What drives students who were successful in our Tertiary Preparation enabling Program (TPP)? This report is the foundation of a longitudinal study of a group of successful TPP students and how they managed their undergraduate program.

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A group of successful TPP students volunteered to meet with us to discuss their TPP experiences and the transition into their chosen undergraduate course at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The common characteristics of successful TPP students at USQ were previously researched by the authors in 2013. The results of this study were used to inform the current qualitative data collection. This group of students agreed to be part of a longitudinal study in order to evaluate how they approached the challenge of undergraduate studies and whether the TPP had any long term impact. Their comments about the course were refreshing, often supportive but in some cases challenged the assumptions the course writers and planners had made when developing the program.

The challenge for us as enabling educators is to review some of the underlying assumptions for the TPP courses in order to develop strategies and design learning to better suit the attributes of this diverse cohort of TPP students.

Introduction

This paper is a continuation of research done by the authors in 2013, where responses to a survey by successful students in the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) were reviewed to evaluate whether these students have any common characteristics that might underpin their resilience and persistence (Orth & Robinson, 2013). One of the recommendations from the research was to complete a longitudinal study with these students over the period of their undergraduate studies and prepare a qualitative analysis report of their reflections, to assess the impact that TPP has had on their future studies. This analysis could offer enabling educators greater insight into future course design that may better suit this diverse cohort of students.

The TPP is designed to prepare students from non-traditional pathways to succeed in undergraduate studies at the USQ. If students are successful in the enabling program they are awarded direct entry into the majority of undergraduate programs. The TPP is comprised of three (3) units: Communication, Study Management and Mathematics. The main unit of study is "Studying to Succeed" (TPP7120) which encompasses both Communication and Study Management, and the minor unit of study is an appropriate level of Mathematics. The TPP is a fee-free bridging program. Although these students are enrolled at the university, they are a group of students that are very different from students in the undergraduate programs (Bedford, 2007).

The attrition rates for most enabling courses that do not have minimum academic entrance requirements are more than 50% (Bennett et al., 2012). When students were surveyed by the authors previously, in 2012, to find out what caused so many to discontinue their studies, the response rate was very low (often less than 5%). Once students have made up their mind to discontinue their studies, they have diminished interest in responding to research that will review their attitude, motivation and their reasons to drop out of the program (Porter, 2004). For this reason, this study has focussed on successful students, students who were available at the end of the semester, students who passed the TPP course and ultimately, students who did respond to our requests to have an interview with them.

Conclusions from the 2013 research arising from the survey of TPP students who were successful in completing the course in 2013, indicated that most successful students demonstrated specific characteristics that nurture persistence and resilience (Krause & Coates, 2008). These characteristics included strong motivation, determination, adequate foundation academic skills, confidence, an accurate assessment of ability, independent learning skills, problem solving skills, a definite career path, self-efficacy, access to genuine support, consistent engagement with the course, robust time management skills and a positive attitude towards their lecturers, course and university.

This research draws upon a subset of the students who answered the initial questionnaire to review their perceptions as to why they had been successful, to acquire greater insight about the successful enabling student and provide feedback on the TPP course given their undergraduate experiences.

Background, Theory and Literature Review
As the TPP is a fee-free program, students enrol, not only with the confidence that if they pass TPP they can enter university, but also with the knowledge that if they fail or drop out, there will be no fees to pay. This lack of financial penalty may not be an incentive to continue studying when the work becomes more complex or the assignment load too onerous. More than 50% of TPP students are under 30 years of age, have not been successful in a traditional secondary education, have yet to develop strong tertiary academic skills including good communication skills, have low academic self-efficacy and have yet to experience the rigours of fulltime work (Whannell, Whannell, & Chambers, 2011). The differences outlined are reflected in the high attrition rates associated with enabling courses (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009).

Most research into attrition rates to date has been with undergraduate students. There is a strong indication that by providing targeted support the attrition rates may be reduced (Tinto, 2002). Bird and Morgan (2003) list several factors that affect mature age students ability to complete tertiary studies when studying at a distance. Some of these include: conflicting work and family commitments, financial strain due to decreased paid work as a result of study commitments, time management, both academic and emotional support, degree of approachability of university staff, level of commitment and motivation to study, issues of academic isolation and level of support from partners. One conclusion of the research conducted by Bird and Morgan was that mature aged students studying at a distance should be encouraged to undertake a preparatory program prior to commencing an undergraduate program. Participation in programmes that help students transition into university, the student psychological makeup, student background, student long term goals, and emotional support are certain factors that impact on the student retention rate (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Kuo, Hagie & Miller, 2004).

Recent first year undergraduate studies identify the roller coaster ride of confidence and emotions that students experience in their first year at university. Quality teaching programmes, together with positive social and collaborative learning experiences, are strong determinants of graduate outcomes and must form the foundation of enhanced student learning (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). The TPP may provide more than the academic skills necessary to succeed in an undergraduate program. It may provide emotional support in a non-threatening environment where there is the opportunity to resubmit assignments, to repeat the course without financial penalty, to work with lecturers who assume that their students have very little prior academic knowledge and experience and to genuinely reflect with other fragile TPP students (Ramsay, 2004). The TPP affords a safe environment where students develop confidence to better manage their emotions before they enter main stream university. If these emotions can be managed effectively then students will have greater capacity to succeed in their academic studies (Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005).

This research is limited to the discussion of trends exhibited by successful students rather than trends over a broad range of TPP students (Creswell, 2009). It must also be acknowledged that participants' responses about the TPP may be biased as they were interviewed by lecturers who had taught them within the program.

Methodology into the Research

Emails were sent to the 59 students who responded to the questionnaire at the end of Semester 1 2013, expressing an interest in meeting with them to discuss their thoughts on the TPP course and to find out how they were managing their undergraduate studies. Students who finished the course were considered successful. A small group of ten (10) students replied and interviews were arranged either on campus or by telephone linkup. All of these students had experienced success in their first semester of undergraduate studies. Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the interview sample.

Table 1: Characteristics of the interview sample

		Student count (n = 10)
Age	Under 20	1
	21 to 30	4
	Over 30	5
Gender	Male	2
	Female	8
Current study mode	On campus	5
	External	5
Initial undergraduate semester enrolment	2 subjects	2
	3 subjects	2
	4 subjects	6
Subsequent semester enrolment	2 subjects	5
	3 subjects	3
	4 subjects	2

Males (2) were under-represented in the group. Students who were under 20 years of age (1) were also under-represented. Because the size of the response group was small (10 out of a possible 59), the findings may not be typical of the complete group of successful students.

A few questions were constructed, to reflect the 2013 research, to be open ended, to elicit the views of the participants and to foster a relaxed and non - threatening interview environment (Creswell, 2009). The questions and processes were approved by the USQ ethics committee. The interviews were not recorded but comprehensive hand written notes were made during the interview. These notes were typed the same day to make certain that the details were accurate and complete. An alphabetic code was allocated to each student to retain their anonymity.

Interview responses were grouped into several themes (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). These included: strategies to cope, drive and motivation, academic support, emotional support, background, perceptions of TPP and general comments.

Analysis of interviews grouped into themes

Background: Most of the participants described themselves as being the first in their family to attend university, with no family encouragement to attempt higher education. Secondary schooling was generally completed, with two of the students having pursued an OP (Overall Position is the Tertiary Entrance Score Equivalent) pathway. One student had only

completed year 10 at secondary school. Participants' secondary schooling was followed by an assortment of multiple, mainly unskilled, jobs. Two individuals had completed a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) course but did not remain in their area of training. Overall, the participants disclosed feelings of dissatisfaction with their past and current employment and a desire to upgrade their skills; "I am tired of working in dead end jobs" (student E). They perceived that a degree would enable them to find an occupation that they would find satisfying and rewarding.

Strategies implemented to cope with studies: For most students, the main strategies were associated with being organised and following a study plan, with an emphasis on quality and quantity of study time. One student mentioned the strict prioritising of her time. A few students gave a more in-depth view of their strategies, which included class attendance or listening to all lectures online, lurking on the Study Desk forum, being very aware of any lecturer recommendations, taking notes, printing out all study notes, and getting assignments completed ahead of time. One student commented on the usefulness of USQ Facebook pages in preference to the USQ course forums: "It is not the fear of Big Brother watching but I can ask any question without feeling foolish."

These strategies suggest that the mature aged students in this study tend towards a strategic approach to learning; they have developed strategies to ensure that they pass their courses but make no mention of the need to become immersed in their studies. A surface level approach to learning is associated with rote learning but not necessarily an understanding of what has been learnt, whilst a deep level approach occurs when a student makes a determined effort to understand the subject content. In-between these extremes, is a strategic approach to learning – where the student aims to get the highest grade by using their time and intellectual resources effectively (McLoone & Oluwadun, 2014). Students that employ a strategic approach may move between surface and deep level approaches, depending on their perception of the requirements of the course. Mature-aged students are more inclined to a deep or strategic approach to learning than school leavers and the personality trait of conscientiousness is linked to a strategic approach (Burton, Taylor, Dowling, & Lawrence, 2009). Low SES students are more likely to have worked consistently during the semester and are more strategic about managing their workload (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). The observed strategic approach of the participants in our study appears to be consistent with the findings of these other studies.

Drive and motivation: Some common themes that emerged were: the desire to be a role model for others in their lives, the need to have a career that gave job satisfaction, and concern about the future both emotionally and financially. For certain students, there was the need to prove themselves, arising from fear of failure or the determination to rectify opportunities not taken up in the past. Student A noted that she was concerned about what she would do in the future when her children had left home and her husband continued to work long hours; "I need to do this for myself." Three students made specific reference to their interest in their career choice as part of their drive, with student C stating "I have always had a passion to do this" about her intended occupation. A fourth student indicated the importance of finding a degree that was of personal interest but had as yet not achieved this goal. James, Krause and Jennings (2010) noted that students indicated that the most important reason to enrol at university was to pursue a field of interest, followed by better job prospects. This attitude was evident in the group of students who were interviewed, although indications are that the priorities of participants in this study held job prospects as most important.

Deci and Ryan (1991) (as cited in Fazey & Fazey, 2001) describe motivation as a continuum, ranging from intrinsic (interested in study for its own sake) to three (3) levels of extrinsic motivation. The extrinsic levels of motivation are identified regulation (interest in achieving for own personal reasons), introjected regulation (a fear of failure, desire to prove

ones worth, anticipation of a reward) and external regulation (studying with the aim of better job prospects). It would appear that the majority of students in this study traverse the spectrum of extrinsic motivation.

In the current educational environment, students need to be able to work independently and process information more autonomously than those of previous generations (Pelgrum, 2001). Chan (2001) maintains that the autonomous learner must develop the capacity to take charge of every aspect of his/her learning, including setting learning goals, identifying and developing learning strategies to achieve such goals, developing study plans, identifying problem areas and addressing these problems, identifying and selecting relevant resources and support, and assessing personal progress. Students can be described as autonomous if they are intrinsically motivated, if they have confidence in their ability to achieve and if they believe themselves to generally be in control of their own success or failure (Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Although the participants in this study indicate that they are more extrinsically motivated, they do show many of the other attributes of autonomous learners.

Participants in this study have very often had to face and overcome great personal challenges in their lives. Many of these challenges may be more extreme than traditional undergraduate students. For example, student H confessed to being a recovering alcoholic who had to keep busy to stay focussed. Student I was a single mother of two who had stepped out of an abusive relationship and did not want to be the sort of person "who just meets other mothers to discuss their children and never achieves anything else". Student F felt desperate about her family's poor financial situation, with three children to support and a partner who did not seem to worry about money. She was employed in evening work and often had to study into the small hours of the night. Student B who had major health problems was determined to prove that her father's scepticism about her completing a degree was unfounded. However she was not sure whether his "goading" was a round-about way to motivate her. She wants to prove him wrong. Student C, who had a child in the final year of secondary schooling, articulated extreme concerns about environmental issues and social injustice and as a result decided not to have any more children later in life when her personal life had become more stable. The impression given by these participants was that their life experiences had made them stronger and more able to face the challenges of studying.

Support network: The response to the open ended question "Do you have a support network?" was interpreted practically by several students as having someone with greater academic knowledge to support them in their studies. Student B indicated that there was a need to develop strategies to cope with less academic support in undergraduate studies, compared to that given in TPP. The majority of students responded by identifying the person(s) that would provide the greatest emotional and practical support, including sharing home and family responsibilities. This support was perceived to be very important in their ability to manage their studies. Only one person indicated that she was indifferent to family support.

Studies with first year students note the importance of the social support network for student retention (Gerdes, 1994; Wilox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). These studies predominantly focused on the traditional school leaver entering university and their need to form a peer social network. The participants in this study are not the traditional student, but have still voiced the need for a strong support network and identified the type of support that they personally require.

Effectiveness of the TPP pathway as a transition to university: The most noticeable response to this question was that success in the TPP had given the student the boost of confidence needed to pursue an undergraduate degree. Most of the students felt that the TPP gave them an advantage compared to school leavers when transitioning into university

as they had a better understanding of academic writing and referencing, they were also familiar with the USQ system of a webpage "Study Desk" and the associated forums for connecting with lecturers and students, and they recognised how to seek assistance with academic issues. Although the Study Management component of the TPP was acknowledged as being useful, several students indicated that they felt they had study management skills already. Others felt that it had assisted in developing organizational skills for independent study.

On the negative side, two students indicated that the TPP should be taught over two (2) semesters to provide opportunity for the consolidation of their academic skills and learning processes. One of these students suggested that the gap between TPP and undergraduate studies was too great. Another student felt that the workload in TPP did not sufficiently prepare her for undergraduate studies and that she had initially been over confident. Although this sentiment was not expressed by other participants, a review of their enrolment patterns showed that of the six students that initially enrolled in a full-time load of four courses, four have subsequently cut this back to two or three courses per semester. The youngest student in the group of participants had the most negative comments about the TPP's effectiveness in preparing students for undergraduate studies.

The overall view of the participants was that the TPP provided a stepping stone to their undergraduate studies, with differing opinions as to whether the size of the step was sufficient. This contrasts with a study of mature-aged students moving into university from a further education college (Christie, et al., 2008), where participants in that research expressed feelings of 'learning shock' in transitioning into their undergraduate studies – they felt the loss of knowledge on how the system worked and a loss of understanding of the academic standard of work expected.

How interviewed students viewed other students who were not successful in their tertiary studies: The opinions of participants gave insight into the qualities that they perceive themselves to have.

Comments included
- They find it hard to take criticism
- They need to learn to be resilient
- They do not stay up to date with their work
- They develop a pattern of failure when they fall behind
- They are not organised
- They are not committed
- They have no goals
- They were not motivated and had no plan – some friends had successfully completed TPP, decided to take a break and had still not enrolled in an undergraduate course
- Younger students lack maturity and have limited life experience to motivate them

General comments on the TPP course: Many students indicated that they had struggled with referencing skills in their undergraduate studies and although they had been taught the basic referencing skills, they believed they would have benefited from a more comprehensive review in the TPP . A suggestion that the TPP could teach better research skills for locating relevant references was also noted.

Most students expressed their appreciation for the generous support provided by the lecturers and the TPP team. This generous support was perceived as not being available in undergraduate studies and students were compelled to develop alternative coping strategies.

Discussion

Although most students expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to complete the TPP as an enabling course, and were able to outline the various ways the course had helped facilitate the transition into an undergraduate degree at USQ, there were some reservations expressed that need further analysis. At the core of an enabling course is the support provided by a dedicated and caring staff. The curriculum is also designed so that most students who make the appropriate effort will succeed. It is challenging but not too challenging for these successful TPP students. As a result of the generous staff support and their success in TPP, these students confidently enrolled in undergraduate studies. However, later in their first year studies, several students recognised that there was a larger than expected academic gap between the TPP and their undergraduate course. This academic gap may have emerged as a result of the lighter work load in the TPP (3 credit points for fulltime TPP, compared to 4 credit point for a fulltime undergraduate course), the considerable support when doing assignments, the relaxed assignment submission deadlines and the generous resubmission policy of the TPP, compared to the inflexible undergraduate assignment conditions. Course planners have purposefully built these features into the TPP to provide new students with a better opportunity to transition into undergraduate studies.

These intentional modifications should enhance the framework of good enabling education so as to provide confidence and equitable opportunity for students of all abilities. For the more able students who were part of this research, these modifications may have contributed to over-confidence that often led them to make unsuitable decisions in their undergraduate studies. Some of these decisions may have been: enrolling in too many courses, enrolling in courses that may have been too difficult, not spending enough time preparing assignments, and under-estimating the expectations of required research. Although these students were able to overcome poor decisions and re-strategize, it is questionable as to whether all graduates from TPP are able to adjust for initial poor decisions. Whether there is any significant difference between these students who chose TPP as a pathway compared to traditional undergraduates may be worthy of future research. However, the students interviewed expressed the view that these aspects need to be "tightened up" so as to decrease the academic expectation gap and in so doing better prepare students to meet the challenges of undergraduate work. It will be interesting to observe how this attitude may change over the longitudinal study.

Most students interviewed were motivated, organised and were strategic in their planning. They indicated that there had been some problem that transpired during their secondary education which was the catalyst for not proceeding with a tertiary education. At school, they had had the ability but lacked the application and discipline to develop the academic skills necessary for successful undergraduate studies. Most students had found multiple, mundane unrewarding jobs or had periods of unemployment after secondary school. These experiences, together with maturing and life experience, were the basis for finding the TPP pathway into tertiary studies. These students had the ability, the motivation and often a long term career goal before they started the TPP and now welcomed the opportunity to overcome previous issues that had thwarted their progress into tertiary studies. Even though they had possessed many of the skills that were taught in the TPP, they were appreciative of the opportunity to revisit and better develop them in order to gain greater confidence to succeed in future undergraduate studies.

Conclusions

Previous research responses to a survey, completed by successful TPP students, indicated that these students had several attributes that contributed to their success. The interviews with these ten successful students re-affirmed the conclusions of our previous research: they were motivated, determined, had good problem-solving skills, were independent learners,

acknowledged the need for the support of family and friends and had a positive attitude towards their lecturers, course and university.

Over and above these attributes the participants collectively left us with the impression that nothing would deter them from achieving their educational goals. Their determination was evident in the way they spoke, by what they had done so far, problems they had managed or overcome and what they planned to do in the future. They demonstrated the capacity to be independent and not be victims of the struggles that had confronted them so far in their lives. This determination and independence had nurtured genuine confidence to succeed. They perceived themselves to have a greater desire and need to succeed than many of their fellow students. The life stories of these participants revealed that most had considerable life challenges during their secondary schooling, during the period after secondary school and now, whilst in their undergraduate studies, compared to traditional university students. They may not have managed these challenges very well as adolescents, but now they had developed robust strategies to manage those problems and new ones in their adulthood. Further research may establish that students who were not successful in developing these effective problem management strategies, prior to or during TPP most likely had dropped out throughout the course.

Recommendations
- Undergraduate preparation for successful students can be enhanced by reducing the size of the academic gap between the TPP and the first year undergraduate courses
- A larger sample size should be reviewed to ascertain if there are groups of successful students who would be disadvantaged by reducing the academic gap
- Develop student study management skills to enable students to capitalise on existing coping skills and the formulation of effective survival strategies
- Recognise that most successful TPP students often have academic ability but do not have the academic experience that is provided by the course
- As there were only a small group of recent school leavers, further research needs to be done with the growing age group of 18-20 years of age
- The research has revealed some interesting insights into TPP and should provide the necessary incentive for the longitudinal study to continue.

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