement with the institution have been shown to enhance retention (Hartley et al., cited in Hodges et al., 2013). Students' attendance at classes and level of identification with university culture have been seen as contributors to retention. Whannell et al. (2012) found students who left had lower levels of commitment to study, characterised by low attendance and interaction with university staff and other students. Therefore,

**P4.** *EP students exhibiting low student engagement are less likely to remain in their EP.*

## **Conduct of the study**

As the objective of this research was to explore the phenomenon of attrition in EPs, qualitative research utilising interviews was proposed as the most appropriate research method to deeply explore this relationship. This qualitative research "... emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data" (Bryman & Bell 2011, p.386).

The EP used for study was the University of Newcastle EP. This EP is the largest and longest running in Australia, operating since 1974. The sample source was the *Potential Enabling Program Participant Research Register* (PEPPR Register), developed and maintained by the University of Newcastle.

## **Method**

Interviews were phenomenologically based, with participants reconstructing their experience within the topic under study (Seidman, 2013). This method of data collection involved a limited number of questions "intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants" (Creswell, 2009, p.246). Using open-ended questions, the aim was to build upon and explore participant's responses to those questions. The interviews focused on reasons why participants withdrew as well as the relationship between withdrawal and other life events experienced by participants. As the research utilised both telephone and face-to-face interviews to collect data, interviews were a combination of a semi-structured approach and *critical incident technique* (CIT). Critical incident technique involves "interviewing respondents about particular types of event or behaviour in order to develop an understanding of their sequence and their significance to the individual" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.219). In interviews respondents were asked to recall and describe the factors which contributed to and triggered their attrition, or which prevented them from withdrawing.

The primary mode of analysis was inductive, constant comparison method (Merriam, 2009, p.18). Student response transcripts were coded to identify concepts, defined as "labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or that appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds" of respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.578). From these codes categories were developed, such as time pressures, personal issues and engagement. Categories represent "real world phenomena

... at a higher level of abstraction” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.578). The resulting themes were interpreted to develop findings that would be “comprehensive, holistic, expansive and richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p.18).

## Findings

Of the 16 respondents, eight were female and eight were male. Nine respondents were mature age enabling students. Eleven respondents successfully completed EP on their first enrolment; two of the five who did not complete, re-enrolled and successfully completed thereafter. The thirteen successful students all currently study or have finished degrees at the University of Newcastle. Degree choices included science, engineering, nursing, psychology, arts and business. Three students have gone on to postgraduate study. The following section presents descriptive data for the respondents.

The qualitative interviews conducted support existing research into the complexity of student attrition. The dominant themes emerging from the data were the four factors identified in the existing literature: time pressures, personal circumstances, use of support services, and level of student engagement. It is important to note that none of the interviewees identified one reason alone to leave, or a single reason to stay.

### Time pressures

The first and most prominent of the four themes to emerge from the data, time pressures, was discussed by all respondents. Previous studies have shown personal time pressure to be the crucial factor in attrition of students in EPs. The results of this study are in agreement with previous literature. Respondents cited the difficulties in balancing enabling study with their families, life and work and the need for significant adjustments required. These adjustments often required the higher prioritising of study in their lives, or “learning to fit study into life” (Respondent 14).

A number of respondents found time management to be the greatest issue they had not anticipated. One respondent commented “we need to be taught firstly how to manage our time effectively before we can study” (Respondent 4). Time management was cited as being more difficult than expected for most respondents. All unsuccessful respondents cited time management difficulties as contributing to their withdrawal. One of the salient issues around time pressures was family and children, and how these pressures affected respondents. Responses included “I fell behind at the start, time management was hard, with four kids at home and working full time” (Respondent 12) and “it was more demanding than I expected, requiring significant adjustments” (Respondent 2).

Consistent with previous research, time management was more difficult than expected for over one third of all respondents in this study, while significantly more than half the respondents who were unsuccessful in the EP, cited time management difficulties. The current study, however, found specific illustrations of how time impacted on EP completion. The pressure of family/children was cited by four respondents as impacting on their ability to study. Consistent with EPs, mature age students made up over half the

respondents in this study. While the existing literature acknowledges the contribution of time pressures to attrition (Bedford, 2009, Whannell et al., 2012, Hodges et al., 2013), it does not examine the origins, causes and manifestations of time pressures. As the influence of family and children on study management skills of students in EPs have had little exploration in published research, their effects are not publicly known. The current study provides richer detail around the issue of time management, highlighting the inclusion of influences such as family and children in future research. An implication for policy and practice of EPs may be the inclusion of time management skills training in future programs. The extant literature has identified time pressures as a key factor influencing attrition. The findings of this research support the existing literature and have identified time pressures as impacting on students' commitment to study. However the existing literature makes little mention of addressing students' time management skills directly. This implication emerged from one respondent, "we need to be taught firstly how to manage our time effectively before we can study" (Respondent 4).

### **Personal circumstances**

The impact of personal circumstances, often related to stage of life, emerged from the interviews as a dominant theme. The majority of respondents had not completed their HSC and so were motivated to complete an EP in order to acquire an ATAR for university entrance. A significant proportion of the mature age respondents sought a more fulfilling job than their current one, as well as better career opportunities, income earning potential and financial security and thought that completion of university study might enable them to achieve these goals.

Stage of life was seen to impact on the personal circumstances of students. Lack of maturity, ambition and commitment was cited by younger respondents as reasons for leaving EPs, while mature age respondents cited family/partner commitments and lack of family support. Mature age respondents often spoke of their EP being a turning point in their lives, a commitment to a new beginning. One mature age respondent cited the enabling program as "an integral part of my transition in life. Looking back it was the start of my new life, a second chance" (Respondent 1).

Lack of partner and family support was also a recurring theme in the data, particularly voiced by four female respondents. For several respondents, all female and mature age, a husband or partner was unsupportive or even obstructive of attempts at academic study. For example, responses included "I was married. I wanted to study, but my husband wouldn't let me" (Respondent 13). "Women support men when men study, but the opposite is not true" and "men are threatened by women's increased confidence" (Respondent 10). Several female respondents also stated that they did not enrol in an EP earlier because of an unsupportive husband/partner.

Work commitments and changing circumstances at work impacted respondents' priorities and therefore level of engagement with the university, socially and academically. Escalating commitments at work or a busy period of the year meant some respondents had to devote more time and attention to their employment, rather than their study. One

respondent cited that their “boss insisted I work back on Monday nights; my uni night” (Respondent 16). For these reasons a number of respondents found it difficult to attend all lectures and tutorials.

Respondents cited the following three changes in circumstances in descending order of frequency: (1) family/partner commitments; (2) lack of family support; and (3) work commitments impacting their time commitment to study. Just under half of the 16 respondents found it difficult to attend all lectures and tutorials due to time pressures. The resulting implications for students’ engagement, particularly for mature age students, with families, partners and work issues, are clear. Half of the respondents in this research studied courses that were not offered online. A further implication to emerge from this research is the need for more flexible study options for EPs. One respondent commented “my course was not available online, so it was difficult attending all lectures and tutes and there were no lecture recordings for my course” (Respondent 6). Flexible study options are addressed to some extent in the existing literature. Hodges et al. (2013, p.127) recommended the “development of flexible curriculum and course design responses”.

Support from family and partner was seen to have a significant effect on ability to study. An unsupportive husband or partner was cited by several female respondents as a cause of stress, impacting their ability to study. While one study (Debenham & May, 2005) found that mature-aged women face a significant range of problems, the experiences of mature-aged women in enabling education have not been researched. An implication arising from this study is the need to develop mature age study/support groups, particularly for women. A key finding of this research is the importance to respondents of support and friendships with other students. Over fifty percent of respondents in this study identified “friendships formed” as the most positive aspect of their enabling experience. This implication emerged from the response by a respondent “they could have a mature age support group before or after class, or even online, to talk to someone my own age” (Respondent 13). The existing literature does not address the provision of these support groups in EPs.

### **Use of support services**

The use of academic support and counselling services by students has been demonstrated in the literature to increase retention (Hodges et al., 2013). The value of these support services to retention is evidenced in this research. Respondents cited “very good support services, both academic and personal” (Respondent 3). “The extra support got me through, I would have been lost without it” (Respondent 5). Respondents credited the academic support service with “teaching me how to write essays and reports and learning how to reference” (Respondent 7), as well as “learning how to use the library” (Respondent 11). Respondents credited the counselling support service with “showing me how to fit study into my life” (Respondent 13) and “keeping me sane” (Respondent 3). Respondents who had lefted cited awareness of but lack of use of academic and personal support services. Responses included “I was too busy working and going out with friends; I was not committed” (Respondent 10). Several respondents cited their lack of use of

support services as regretful, for example “I knew about the support services, but didn’t use them” (Respondent 3).

Respondents who had completed their EP cited support from academic and personal services, as well as support of teachers and other students as contributors to their retention. Of note was the comparison and contrast of enabling study to undergraduate degree study by respondents from both groups of respondents, left and retained. Most respondents commented on the differences and similarities between the two and the majority perceived the enabling program to be more personal, enthusiastic, helpful, supportive and confidence-building than undergraduate study. Responses included “enabling helped my undergraduate study enormously, I didn’t realise how much till I got into uni” (Respondent 5), “undergraduate would have been overwhelming without enabling, where the school leavers struggled, I had confidence and experience, academia was no longer daunting” (Respondent 6) and “I almost got more out of it than my degree, everybody should do it” (Respondent 12).

The results of this research support the existing literature and add useful individual insights. Respondents who had left cited awareness, but lack of use of academic and personal support services. A number of respondents stated that they regretted not using support services such as academic research and writing workshops, library assistance and counselling more. Respondents who completed their EP stated that support from academic and personal services, as well as support of teachers and other students, contributed to their completion. The existing literature has identified the lack of use of support services as a factor influencing student attrition (Hartley et al., 2011, cited in Hodges et al., 2013). This research has supported these findings. Additionally, a large proportion of enabling students are mature age (Hodges et al., 2013), studying at night while balancing the responsibilities of family and work. This research supports this finding, with nearly sixty percent of respondents being mature aged students when they enrolled in their EP. Academic and personal support services such as counselling are traditionally available during the day, but much less so or not at all at night time, when mature age students are attending lectures. With family and work commitments it is much more difficult for these students to attend campus services during the day, so they therefore miss out. A possible implication of this research is the provision of more support services for evening students. This implication emerged from comments by respondents “it was lonely at night, no academic services or support was available” (Respondent 11) and “they could have a mature age support group before or after class, or even on-line, to talk to someone my own age” (Respondent 13). Evening access to support services is only addressed to a very small extent in the existing literature. Hodges et al. (2013, p.127) recommended increased provision of “evening counselling services”.

### **Student engagement**

Social and academic engagement with the institution have been shown to enhance retention (Whannell et al., 2012). The results of this research support the current literature. Lack of commitment and application was cited by respondents who left as reasons for their leaving, for example “I fell behind at the start and never really caught

up” (Respondent 15). Conversely, early engagement was highlighted by respondents as key to their retention, for example “I met my best friend at Orientation and we supported each other from then on” (Respondent 13).

When asked about the most positive aspects of their enabling experience, respondents highlighted the teaching staff, friendships formed and confidence gained. Responses included “the teachers were very encouraging, personable and interested in me” (Respondent 8). “Good friends helped, now lifelong friends, I realised I was not alone, they were just as scared as me” (Respondent 13). Respondents also highlighted the “sense of belonging” (Respondent 4) to the university provided to them by staff and other students. Respondents described the friendships formed with teachers and students during their enabling program sustaining them in their undergraduate degrees, with many enduring still.

Several respondents described their enabling experience as “more positive” (Respondent 6) than their ensuing undergraduate experience, citing the enabling teaching staff as “more friendly and approachable” (Respondent 12) than undergraduate teachers. Retained students cited support from teachers and other students as reasons for their retention. When asked if they had any regrets, several respondents wished they had studied harder and spent more time on campus. Almost all respondents rated being “very satisfied” with their EP personal experience. Responses included “I loved it, passed and had fun” (Respondent 5), “I discovered the joy of learning, could feel my brain stretching and expanding” (Respondent 7), “I learnt student life, where everything was, it gave me confidence” (Respondent 3), and “it gave me a sense of belonging, during and after enabling, it changed my perception and shifted my identity. I was not just a mother any more” (Respondent 9).

A number of respondents emphasised the importance of EPs providing a good introduction to university study. This prompted their commitment and engagement to their undergraduate course. These respondents cited the need to “learn how to study again” (Respondent 2) after not completing their HSC, or being away from study for some time. Several respondents cited a fear of university study and a desire to develop self-confidence through the EP to be able to tackle undergraduate study.

Lack of maturity, commitment and application was stated by respondents in the group who left as reasons for their attrition. Student engagement with the institution, as early as possible, is a recurring factor influencing rates of retention, in the existing literature (Whannell et al., 2012, Hodges et al., 2013). The importance of engagement is evidenced in this study, with students who left citing “lack of commitment” and “lack of application” contributing to their leaving. Engagement and motivation were issues for all students, with a quarter of all respondents expressing regret at not having studied harder. An implication arising from the findings is to ensure early student engagement in EPs. This implication emerged from the response “I fell behind at the start and never really caught up” (Respondent 15). This implication is addressed to some extent in the existing literature, with Hodges et al. (2013, p.5) recommending “engagement in their program by Week 2”.

This study found that lack of confidence played a role in engagement. Some respondents expected to fail, while others enrolled in EPs to develop self-confidence. A number of respondents gained confidence during their course and their engagement with the University increased accordingly. One respondent commented “the teachers built me up and gave me confidence. I was willing to work to earn their respect. They gave me a desire to learn” (Respondent 6). Almost half of the group who completed their EP indicated that their confidence developed during their course. One respondent stated that a lack of confidence prevented them from enrolling in an EP at an earlier stage. Three respondents in this study came into their EP expecting to fail. Similarly, three enrolled in their enabling program to develop their self-confidence. Seven participants reported gaining confidence over the course of their EP. One respondent cited lack of confidence as the reason for not enrolling in an EP earlier on in life. These responses came predominantly from female respondents.

The existing literature addresses the importance of student engagement (Whannell et al., 2012, Hodges et al., 2013), but has been less informative on the reasons for students’ lack of early engagement, which has been identified in this research as often involving lack of self confidence. An implication to arise from this research is the need to actively address the development of student’s self confidence through training and/or counselling. This implication emerged from the response “women come in with no confidence, despite their accomplishment; everyone needs to develop their confidence first to be able to study” (Respondent 9). This issue of the need for confidence building has only been addressed to a very small extent in the existing literature, with Hodges et al. (2013, p.127) recommending “facilitating student access to existing counselling services”.

The overall findings of the study broadly support the four research propositions. These findings assist understanding of the reasons behind attrition and retention in EPs. The extant literature on enabling course attrition concluded that the key factors influencing student attrition are time pressures, life events, lack of use of support services, and lack of engagement. The study has further validated and confirmed these conclusions, giving weight to the extant literature and adding individual insights into how these factors affect the student experience. The following provides a summary of the factors arising from this study that influence attrition in EPs.

- lack of partner/family support (time pressures, personal circumstances)
- lack of application and failure to complete work (student engagement)
- lack of maturity, ambition and commitment (personal circumstances, student engagement)
- awareness but lack of use of academic and personal support services (use of support services, student engagement)
- work commitments and priorities (time pressures, student engagement)
- preoccupation with friends and social life (time pressures, student engagement)
- failure in another enabling course preventing completion (student engagement)
- sport commitments such as training and University Games (time pressures, personal circumstances).

## Practical implications

This study confirms the factors contributing to attrition identified in the literature. Further, this study has explored more deeply the factors found in the extant literature on EPs. For example, (1) manifestations of time pressures have been more fully examined, (2) personal circumstances involving partner, family and work commitments have been highlighted, (3) the difficulties experienced by mature age evening students in accessing support services have been identified, and (4) the role of self-confidence in student engagement has been identified.

These findings have a number of implications for managers and coordinators of enabling programs. While the existing literature has identified the four key factors influencing attrition in enabling programs, it has to date provided few recommendations to actively address these causes of attrition. Six implications for management practices in the context of EP management have arisen from this research, and it has also developed insights that have received little attention in the existing literature. The substantial differences indicated here between undergraduate university study and EPs necessitates a different and more personal approach to EP students and the factors impacting their attrition and retention.

In order to understand how student attrition takes place, this study argues for greater attention to be paid to time management skills training, flexible study options, provision of support, and confidence building. The following six implications for policy and practice have arisen out of this study:

1. Actively address the development of students' time management skills through training and skills development.
2. Provide more flexible study options through increased provision of online offerings and lecture recordings.
3. Provide more support services for evening students.
4. Develop mature age study/support groups.
5. Ensure early student engagement.
6. Actively address the development of student's self-confidence through training and/or counselling.

## Limitations

There are several limitations associated with this study. EP students from one institution make up the sample studied, that is, students who either enrolled in an EP and who did not complete, or who completed an EP at the University of Newcastle. This limitation may impact the extent to which findings may be generalised; they may be specific to this case (Yin, 2009). The study utilises a relatively small sample of 16 current and former students, although this sample size is common with in-depth studies (Sandelowski, 1995). However, care needs to be taken in interpreting results and inferring implications based on such a sample size. The use of interviews as a data collection method also has limitations. For example, there may be a risk of problems with memory and recall for

respondents who are asked questions related to an earlier and perhaps uncomfortable experience (Yin, 2009). This potential risk has been mitigated using critical incident technique (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.219), as significant triggers and barriers are more likely to be recalled. Additionally, telephone interviews may be potentially less accurate, given the absence of non-verbal communication (Kitzinger et al., 1999).

## **Research implications**

The findings of this study have several implications for future research. The few studies that have been undertaken into attrition in EPs have all highlighted personal factors contributing to attrition: time pressures, life events, use of support services and low engagement (Bedford, 2009, Whannell et al., 2012, Hodges et al., 2013). A possible explanation for this phenomenon lies in the unique nature of EPs. EPs are very different to undergraduate study and even VET programs. They are neither a qualification by themselves, nor vocational training, although they can be perceived as a form of training for entry to higher education. In this way they are a tertiary preparation program, an opportunity to gauge one's capacity and suitability for tertiary study. Hence EP enrolment may be a test of personal identity as well as academic identity. To complete an enabling program is not necessarily the goal for students, as evidenced by the comment "showing me how to fit study into my life" (Respondent 13). The student goal may be to prove oneself capable of undergraduate study, at whatever the ATAR level required for the chosen degree program. This was borne out by the findings of this study that over ten percent of respondents enrolled in their EP to develop confidence. Non-completion of an enabling program may not be perceived as a failure, but just an indication that one is not yet ready, or not suited to tertiary study. For example, two of the respondents in this study who left returned later to successfully complete their enabling program, stating "this time I was committed" (Respondents 2 and 15).

These findings highlight issues around the 'teaching-learning contract' (Cunniff, 2011). What can and should the learner, the teacher and institution bring to this equation? What expectations are appropriate? Is retention the only happy ending? Is tertiary education more fulfilling than whatever else someone might do instead? The implications of these questions for the expectations of EP students are important areas for future research.

In this light, these findings take on a new significance. EPs are a very personal experience for students. The findings of this study echo those of previous studies (Hodges et al., 2013), that EPs change lives, giving participants a second chance at a different and possibly more fulfilling life. Any attempts to reduce attrition in EPs must focus on developing more personal interventions with students as early as possible, aimed at addressing time management, providing more flexible study options, facilitating evening and mature age support and addressing self confidence. These actions may maximise the already valuable teaching, services and support provided through EPs.

A number of gender issues are also raised by this study. For many female students the multiple challenges they face can eventually overwhelm them. Lack of support; traditional

expectations of family and child care; as well as low confidence can work together, with one more challenge often becoming the 'last straw'. These issues and their effects on the success of women in EPs deserve additional research attention.

This study confirms the factors contributing to attrition identified in the literature. Further, this study has explored more deeply the factors found in the extant literature on EPs. Opportunities and areas for future research include the level of time management skills among students in EPs; the influences of factors such as family and children on attrition in EPs; the experiences of mature age students in EPs, particularly women; the availability and use of evening support services in EPs; the availability of mature age study/support groups; the methods of early student engagement in EPs, and the levels of self-confidence among students in EPs.

## Conclusion

Student attrition at any level of education involves a cost. Student attrition in EPs involves a cost to students, universities and Australia's intellectual economy at large. Costs to students include financial, emotional and opportunity costs. Non-completion can involve perceived failure for the student, with possible risks to self-esteem and motivation. Universities incur sunk costs in resourcing courses with administrative and teaching staff, facilities and support based on enrolment numbers. As enrolment numbers decline, so does the productivity of resources. Potential revenue from future enrolments is also reduced, as is the available pool of potential candidates for enrolment. Finally, the societal cost to Australia's intellectual economy and capital needs to be considered. These considerations compound the need for further investigation into EP attrition. The body of academic literature on attrition in EPs in Australia is growing. At this time it is an emerging area, warranting further and needed attention. Much of the existing academic research has been quantitative, focusing on measurement of statistical characteristics of attrition. Therefore, this qualitative research furthers practical understanding in this important area of higher education.

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