



Enabling pathways lead to successful outcomes

The challenge

Southern Cross University (SCU) has a footprint that ranges from Kempsey in the mid-north NSW coast to the Gold Coast in South East Queensland, with distance education students coming from across Australia and overseas. SCU has a highly diverse student population with many students being first in their family to study at university. To cater for this diversity, SCU offers a range of pathways to university study, including Diplomas, Associate Degrees, and an enabling program called Preparing for Success Program (PSP).

The award-winning PSP program¹ has been offered since 2006 and enrolls approximately 1000 students each year. PSP students study three core subjects: 'Managing Your Study', 'Communicating at University' and 'Applying Quantitative Concepts', and one of either 'Studying Science' or 'Issues and Enquiry in Arts and Business'. PSP students come from diverse backgrounds: 66% are regional, 27% have low socio-economic status (SES), 6% are Indigenous people, 72% are first in family and 11% have a disability.

This case study focused on the impact of completing PSP on students' experiences in undergraduate study.

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Seven students who had completed PSP and were in the second year of their undergraduate program, and five staff members were interviewed for the study.

Key findings

Internal SCU reports indicate that students who complete PSP perform the same as or better than students who enrol through traditional pathways. The principal themes that emerge from the case are that PSP students develop skills and confidence in emotional and practical ways, have a sense of belonging when they enter their undergraduate studies, and are enabled to manage their lifeload.

¹ OLT Citation 2014. <http://scucollege.scu.edu.au/index.php/23>

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Confidence

'Wow, I can do this,' is probably one of the most amazing things and that it can lead me to where I want to go. (Student)

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Skills

that gave me not only a love of maths, but amazing skills and I thought, 'Oh, is that how you do that?' and that was such a great learning experience. (Student)

Yeah, I know how to write an essay, I know how to reference an essay, I know how to research for an essay... I know how to work through a study guide or pick out the important things and do all the critical reflections. (Student)

Managing lifeload

everyone's schedule can change at the drop of a hat. And, because I'm still a carer for my husband and have to take him to medical appointments... I can just fit PSP around everything else that's going on in life, which is just wonderful. (Student)

These outcomes were not unexpected, as students who complete PSP come to undergraduate study motivated, confident and armed with the relevant academic skills. PSP helped them refine their discipline interests and developed their sense of identity as a student:

my first day when I was actually on campus with midwifery, it didn't matter what you looked like or what age you were, it was completely irrelevant, you were all just there, you were a uni student and off you went. (Student)

From the interviews it was also apparent that the regional context of the PSP contributed to its success:

I studied here because of my location. I guess had I been living in a city, I would never have considered university because of that push to work full time to earn the money you're earning plus more. I would never have thought that I could afford to do uni, so I guess living in this regional area allowed this space for me to go in a new direction. (Student)

Enabling programs shape the student experience

SCU data shows that students who complete the program perform the same or better than students who enter through traditional pathways. This case study has showed how the PSP enabling program works to build skills, identity and confidence for the challenges of undergraduate study. The data showed that students had developed a sense of belonging.

Implications for practice

Non-school pathways into university study are an important service of regional universities to their communities, to enhance participation in higher education. This contribution should continue to be supported by universities and the public policy agenda for higher education.

Conclusion

Enabling programs provide regional students with access to university studies. The quantitative evidence indicates that students who complete an enabling program have enhanced chances of success in their undergraduate studies. This case study reinforces that evidence by providing data about how enabling programs act to positively influence students' experiences in their undergraduate program by building skills and confidence. Enabling programs can transform students' experience at university and their lives, and facilitate lifelong learning and active citizenship.