Enabling education: Mitigating risk on the path to opportunity

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Introduction

The University Preparation Program (UPP) is an enabling course at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) which facilitates entry into higher education for students who otherwise would not meet entrance criteria. Like many of its counterparts in universities across Australia, it is an open access (no entrance requirements), fee-free preparatory course designed for students who occupy a position of disadvantage (Clarke, Bull, Neil & Birney, 2002). This position of disadvantage stems from membership to one of two groups. Group one is comprised of students under-represented in the Australian higher education landscape, and includes students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students from rural or remote areas and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (James, 2008 Bradley, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Group two is comprised of students identified as less likely to succeed (as measured by retention and grade point average) according to certain background markers such as low entrance scores or prior levels of education achievement, refugee or non-English speaking background (Rienks & Taylor, 2009). Often students belong to more than one group and/or have more than one marker of disadvantage. Fostering participation in higher education from these groups (that is, widening participation) is seen as both an important tool for promoting social equality (Bradley et al., 2008) and as part of a general lifting of educational attainment to allow Australia to compete successfully in the global knowledge economy (Bradley et al. 2008; Gale & Tanter 2011).

The dominant discourse on higher education in Australia and indeed world-wide is one of opportunity. Statistics tell us that having a university education improves your health, job choice, salary and the outcomes for your children and that it is a key factor in breaking cycles of poverty and encouraging movement between social classes (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Bynner, Dolton, Feinstein, Makepeace, Malmberg & Woods, 2002; Goldthrope, 2007). A considerable body of research has been produced over the past 20-30 years focusing on who is not participating in higher education and why, framing this under representation as undesirable (see for example, James, 2001, 2008; Coates & Kraus, 2005; Cardak & Ryan, 2009; Australian Government, 2010; Gale & Tranter, 2011). Initiatives and programs which encourage participation have flourished - enabling education programs being but one example.

Whilst few would challenge the notion that education is desirable, a blanket acceptance of it as 'opportunity' does not necessarily tell the whole story. The reality is that whilst success and retention rates for those students who successfully transition from enabling programs to undergraduate study are comparable with students entering via all other entry methods (Clark et al., 2000), attrition rates of 40-50% within enabling programs themselves are more than twice as high as general undergraduate attrition rates (Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Murray, O'Rourke & Schofield 2013). Some of this may be called 'positive attrition', that is attrition that comes about by a student finding a better alternative (for example, an alternative course or a job) (Hodges et al., 2013). However, the high attrition rate also suggests that entering higher education via this route is not always a successful experience.

To date research into enabling programs and their students in Australia is limited and many aspects of the enabling students' 'story' remain untold. There are indications from related research in other countries or with other groups of students, however, which suggest the negotiation of risk could be a factor in understanding this story, and could provide some explanation for phenomena such as attrition in enabling courses and the continued pattern of under-representation in higher education, as well as informing aspects of program design and delivery risk (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Reay, 2003; Brine & Waller, 2004; Lehmann, 2004; Abbott-Chapman 2011).

Background

Whilst research specifically into enabling students is limited, research into the effect of background on both access and participation in higher education in Australia is quite extensive and strongly suggests that background matters. Students from backgrounds of disadvantage are faced with significant challenges when negotiating a path to higher education, challenges not necessarily faced to the same extent by those from other backgrounds. These include low family and community aspirations and support (Young, 2004; Wilks & Wilson, 2012); less confidence about the benefits of higher education (James, 2010); financial barriers (Young, 2004; James, 2010; Abbott-Chapman, 2011); and a more fractured pathway (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Harris & Marlow, 2011). In addition, once at university, such students continue to face barriers (Devlin, 2010), including a lack of prior knowledge and understanding of the higher education system and requirements (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009; Leese, 2010); difficulties establishing a sense of belonging (Reay, 2001; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009; Meeuwisse, Severiens & Born, 2010); and the demands of negotiating complex past educational experiences, personal circumstances and responsibilities, often with limited resources (Elliot, 2002; Hardin, 2008; Stone, 2009; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Hodges et al., 2013).

Some researchers have suggested that students from backgrounds such as these experience a higher level of risk in accessing higher education. Diane Reay's (2003) study of working-class women in an Access (enabling) course in the UK, for example, concludes that whilst the women were able to take advantage of the larger number of pathways now available in the UK, their level of risk in doing so was far greater than non-working class students. Archer and Hutchings (2000), looking at non-participants in higher education in the UK, also argue that the risks and benefits of higher education are unequally distributed depending on class backgrounds, and that for students from working-class backgrounds, the choice of higher education is both more difficult and more costly. Abbott-Chapman (2011) similarly found that rural, low SES students in Australia needed to individually negotiate their paths to and through higher education and this also meant that they negotiated a much riskier environment.

The Concept of Risk

There is a growing awareness of risk in contemporary, western societies. This has arisen from a sense of unease with the promised benefits of modernity and a broader questioning of established thought and tradition (Lupton, 1999). In recent times there are three main perspectives on risk which have been adopted: the rational actor approach, which sees individuals making objective, rational choices based on scientific information and mathematic calculations to minimise risk; the risk society perspective proposed by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), which sees risk as a defining feature of modern society, though with the breakdown of universal social norms, individuals are required to play a much more significant role in deciding and managing risk; and the socio-cultural perspective, which pays greater attention to the immediate social and cultural context of the individual and how this impacts on their perception of risk (Henwood, Pidgeon, Sarre, Simons & Smith, 2008). This study makes use of the risk society and socio-cultural perspectives of risk. It looks at risk both in terms of how students negotiate experiences and issues which contain uncertainty and the potential for harm, and how they themselves frame their experience.

Methodology

This study was undertaken as a pilot to inform a larger scale study. The aims of this study were to:
1. To investigate the level of awareness of risk amongst students embarking on tertiary level study via UPP.

2. To gain a deeper understanding of both the extent to which students manage risks and hurdles when returning to study, and the mechanisms and resources they employ to do this.

It looks at the way students experience and perceive risk in the early stages of their participation in the UPP. Given that risk is perceived and constructed by individuals in different ways, a qualitative methodology has been employed. By using students own words as the data source, this approach allows for the exploration of multiple realities and for a nuance investigation of the topic on an individual level (Creswell, 2012). Data were collected using one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews enables an exploration of the diverse and complex ways individuals understand the concept of risk and also how they might interpret their experiences (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2006).

Six students were recruited for this study. The students represented a variety of backgrounds and ages as indicated in the table following:

Table 1: Participant details

Name*	Sex	Age	Highest level of school attendance	Background	Goal
Lewis	M	19	Year 12	School leaver. First-in-family.	Not sure. Just seeing if he likes it first.
Michael	M	30	Year 12	Sudanese refugee/non English speaking background. Previously started university but dropped out.	Wants to be a social worker and contribute to his community.
Adele	F	31	Year 12	Married, three children ranging in age from 7 – 12 y.o. Carer for disabled husband	Not sure. Just exploring at this stage. Maybe social work. Maybe IT.
Sonya	F	39	Year 12	Trained and worked as a nanny. Single mother with one 6 y.o. child. First-in-family.	Kindergarten teacher.
Christie	F	20	Year 11	Dropped out at the end of year 11. Worked in retail.	Medical researcher.
Dave	M	49	Year 11	Left school half-way during Year 11 to get a job. Worked as postman and photographer for 30 years.	Not sure. Perhaps nursing.

*Pseudonyms

Findings and discussion

The following sections detail two main themes that arose from this qualitative analysis: dealing with previous education experiences and a discourse of opportunity not risk.

1. Dealing with previous education experiences

All students were asked to describe their previous education experience. In each case they voluntarily offered an explanation as to why they had not continued with their education directly after high school. In all but one case (Lewis) this was ascribed to some personal

failing on their part. Adele described herself as being unable to stick with study in post high school attempts; Sonya attributed her inability to matriculate with falling in with the wrong crowd and not concentrating; Dave described how he and his friends did not value education beyond high school and so he left and got a job; Christie sees herself as not connecting, not being motivated and having poor time management skills; and Michael explained that even though he had a score that enabled him to get into university, it was based on his ability to do Science subjects and when he actually started he found his English was not good enough. Lewis was the only participant who attributed his current situation to things not entirely down to his own actions, describing a mix-up with subject choice that meant he was unable to matriculate and which had left him feeling disheartened and confused, his confidence shattered.

Each student saw participating in UPP as a way of either testing or negating those factors that prevented them from continuing with study. As Dave explains:

> I left school young…. I saw the freedom to do whatever I liked and I had people around me who allowed me to just tag along and go surfing and all those sort of things and not do much schooling…. I saw myself as someone who didn't like school….. And [now] it's like, well I want to see whether I can take to the study; whether it benefits me as a person as well.

For Sonya, studying in UPP allowed her to see if she had the capacity to succeed without risking any financial debt:

> I found this UPP program where I could go to uni and I wouldn't put that great HECS bill on top of me…. That's why I didn't go to uni before-hand, because I'd have to pay and where I was I couldn't afford it. It just scared me, especially if I flunked, because I'd done it previously....

Despite UPP being a pathway which allowed students to meet entry requirements, no students talked about this. Instead, as noted, all the participants spoke about how doing UPP would help them overcome past experiences. In addition, several participants were able to articulate gaps in their current situation or understandings which might make success in undergraduate study harder. They again saw studying in UPP as a way of testing the water, of gauging to what extent these factors would impact them and as a way of acquiring the necessary resources to cope. As Lewis explains in response to a question about why he has enrolled in UPP:

> … to actually see if the university is right for me, how I can adjust to it, especially after last year with all my troubles. To really see how I can adjust again to being in this kind of environment.

Adele wanted to know what university was like, and whether she could manage the many responsibilities she had which included looking after three children, caring for her husband who suffered from bipolar disorder, and managing her own mental health issues of depression and anxiety:

> 'I thought I wouldn't be able to juggle it all, you know the family life and stuff, but I've managed to do it. I've surprised myself. I thought I'd break down, have a meltdown or something'.

Dave wanted a safe environment in which to give university a go. When discussing what kind of things he had considered before enrolling he says, 'I didn't want to look silly, that I was just incapable of it.' Sonya realises that she does not have some of the skills she needs to succeed in undergraduate study:

> I've never done an essay before, that's what I realised…. I've done lots of summaries and projects and things like that, but to actually write an essay is a completely different kettle of fish.

Michael, Lewis and Dave all recognised that study at university meant they needed to adopt a more independent learning style in order to succeed and that studying in UPP was a good way to do this. Michael identified a significant difference in the teaching styles he had been used to in Africa and those at university:

> …. In Africa the teachers have to show you all the instructions …. Here the teacher show you the main point and then you can find that on your own … it is different to the way I learnt it there [in Africa].

Dave, Adele and Lewis also recognised that because they had little previous experience with higher education or people with the right experience to support them, accessing higher education via UPP provided a way of bridging this gap. Lewis describes how he has to find out things for himself because he's 'not exactly able to get that much from people in my life'. Sonya and Michael had considerable support from friends, and also realised this was an important component in their success.

Participants therefore saw UPP as a place to address past failing and as a place which could help them compensate for backgrounds that did prepare them for undergraduate study. Although only one participant (Lewis) specifically identifies doing UPP as a way of managing risk, all students were taking action to help avoid failure or expensive mistakes in undergraduate level study. That is, they were using UPP as a way of mitigating risk before starting undergraduate degrees. In line with Beck's (1992) concept of the risk society, the participants were taking advantage of the opening up of educational opportunity in a more individualistic, post-modern society. Courses such as UPP now provide an alternative entry pathway previously denied to them. Participants in this study recognised that this opportunity contained an element of uncertainty or harm (that is, risk), however, contrary to Beck's contention that individuals in post-modernity were left to manage such opportunity largely on their own, often lacking the knowledge and skills to do so successfully (Lupton 1999) participants were actively used UPP as a risk-management strategy.

2. A discourse of opportunity not risk

A second finding from this small study is that although the actions of students indicated there were risks (as it is understood in current terms as something which contains the potential for uncertainty or harm) in entering into the higher education environment, this was primarily not how they framed their experience. In line with the dominant discourse on higher education, they primarily framed the experiences as one of opportunity.

Each student was able to articulate clearly what they saw as the potential benefit of gaining a degree. For example, for Michael it was the chance of a job and the opportunity to work with his community; Lewis saw that a degree gave him more career choice; Adele saw it as an opportunity to gain confidence and expand her horizons; and Sonya saw it as an opportunity to fulfil a life-long dream to be a teacher and to have a career that suited her situation as a single mother.

When asked what issues/difficulties they had thought about or faced in coming to university, the participants again focused on the opportunities higher education offered. For example, when Sonya was asked this question she went on to describe how her friends had been encouraging her, how her current job (waitress) made it difficult to juggle the demands of parenting and how she also really wanted to do something interesting. She later commented on the fact that she had lost her job as a result of starting her course, and that her finances were very stretched but she did not identify these as significant issues. Adele, the mother of three who cared for a disabled husband and dealt with her own mental health issues, recognised that initially she felt out of place and was unsure how she would cope. However, at the time of the interview she saw no challenges or issues relating to her UPP studies, just the chance to expand her horizons and gain confidence. In general, therefore, the nature of

the answers provided by participants suggested that they did not strongly associate their current experience with risk.

At the very end of the interview each participant was specifically asked whether they considered that what they were doing was risky to further explore how students framed the notion of risk in relation to their experience. Two students (Dave and Adele) were perplexed by this question and asked for further clarification. Adele's response was a simple 'no'. Dave considered his answer, and said that failing, struggling financially and placing himself in a place of uncertainty were risks, but as long as there were rewards along the way, then that was fine. Michael, Sonya and Christie all countered the question, saying that that what they were doing was not risky, but rather something more positive: Christie said, 'I think I am taking a leap rather than a risk'. Lewis thought that a degree might be risky, but not UPP. In fact he saw UPP as his way of gauging the risks and seeing how he would cope.

The ideas presented by students reflect the socio-cultural perspective of risk, that is, that participants construct their notion of risk according to individual and societal goals, values and experiences (Lupton, 1999). Here students largely adopted the dominant discourse in Australian society of education as opportunity. However, the notion of risk was not entirely dismissed but, rather, framed in line with what Henwood et al. (2008) describes as a 'risk-benefit trade off' (p. 432).

Conclusion
Despite not identifying issues in terms of 'risks', all the participants in this small study identified participating in UPP as a way of countering past events which had previously led them to drop out, fail or stop studying. Participants in various ways also identified that they were not yet ready for undergraduate level study. UPP was seen as a way of countering this lack of preparedness. They were thus all taking action to protect themselves against future harm or uncertainty, the essence of the contemporary understanding of risk. However, perhaps because the discourse of higher education in Australia is dominated by the notion of opportunity, students did not perceive their entrance into higher education via UPP as risky. The study suggests that enabling programs are an important mechanism for mitigating risk amongst students who occupy a position of disadvantage as they enter higher education.

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