The male perspective: Their lived experience as they embark on an educational journey through an enabling program.

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Abstract
In the new era of providing streamlined access to university, enabling programs have had an increased number of students utilising these as an alternative pathway to gain access to university. These programs have an important role in the development and up-skilling of students assisting with a positive transition into undergraduate studies. However, the number of males to females is notably disproportionate within the enrolment figures in the *Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies* (STEPS) program at CQUniversity. There is limited research to identify the factors that inhibit or enhance the male experience within this program. This research paper explores the male experience in the STEPS enabling program and identifies the challenges and obstacles that affect them. Males who were enrolled in STEPS were asked to complete a survey sharing their experience throughout their journey, both positive and negative. The findings indicate that whilst males encountered challenges along the way, they acknowledged the benefits of seeking support through the various networks available. This paper will expand on these findings in order to better understand the male experience through this enabling program. It is expected that this study will inform current teaching practice, curriculum design and promote innovative strategies that guide future program development to increase the completion rate of the male cohort.

Keywords: male*, enabling programs, tertiary access, first year, transitioning to university, mature male students, support networks, challenges.

Introduction

The aim of this research project is to better understand the experiences of male students in the *Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies* (STEPS) program. This project aims to, first, investigate the journey of male students undertaking a preparatory program prior to undergraduate study and, second, identify the challenges and obstacles that affect them in this journey. The data gathered will provide a fresh and current perspective of their lived experience(s) and will be employed to inform teaching practices and curriculum design. In the new era of widening participation to the broader society (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) enabling programs have had an increased number of student enrolments providing a different pathway to enter university. This research seeks to identify any significant factors that either enhance the males' journey, or create difficulties that reduce the ability to successfully participate in the program and continue on to university. By looking at their lived experience, it is anticipated that this project may help the researchers to understand what today's male is experiencing as he enters university through an enabling pathway. In addition to enhancing teaching practices and curriculum design, it could also be helpful in the development of course material that is more relevant to the male cohort.

Enabling programs provide a clear structure initiating the development of academic skills together with foundation knowledge to assist students with an efficient transition into an undergraduate program. STEPS is an enabling program that commenced in 1986 and is offered across multiple campuses at CQUniversity. The program is designed as a pathway to prepare prospective students for undergraduate studies. The underlying philosophy of this program is born from the belief that, within an adult learning program, the inner as well as the outer lives of adult learners must be considered. This is achieved through a holistic curriculum that not only looks at the core subjects for which they require skills, but helps to expand students' current worldview and self-efficacy (McConachie, Seary, & Simpson, 2008). It is offered in a number of modes: on-campus, distance and a combination of both. After an applicant has completed and passed a diagnostic entrance testing process, an interview is conducted by the relevant campus Access Coordinator. During this time a required study plan is tailored to individual students, taking into account their future undergraduate area of study. The STEPS program is flexible; it caters to students' circumstances and gives them the ability to complete the program over a maximum period of two years. Consequently, a balance between work, study, family and personal time is possible. After successful completion, students can gain direct entry into their program of choice or they can apply to the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) if they prefer to attend a different university.

Literature Review

Whilst there have been studies that have focused on the lived experiences of students when entering and progressing through enabling programs (Klinger & Wache, 2009; Muldoon, O'Brien, Pendreigh, & Wijeyewardene, 2008; Noble & Henderson, 2009; Ramsay, 2007; Willans & Seary, 2007; 2009), studies focussing solely on the male experience are very limited. The disproportionate number of enrolments between males and females is significant within the STEPS enabling program at CQUniversity. There is limited research to identify the factors that inhibit or enhance the male experience. The cohort of male students who enter CQUniversity through the STEPS pathway come from diverse backgrounds and may be the first in their family to attend university (James, 2013). A majority of the male cohort come from a working class culture. The value of education in comparison to entering the workforce to provide for their family is a barrier that some struggle to get past. Hearn (1992) argues that male students, with low academic achievement and preparation in high school, follow non-traditional pathways, such as enabling programs, because they are not prepared for the rigours of university. Despite evidence of progress made by means of widening participation programs, male access to higher education is still quite low (Raven, 2012, p. 60). Ewert (2010) hypothesised that men were more likely than women to follow disrupted pathways as a result of their poorer high school performance which left them less

prepared for university than females. Traditionally, fewer men enrol in and successfully complete enabling programs in Australia (Raven, 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2010). Furthermore, males from lower socio economic regions are 'significantly less likely to enter university than their counterparts from more affluent families'. Kahn, Brett, and Holmesch (2011) found that male students who came from underrepresented areas in society tended to be overrepresented in problem areas. These included applying less often than affluent males, underperforming in many academic areas, significantly higher risk to be on academic probation, higher probability to be dismissed from university for academic reasons and an increased lack of persistence to graduate. Raven (2012) states that males from these low socio backgrounds often experience low expectations from family to attend university and, in addition, a lack of parental knowledge to inform and encourage their progression to university. Some of the barriers that were identified with men who had a limited post school education included significantly lower internet skills as well as their age (McGivney, 1999, as cited in Golding, 2005-2006).

Part of the difficulty in preparing males to follow the trajectory through higher education is the pervasive culture of anti-intellectualism for males. Weaver-Hightower (2010) refers to this as the 'mook' image of males who are portrayed through modern day sitcoms as crude, rude, childish and even rakish and he suggests that many of the younger generation of males model themselves on this view. It could be argued that this form of stereotyping does not instil attitudes conducive to preparing young men to succeed at university. In a recent Australian study that investigated aspects that prompted people to participate in education and training at more mature ages, it was found that the factors underlying the decision to undertake further education differed considerably from those affecting younger students (Coelli, Tabasso, & Zakirova, 2012). The authors found that for males, the decision to enrol in further education was generally related to a weaker labour market. These findings were consistent with males being more likely to state that the main reason for entering into study was to gain employment. They also identified that in order to satisfy welfare requirements, males were possibly inclined to pursue an education and enter through a non-traditional pathway. McGivney, (1999, as cited in Golding, 2005-2006) states that there is still credence in the old saying that 'while men tend to earn, women tend to learn' and this has formed a belief that for some men, learning is seen as an unacceptable form of vulnerability. In addition, he found that men's reluctance to engage in education might be related to a 'lack of interest, fear of failure, or the embracing of traditional masculine values'.

Another common argument has been that the increasing feminisation within universities is a detractor for males and this might impact on students entering preparatory programs. It has been noted that certain aspects within an enabling program act as enhancers and detractors for females, so there is the possibility that this might be the same for males (Klinger & Wache, 2009; Murray & Klinger, 2014). Research carried out by Kahn, Brett, and Holmesch (2011) suggests that the male versus female experience is quite different and that males portray less academically engaged behaviour. Additionally, men seem to have greater challenges with reading, formal writing and communication skills. Further to this, Kahn, Brett, and Holmesch (2011, p. 68) hypothesise that masculinity norms that emphasise rigid gender role behaviours, that were constructed as feminine, could impact on a male student's desire to learn and succeed, and therefore may run counter to academic success. They alluded to the belief that these men felt that they were in a woman's environment and, for some men 'who aspire to dominance', often rejected academic behaviours that they construed as feminine. Kahn, Brett, and Holmesch (2011) explained this functionality as a psychosocial illustration of rejecting femininity or otherwise known as masculine mystique. These men may struggle in environments where they are asked to be introspective and challenge themselves. Additionally, Kahn, Brett, and Holmesch (2011) found that the academic setting requires cooperation, sometimes with women in positions of authority, and the hegemonic masculinity requisites to 'reject the feminine' rendering these relationships difficult at best. The other functionality that they identified was a more adaptive form of masculinity. These

men do not portray the male arrogance of the previously stated and appear to have a stronger desire to be stimulated by knowledge. These men have the capacity to make connections with the appropriate support networks, be more engaged, and adapt to the higher education setting much more easily. It is important for enabling educators to better understand the many factors that influence and affect males whilst enrolled as students within their programs as this will assist in ensuring that they are catered for and engaged to their full potential.

Methodology

This paper draws from a questionnaire created through Survey Monkey which consisted of a combination of closed, open ended and likert scales responses. The focus of this research is to determine what obstacles male students encountered while participating in the STEPS program. The questions were designed to explore the challenges these students had to overcome, together with possible solutions and accessibility to support services. Survey data includes mode of study, age demographics, previous educational background, access to support services and motivation behind participation. In addition, students were asked to share the positive aspects alongside the obstacles they faced and to offer suggestions that might improve future male experiences.

Participants

In the STEPS program, during the 2012-2013 academic terms, males made up approximately 33 per cent of the cohort, and ranged in age from 18 through to 65. A total of 920 current and past male students were invited to participate in the questionnaire through Survey Monkey with a total of 79 responding. The low response rate of less than nine per cent can be attributed to the fact that males are less likely to talk openly about their experiences (Kahn, Brett, & Holmesch, 2011). The participants in this project were enrolled in the STEPS program during the 2012 – 2013 academic years and across several campuses of CQUniversity Australia.

Table 1 Student Distribution by domicilum

Campus location of Students

Brisbane	20
Bundaberg	129
Distance	569
Gladstone	34
Mackay	66
Noosa	21
Rockhampton	81
Total	920

The ratio of distance to internal students who were invited to participate in the survey was 62% to 38%. This participation ratio aligns exactly with the actual participation ratio of 49 distance students vs 30 internal students, indicating that the sample was well representative of the population in this regard.

The initial questions posed identified demographic range, age and education level prior to entering university. While the age distribution was even across the designated age ranges, a higher number of respondents fell in the 46-60+ age bracket.

Table 2 Student Distribution by Age

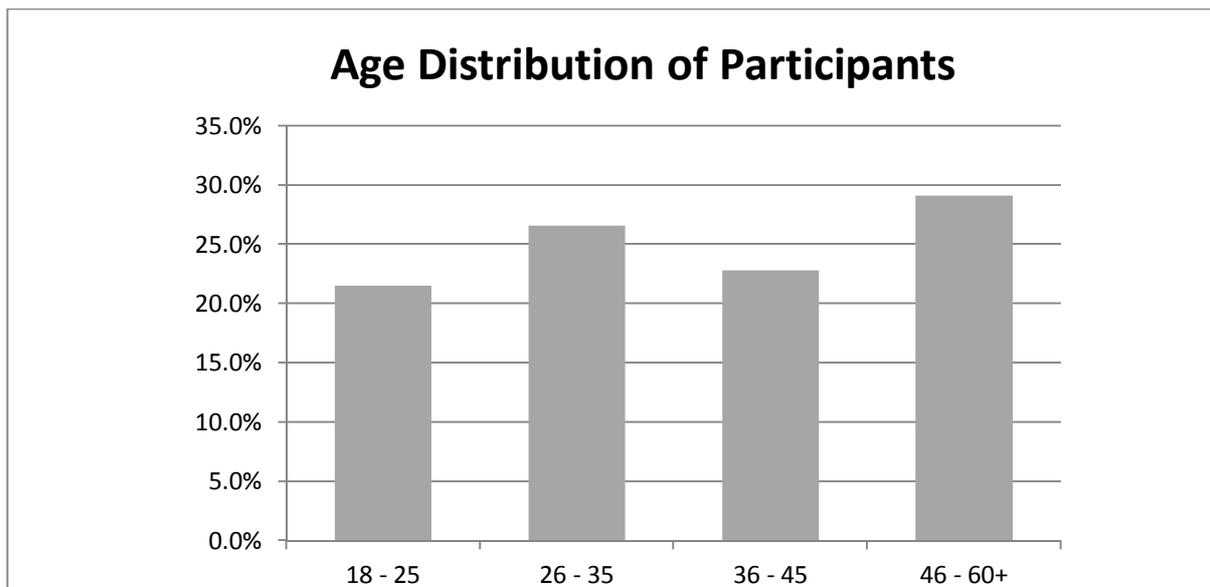| Age group	Response Percent	Response Count
18 - 25	21.5%	17
26 - 35	26.6%	21
36 - 45	22.8%	18
46 - 60+	29.1%	23

Figure 1 Graphical representation of age distribution of participants

The increase in male participants within the 26 – 35 age bracket supports Coelli, Tabasso, and Zakirova's (2012, p. 25) findings that 'for males, the desire to change their current

employment situation (for example, gain a promotion or obtain a different job) was a key motivator for studying after the age of 25 years'. This is supported by Hancock (2012); Gould (1972), Levinson et al. (1978) and Levinson (1984, 1986) who all concur that men tend to reappraise their lives in their late 20s.

Table 3 Highest level of education completed

Highest level of education completed	Response Percent	Response Count
High School	39.2%	31
Certificate	31.6%	25
Diploma	15.2%	12
Bachelor	2.5%	2
Other	11.4%	9
Other (please specify)		15

Approximately 63 per cent of respondents started the STEPS program without any formal study in at least the previous 6 years with 32 per cent of these out of study for more than 15 years. Within these demographics, 39 per cent of the participants completed high school and a high percentage, 47 per cent, of participants qualified at Certificate or Diploma level. In addition, 60 per cent of the participants were the first in their families to attend university and only 5 per cent of students came from a non-English speaking background.

During the data collection period, 63 per cent of the male participants successfully completed the STEPS program, 19 per cent were still currently enrolled with a further 18 per cent withdrawn.
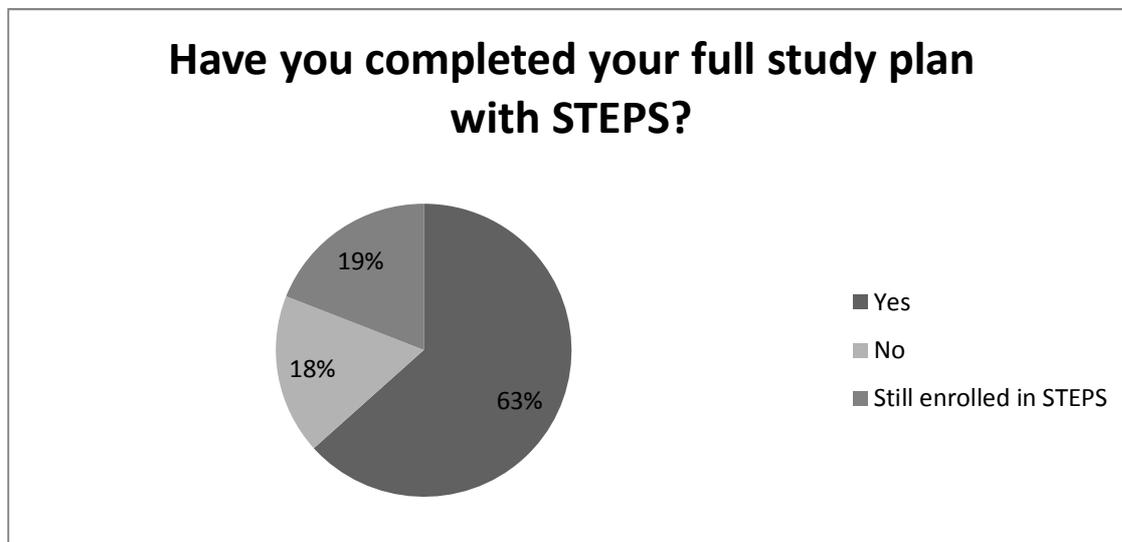

Figure 2 Percentage participants who completed, not completed and those who are still enrolled

Results

The STEPS program is fully funded by the Australian Federal Government. Job agencies and Centrelink encourage participation of eligible clients and in turn, has created an assumption that government support is a major factor in males undertaking STEPS. This assumption is also held by Coelli, Tabasso, and Zakirova (2012) who note that males are more likely to pursue an education via a non-traditional pathway in order to satisfy welfare requirements. Whilst the data gathered from the survey shows that only three of the students reported that participation in the program was for Centrelink and Job Network

purposes/requirements, this is not necessarily a clear indication of the cohort as a whole as some may have been hesitant in admitting to this.
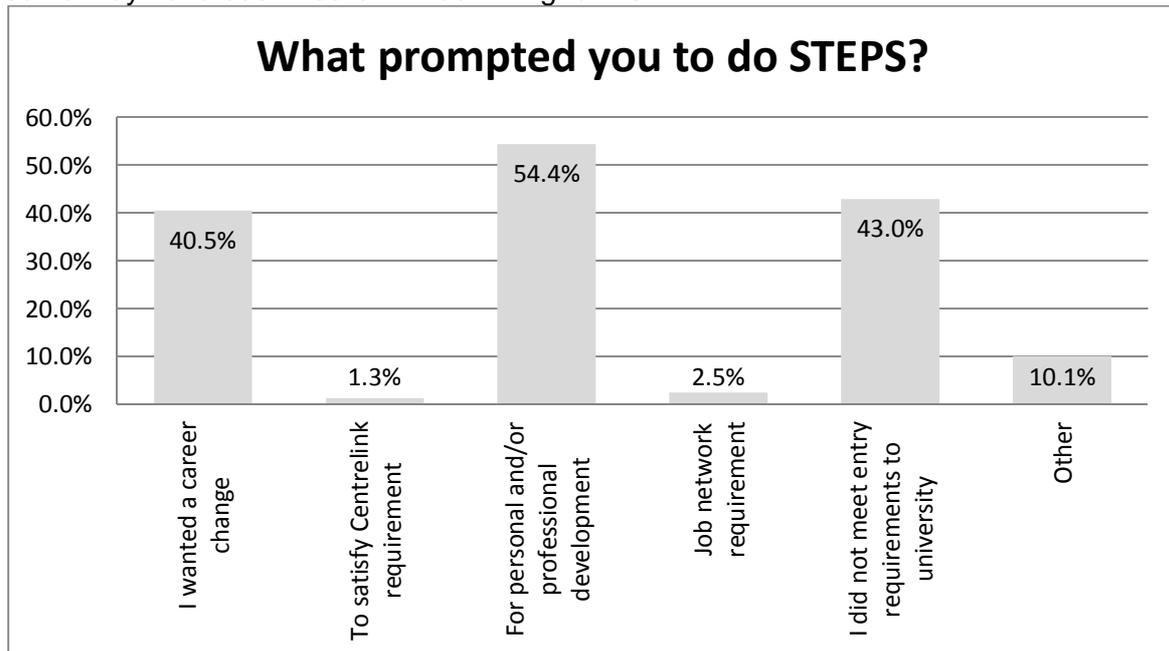
What prompted you to do STEPS?

Figure 3 bar chart with the following data:
- I wanted a career change: 40.5%
- To satisfy Centrelink requirement: 1.3%
- For personal and/or professional development: 54.4%
- Job network requirement: 2.5%
- I did not meet entry requirements to university: 43.0%
- Other: 10.1%

Figure 3 Reasons for doing/attempting STEPS

The results indicate that a majority of the students applied to the STEPS program because they recognised that they required a higher level set of skills than they currently possessed. This could be as a result of low confidence in their academic skills to succeed in the tertiary environment. This was indicated through some of the respondents' comments:

- *to ensure I had the aptitude for an engineering degree*
- *I met entry requirements but did not have the skills or confidence.*
- *I needed extra help before starting my undergraduate.*
- *I wanted to prepare myself for university.*

STEPS is seen as an affordable option to prepare for university study as it is a free program offered to Australian Citizens as well as Australian permanent residents. The results reflect that, for many students, it is an opportunity to be able to study towards a professional career that otherwise would have been unobtainable.

Students were asked what undergraduate programs they were interested in pursuing at university and the results are listed in the figure below. The results were indicative of the typical male career path and it was not surprising to find that the biggest interest was in the areas of Engineering and the Sciences. Law, Education and Psychology were also indicated as areas of interest, whilst a couple of students were still undecided about their future career paths.
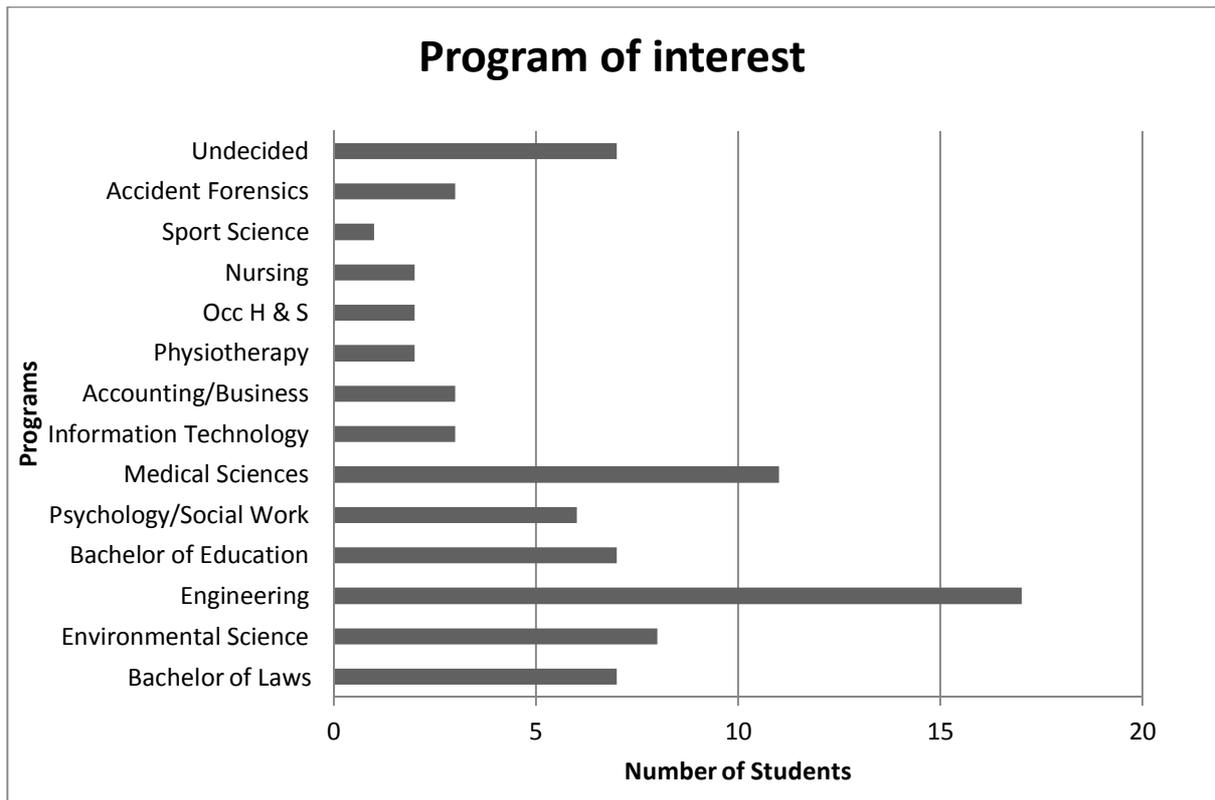
Program of interest

Figure 4 Program of interest

The main focus of the survey was to identify if there were any significant factors that either enhanced the male cohort's journey or caused barriers that impacted on their ability to successfully complete the program. Students were asked to quantify some of the key areas of support to see what aspects were the most helpful.
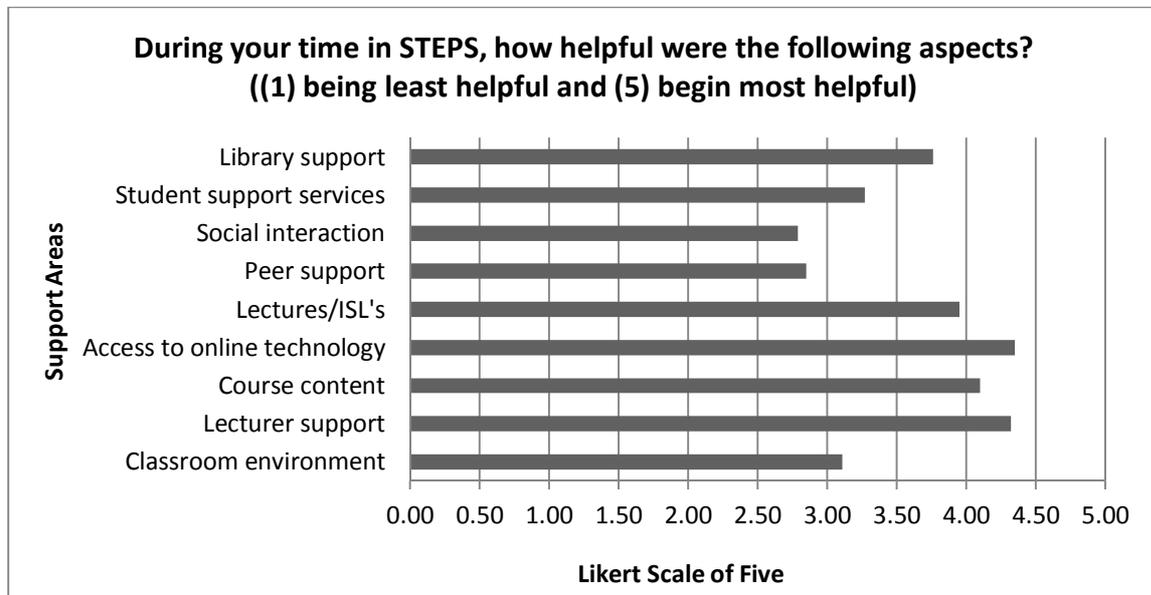

Figure 5 Support areas accessed by participants

The top two responses highlight that lecturer support and access to online technology were what they valued the most. Following closely was the quality of the course content and access to lectures and/or video lecture recordings. This indicates that the way the courses are presented, alongside the supportive nature of the lecturers, as well as the actual content

being taught, is highly valued by these students. Therefore, the core educational package that STEPS offers and the way it is disseminated suggest that students are engaged and supported effectively. Library support and student support services were also highly valued through this research. This result indicates that these services are essential for students to access when required.   However anecdotal evidence, especially in relation to males accessing student counsellors, actually speaks against this finding. The results that came through less valued were social interaction, peer support and classroom environment. As can be seen in Figure 6, distance students valued these three social elements of support less than the internal students. All students, whether distance or internal, access resources online and although some students may develop peer relationships through forums in an online environment, this data demonstrates that distance students appear to not recognise the benefits of peer support.
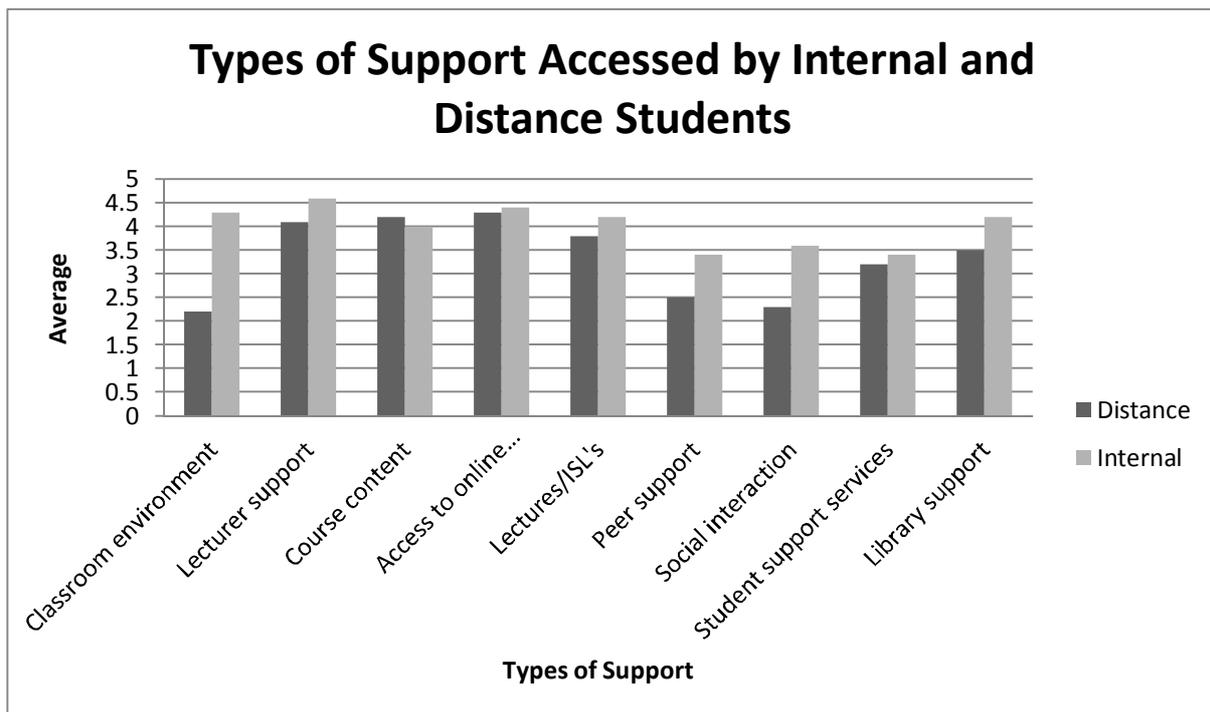

Figure 6 Types of Support Accessed by Internal and Distance Students

Participants were asked to grade on a scale, from 1 (being the lowest) to 5 (being the highest), some of the most common barriers to education.   From these results, the researchers were able to identify which areas constituted the biggest obstacles for the male cohort. The three main barriers to emerge included work commitments, family responsibility and time management and these findings align with research being done by Fey, Emery, and Flora (2008). These barriers are reflective of most males' circumstances as they enter into a tertiary environment as many of them aim to study and work at the same time in order to fulfil personal commitments. In addition, with 80 per cent of the respondents being over the age of 26, it could be that a majority of these have family responsibilities alongside their commitment to study. Kahn, Brett, and Holmesch (2011) found that males often portray less academically engaged behaviour which could be indicative of the high number of males who stated that their time management skills were a major obstacle. Another highly ranking factor was that these male students felt a lowered sense of confidence in their ability to study. This supports McGivney's notion that males enter with lower levels of confidence (1999, as cited in Golding, 2005-2006). Motivation was also highlighted and this could be reflective of the high proportion of males who were enrolled in distance as it is well documented that distance education requires higher levels of intrinsic motivation than internal students require with face to face engagement (Hartnett, St George, & Dron, 2011). The aspects that were

rated lower included peer support, false expectations and health issues which may indicate that male students did not feel that these aspects were obstacles.
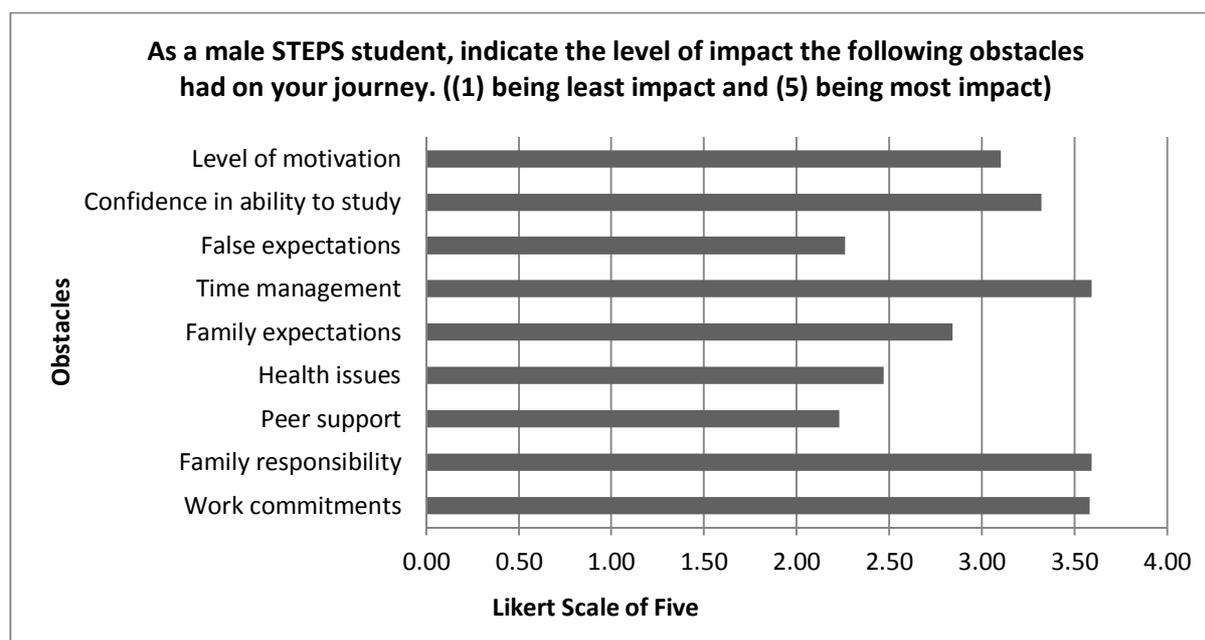

As a male STEPS student, indicate the level of impact the following obstacles had on your journey. ((1) being least impact and (5) being most impact)

Figure 7 Impact of obstacles on journey

This research has highlighted areas that cause the highest level of concern for male students. When asked where they sought help from during these times, 72 per cent claimed they sought it from their lecturers with another 37 per cent seeking assistance from their Access Coordinator, while peer support rated at 30 per cent. The lowest rating was for the student counsellor with only 6.3 per cent accessing this support service.

Table 4 Level of support from dedicated areas

Support sought from	Response Percent	Response Count
Lecturers	72.2%	57
Access Coordinator	36.7%	29
Student counsellor	6.3%	5
Peers	30.4%	24
External support agencies	19.0%	15

Discussion

The CQUniversity Strategic Plan (CQUniversity Australia, 2013) emphasises engaged learning and teaching with staff focussing on supporting the students' learning journey. The question to be asked is whether lecturers have sufficient time to support their students both with course content as well as challenges they experience outside of their study commitments. An additional aspect to consider is distance students' lack of access to face to face assistance and their preparedness to seek available support when needed. Supporting distance students involves helping students with any query they may have with their assignments, course material or even personal difficulty. The additional pressure of monitoring student welfare based on their correspondence or phone conversation is time exhausting in an already packed teaching workload. The time consuming nature of pastoral care alongside academic support can be a challenge for teaching staff as it is not considered part of the lecturing staff's workload allocation. Whereas, the Access Coordinator's roles and responsibilities include pastoral care (performed with no or limited training) and ranges from providing academic guidance, emotional support, developing and adjusting study plans

during a students' journey to accommodate life's challenges. One student confirmed: 'My only child had grown up and left home so most of my support was on my wife. With help from the Access Coordinator by changing courses and my workload and finally from Lecturers providing help with completing work'. However, lecturers may be required to perform pastoral care and could feel uncomfortable with this type of support without much or no formal training. Pastoral care training needs to be considered for Access Coordinators and should be extended to lecturers as many students may not have the level of emotional support they need from family and friends (Kahn, Brett, & Holmesch, 2011). Lecturers may be hesitant in offering suggestions other than perhaps speaking to a counsellor, since no educator would like to advise students incorrectly as a result of not recognising warning signs. However, males rarely accessed the student counsellor; only 6 per cent stated that they used the services provided by the student support area. Anecdotal evidence supports this with student services recording that more females than males access this service throughout CQUniversity. This is consistent with services in the community and hence why the Federal Government has provided funding over the past decade specifically for male counselling (M. Palu, personal communication, September 19, 2014). This is an indication that this is not a CQUniversity issue but a more general social one.

One aspect to note is that 21.5 per cent of respondents were within the 18 to 25 age group and many within this group may be immature, emotionally not ready for this learning journey and still carrying old habits from school. These habits are not conducive to a supportive learning environment and one respondent commented that 'the immaturity and disruption of some younger students and their unwillingness to fully engage or work as a team' affected the class environment and ability to study effectively. According to Scanlan (2008) one of the reasons that some younger men in her class returned to study was to placate a parent; others included to become a role model, find better employment, rediscover learner identities and to fulfil a dream (cited in Hancock, 2012, p. 193). This aligns well with the findings in this research. Forty nine percent of responses belonged to the 26 to 45 age group and Coelli, Tabasso, and Zakirva (2012, p. 11) felt that an important motivator for this demographic was to reassess 'their current employment situation'. Furthermore, some underlying reasons for mature age students undertaking further study differed to those 'at a more conventional (younger)' age. For those aged between 50 and 64, Phan and Ball (2001, p. 31) attributed the main reason for undertaking study to 'personal interest'.

Comments made by nearly half of the participants indicated that family played a major role in providing support during their STEPS journey. This notion is supported by Hancock (2012, p. 200) who states that 'family often acted in a supportive capacity'. This raises a solid point that support is not solely delivered by the university, but that external support is pivotal to the success of students. Another reflection made by students is the necessity to draw on inner strength through these difficult times. Comments like 'I told myself to man up and get it done; generally sorted things out for myself; simply worked harder and had to burn the candle at both ends regularly', reflect an inner drive to persist through to completion. Appropriate learning practices like 'managing through goal attainment and keeping a learning journal' were aspects that reflect intrinsic motivation. One particular student found that it was through 'perseverance and letting go of annoyances' that allowed him to overcome negative influences that could have become an obstacle. It seems that a lot of personal growth and inner strength is developed during their journey, and students who cultivate their inner strengths and the ability to communicate and seek support when required, seem to be the ones who develop resilience from this program. As one student stated, 'I am studying for me, a selfish but perhaps necessary attitude in today's society'.

Participants had some definite thoughts when it came to providing suggestions to prospective STEPS students. Seeking support featured strongly with a clear family focus: 'Make sure you have partner/family support and study space, as well as dedicated study time allocated in your weekly planner'. Another supports this notion stating: 'Make sure

those closest to you are 100% committed to your goals. My family are starting to realize how much of a burden on them my study can be. This is putting huge pressure on me now I am actually doing my degree'. Others indicated the important role that STEPS staff as well as fellow students played. One student stated: 'I made friends during STEPS who have also gone onto undergrad study and I still talk to and go to for advice. Interact with other students because you will need the support from your peers for STEPS and after'. Within STEPS, study buddies and support groups are highly recommended. This is based on the premise that people with similar experiences can truly understand and relate to what another student is going through.

Conclusion
Through this study it became clear that many students were faced with similar barriers during their journey in STEPS. The three largest obstacles were noted to be work commitments, family responsibility and time management. Clearly, all of these factors are outside the circle of influence and control of the academic staff, but have to be carefully considered by the particular Campus Access Coordinator, during the individual student interviews, when the required study plan is developed. It is very important to ascertain what the work commitments as well as family and personal responsibilities are that a prospective student has to contend with before a study plan can be constructed to ensure possible successful participation. Further to these obstacles, students also shared support areas of value which they accessed during their journey in STEPS. Access to online technology alongside lecturer support was stated as being the most valuable during their journey. Considering the high level of lecturer support, it would be interesting to ascertain through further research what the ratio of support is between pastoral care and course content clarification. Course content was next in line which confirmed its high value for these male students. This is an indication that the current course content aligns to the needs and interests of the male participants and does not necessarily need to be changed to have a more robust orientation to fit the male student's perspective. Family support featured very strongly throughout responses, while peer and social support in a classroom environment was rated to be the lowest. This could be a direct result of most participants not having direct access to this type of support, since they were distance students. This research has assisted in identifying some factors that inhibit and enhance the male experience in this program; however, there is scope for further in-depth research to delve into some of the findings and seek better clarification. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, it has confirmed that the STEPS program plays an important role in structuring the development and up skilling of foundation knowledge required for male students to transition successfully into an undergraduate program at university.

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