TRANSITION AS TRANSFORMATION: DEVELOPING STUDENT IDENTITIES AND ACADEMIC LITERACIES THROUGH A UNIVERSITY PATHWAYS PROGRAM IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

- Enabling programs as entry path to university in Australia

- Designed to support equity groups and widening participation

- This paper will explore student perspectives on transition to university through these pathway programs and provide recommendations for educators and widening participation practitioners.

Widening University participation in Australia

- Role of the 2008 Review of Higher Education in identifying participation targets (Bradley et al 2008).

- Australian university policy is designed to support underrepresented demographic groups to participate at a representative rate (Gale & Parker 2013).

- Many Australian universities have developed enabling programs, to 'provide opportunities to undertake higher education for those who lack the usual or traditional prerequisites for university entry… actively preparing them for success in their future undergraduate studies' (Klinger & Murray, 2010, p. 118).

- Enabling programs can play an important role in making university culture accessible, as 'the university environment can be a very daunting experience for students who have experienced challenges in their education' (Bennett et al. 2015, p. 56).

- These programs provide a space wherein individuals can develop a sense of belonging and establish student identities, alongside the knowledge and practices required for academic success.
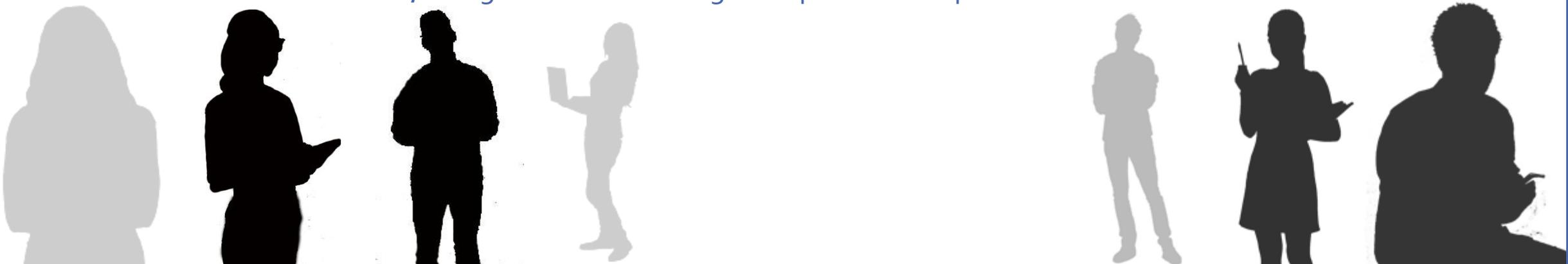
Methodology & Method

- Mixed-methods research

- Critical Pedagogy allows for the critique and deconstruction of systems of power, privilege and marginalisation. Explores the role of education as 'a political act' that empowers students (Freire 1994 in Stokes & Ulpen 2015).

- Designed using a constructivist framework to explore how students perceive their learning experience and 'construct knowledge with their own activities' (Biggs & Tang 2011, p. 22).

- Ethics approval through two institutions

- Surveys at 2015 Orientation and revisited in 2017

- Seven in-depth interviews of 1-2 hours duration

- Using thematic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Rogers, Fairclough & Gee 2004), interviews were coded and issues of affect, belonging, and identity emerged.

- Pseudonyms are used throughout.
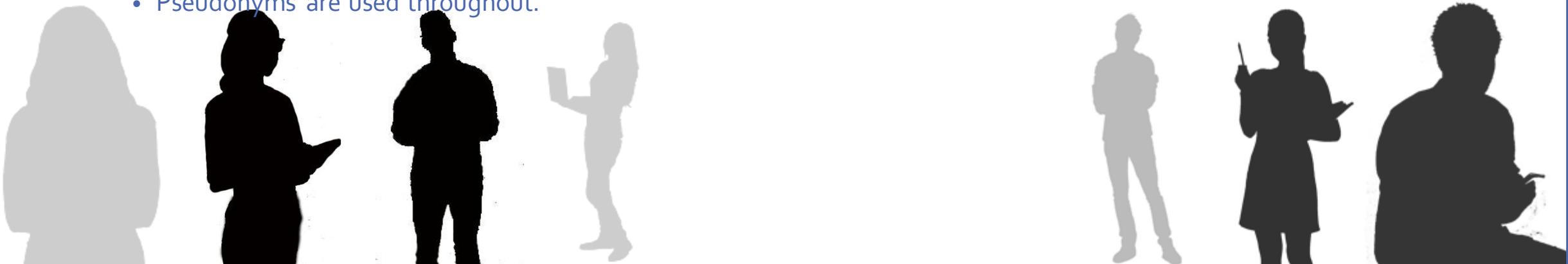
Theme 1: The impact of misrecognition

- Student responses indicate challenges from previous educational experiences, limited resources, and the need for an alternate entry pathway to university.

- Five interviewees left secondary schooling early, due to bullying, an apprenticeship opportunity, or boredom.

My maths class was filled with a lot of students that were not interested in learning, my teacher gave up and we'd watch movies at every class.

Taylor (Performing Arts and Creative Writing)

- Others completed high school with a low finishing score or undertook vocational education.

- For those who do not possess the valorised cultural capital, educational experiences may lead 'students to internalise processes of misrecognition' (Burke & Crozier 2013, p. 36).

I always felt very much like I was a student that very early on teachers decided wasn't worth teaching... I was very, very scared to start foundation studies because I wasn't sure it would be any different.

Jo (Social Work)

Key findings: The impact of misrecognition

For students from low-SES backgrounds, this apprehension is extended through significant challenges raised by financial pressure:

I want to be able to focus all on my education so that I can support them afterwards but it's kind of impossible when all that pressure's been put on you because you don't want your Dad homeless or your Nana in a home

Tom (Information Technology)

Students were often impacted by situations outside of their control, such as physical and mental health issues, or complex family dynamics. The university processes were unfamiliar: 'almost like going to a different planet' (Taylor, Performing Arts and Creative Writing).

To become familiar with academic culture, university requirements, and develop student identities, support was needed.

Theme 2: The importance of enabling

- All students reflected on their enabling program as a positive journey.
- All students also stated they would not have succeeded at university without the enabling program as a pathway.
- A student who struggled in high school due to a learning difficulty, discussed the importance of enabling pedagogies, as the lecturer, 'made it more personal for me... even using examples that I would relate to'.

  Hayden (Visual Arts).

- Student confidence was built through
  'a warm, inviting environment... (in which) every
  answer will be considered with respect'.

  Eleni (Education)

Theme 2: The importance of enabling

- Many interviewees recalled advice from enabling program lecturers, which assisted in navigating the university, and they carried this advice forward into undergraduate.
- Students identified additional support structures and approaches, such as scholarships and counselling.
- Two interviewees changed degrees in first year, and many mentioned enabling program peers who also changed degree enrolment due to lack of interest or motivation.

Key findings: Transition as transformation

- Clear benefits of the enabling program in supporting student transition to undergraduate.

- Students found a clear sense of purpose provided motivation to manage the challenges of university

If you look at what goes on in the world, people who are less fortunate, don't have much attention given to them by the authorities, so I think I if I do my studies and have experience in the area I can better make a positive impact.

Ansah (International Studies/Social Work)

Key findings: Transition as transformation

- Students identified academic literacies, understanding of the university system and culture, awareness of support services, and having a strong grounding in academic concepts as being beneficial for their degree studies.

- Becoming part of a learning community was an exciting journey, 'it's almost like something sparks in these conversations… you're just able to show what you did learn about… it's a proud moment' (Taylor).

- The enabling program provided a transformative pathway, which supported students to gain confidence in their own capability

I just felt myself becoming more intelligent; speaking better; writing better; relationships – forming relationships – not being so intimidated by (lecturers) or other PhD holders or just even professionals or academics and even the institution … if you really put your mind to it, you can develop those neural pathways to get you to university – if I can you can.

Eleni (Education

Discussion & Recommendations

It has been life changing…being a lot more confident and comfortable within myself. It has given me the power to know that I can steer my life in the direction that I want to go in.

Nathan (Psychological Science)

- Enabling programs provide supported transition to university, assisting students to develop skills for academic success.
- Inclusive enabling pedagogies assist students to build trust with educators and identify supports to succeed in the university environment.
- Students from equity groups would also benefit from greater financial support and opportunities for ongoing careers counselling.
- These reflections on individual educational trajectories, highlight the transformative role of these pathway programs, which assist students to re-engage with education and better connect with university and the opportunities provided.

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Acknowledgements

Questions?

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