

**ENGAGING MATURE-AGED LEARNERS: EVALUATING THE ENGAGEMENT OF STUDENTS
IN THE OPEN-ACCESS OPEN FOUNDATION ENABLING PROGRAM**

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Abstract

This paper documents a research project on student engagement that was conducted in the Open Foundation enabling program offered by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre at the University of Newcastle, Australia. While most of the national and institutional studies on student engagement in Australia completed to date have focused on undergraduate students, this project adds to the small but growing number of studies on student engagement in open-access enabling programs. Results indicate that factors beyond the control of the university, such as paid employment, First-in-Family status, and time pressure may have the most significant impact upon engagement in learning of students from equity groups typically underrepresented in tertiary education.

Introduction

Building upon well-established survey instruments currently used in Australia, the UK, and the US to measure student engagement, this project makes a significant contribution to research in the field by shifting the focus away from undergraduate programs to include factors that influence the engagement of students in open-access enabling programs. Specifically, the findings of this project provide insight into the factors affecting the engagement of students enrolled in Open Foundation – an open-access enabling program offered by the University of Newcastle, Australia. Students in this institution's enabling programs are often identified as belonging to equity groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities, students from regional and/or remote areas, and students from a non-English-speaking background. It is anticipated that the ongoing investigation into the engagement of enabling students will ultimately better inform the equity initiatives and types of support currently offered, such as learning support, Peer Assisted Support Sessions (PASS), counselling, and careers advice. In addition, the project provides the opportunity to report on the impact of factors affecting students that are within the control of practitioners (e.g. offering a choice of program modalities, the provision of targeted support, and scheduling considerations) and to discern them from those external factors that institutions may have little control over (e.g. extensive work or family commitments).

Although there are various definitions of student engagement, e.g. student involvement with teaching and learning activities whether they be classroom attendance or completing assessment tasks, other definitions take a broader view and include cognitive and emotional factors in addition to these behavioural factors. However, as Trowler (2010) notes, other factors contributing to the definition of student engagement include the involvement of students in making decisions, as well as the formation or adjustment of their own personal identity and epistemological beliefs regarding higher education. A great deal of evidence suggests that tertiary student retention and success are linked to how engaged students are in their degree or program, and an increase in engagement also enhances retention and success (Kift & Field, 2009; Scott, 2008; Taylor & Parsons, 2011; Tinto, 2012; Yam & Burger, 2009; Zepke, 2013). Therefore, it is in the interest of educators to enhance student engagement regardless of whether the student is at the undergraduate or enabling level.

Enabling Programs at the University of Newcastle

The University of Newcastle is the largest provider of enabling programs in Australia, with the English Language & Foundation Studies Centre operating each of the institution's three enabling programs (Yapug, Newstep, and Open Foundation)ⁱ at the (larger) Callaghan and (smaller) Ourimbah campuses. Catering for mature-aged students, the Open Foundation program is the largest of its kind in Australia and has helped over 40,000 people access university since the program was established in 1974. Students entering the program often experience various personal, psychological, health, and/or academic barriers that have a demonstrable impact upon their access to – and success in – tertiary education (Hodges et al., 2013). In addition to offering a suite of student support services, the Open Foundation program seeks to meet the needs of its very diverse student profile by allowing for a range of study modes (on-campus, online, part-time, and full-time) that provide more flexibility than is typically offered in tertiary pathway programs.

The findings in this paper will help to understand better the specific factors that influence the engagement of students in this enabling program. Indeed, the use of the survey may inform staff in the program to allow them to appropriately support students that may result in better outcomes.

Methods

Project and Instrument Design

The purpose of this project is to explore how the experiences in open-access enabling programs shape student engagement and motivate students to continue their studies. Having a better understanding of the factors influencing the engagement of these students may give program providers greater insight into whether engagement may be improved through strategies such as further training of teaching staff and the provision of additional support services. It will also determine if the effect of such initiatives may be reduced by factors outside the university that the university cannot control.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the project involved a single online questionnaire created using Survey Monkey software. It contained 23 questions divided into nine sections. The survey design was based on three established survey instruments examining student engagement at undergraduate levels: the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), the UK Engagement Survey (UKES), and the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). It was then further refined and adapted to suit the specific aims of the project and the enabling cohort. For example, in *Section 2: Learning Barriers*, the items that appear in the survey (e.g. juggling work and study, caring for children, mental health issues) were included because of anecdotal evidence collected by the authors over a number of years.

The survey covered a range of relevant factors that influence student engagement, including student perceptions of teaching and support, barriers to learning, motivation, and career aspiration. The design of the survey instrument also enabled the analysis of the following variables: mode of program delivery, gender, age group, full-time or part-time program enrolment, campus, various equity groupings, and employment status. In addition, the survey instrument provided participants with the opportunity to write open-ended comments after each section of the survey, allowing qualitative data analysis to identify any recurring themes.

Recruitment and Data Collection

All 1400 students who were enrolled in Open Foundation (on both campuses and in both modes) at the beginning of Semester 2, 2015 were invited to participate in the survey. An

email was sent to each student containing a brief description of the purpose of the study and a link to the survey on the Survey Monkey website. A reminder was sent one week after the initial email was sent. The survey remained open for three weeks.

The targeted cohort of students consisted of two groups. The first group was in the second semester of the part-time (online and on-campus) Open Foundation program and the second group was in the first (and only) semester of the on-campus full-time program. Out of the potential cohort of 1400 students, 152 returned responses. This represents a response rate of 10.9%. This may at first seem low; however, the figure of 1400 represents the total number of students enrolled at the beginning of Semester 2, and considering industry-wide attrition rates, the final figure of 152 responses may represent a somewhat reasonable proportion of students who remained active in the program at the time of the survey. Of these respondents, 69.7% were female, 28.3% were male, and 2.0% responded with unspecified / indeterminate / intersex. This is approximately proportional to average enrolments in the program, where female students constitute 60% of the cohort and males 40%. The division into age groups slightly favoured the group 20-30, making up 55.3% of the cohort, while the remaining 44.7% were aged 31 and above.

Quantitative Analysis

Survey Monkey automatically calculated basic quantitative statistical results for each of the survey items, providing much of the data in this paper. Further analysis using the statistical program LMP allowed for the identification of significant differences in the responses between sub-groups.

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2013) and Bryman (2012), was used to discern the main themes from the open-response questions of the survey. The items analysed for this particular study were *Please tell us about other ways you are engaged in learning* and *I was thinking of withdrawing from Open Foundation because of...* as the authors sought more insight into these areas.

Discussion of Results

A brief overview of equity group considerations is provided below as a preface to the following discussion of results from selected sections of the survey that relate to learning barriers, student engagement in learning, the Open Foundation experience, and student motivation to stay and complete their studies.

Limitations

The pilot study nature of this paper led to a number of limitations that will be addressed in future iterations of this project. The timing of the survey may have influenced the number of respondents and to which cohort they belong. Firstly, the survey was undertaken mid-way through Semester 2. That means that students in the part-time program completing the survey were, by definition, more likely to be engaged because they had already successfully completed one semester of the two-semester program. Those doing the part-time program who had been less engaged would most likely not have completed Semester 1 and moved onto Semester 2. Secondly, in the full-time program, those students who had been least engaged may have disengaged before the survey's implementation. However, this does not entirely exclude those students who were no longer engaged in the program because these students would have received an email based on their enrolment at the beginning of the semester not on their current engagement at the time of the survey. Additionally, providing only two options for students to report their ages (20-30 and 31 and above) limits the quality of data, preventing close analysis of trends linked to age.

Equity Groups

Of the 152 responses received, over one-third of students did not identify as belonging to a specific equity group. However, as shown in Figure 1 below, the largest portion of students indicated that they were the first in their family to attend university. In descending order, the other equity groups nominated by respondents were regional or remote location, having a disability or medical condition, non-native speakers of English, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. The smallest portion of respondents identified as holders of a Permanent Humanitarian Visa. Note: Students were able to choose multiple responses if they identified as belonging to more than one category.

Table 1 The proportion of students belonging to various equity groups. Note: The table represents the percentages of responses to this item not the total number of participants because some students identified as belonging to more than one equity group.

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
First in my family to attend the University	40.9%	70
Regional/remote location	8.2%	14
Disability or medical condition	7.0%	12
Non-native English speaker	4.1%	7
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander origin	2.9%	5
Holder of a Australian Permanent Humanitarian Visa	1.2%	2
None of the above	35.7%	61
<i>Total responses</i>	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>171</i>

Although two-fifths of all respondents identify as being in the group First-in-Family, it is important to recognise that not all students belong to this cohort, and, in fact, a roughly similar portion did not identify as belonging to any of the specified equity groups. However, also of importance is that the survey did not provide an option for students to identify themselves as having a low-socioeconomic status, which could potentially be the largest cohort.

Learning Barriers

For this item, students were presented with a list of 15 potential learning barriers. They then had to identify the top five learning barriers they were experiencing and rank them in order of impact from 1 (having the most impact) to 5 (having the least impact). Table 2 below shows the average ranking of what students considered barriers to their learning, in order. As shown in the table, the largest barrier to learning indicated by students was juggling work and study, followed by financial difficulties, caring for children, academic writing skills, and mental health issues. Except for academic writing skills, these learning barriers are outside the influence of teaching staff. Items that students did not rank highly as learning barriers included engagement with teachers, physical disability and/or health issues, or technology, such as the Blackboard Learning Management System.

Table 2 Learning barriers experienced by students ranked from most important to least important.

Answer Options	Rank
Juggling work and study	1
Financial difficulties	2
Caring for children	3
Academic writing skills	4
Mental health issues, e.g. anxiety, depression	5
Adjusting to the University learning environment	6
Distance from the University	7
Engaging with peers (in class or online)	8
Mathematic skills	9
Oral presentation skills	10
Caring for parents or other family	11
Personal health issues	12
Engaging with teachers	13
Physical disability and/or physical health issues	14
Using technology (e.g. Blackboard)	15

As indicated in Table 2, students reported that juggling work and study provided the biggest learning barrier they were experiencing. This is closely followed by caring for children and experiencing financial difficulties. Given these results, enhancing student engagement could involve expanding program flexibility when it comes to offering online courses or both day and evening classes. Other strategies may be to encourage teachers to be flexible with assessment task due dates and assist students by teaching better time management skills or strategies on how to deal with competing priorities.

Mental health issues and academic writing skills were still considered learning barriers, but not to the same extent as working, family commitments, and financial pressures. Students are expected to be quite computer literate and they are often instructed to approach teaching staff when they have an issue. Fortunately, responses indicate that using technology and engaging with teachers provided very little barrier to learning.

Engagement in Learning

As shown in Table 3 below, the most common way students measured their engagement was by submitting their assessments on time, regularly accessing learning materials on Blackboard, and attending classes. Student perceptions of factors influencing their engagement were lowest for the categories of participating in online discussions, interacting

with students outside study requirements, and accessing learning support. It is important to note, however, that comparison of quantitative and qualitative data revealed marked variance between these rankings and the way that students reported their engagement in the open-ended comments of that section of the survey.

Table 3 Responses to the prompt "My Engagement in Learning" showing average rating out of five.

Answer Options	Rating Average (out of 5)
I submitted assessments on time	4.68
I regularly accessed learning materials on Blackboard	4.62
I attended classes	4.55
I spent time studying while off campus	4.51
I participated in face-to-face discussions	3.85
I feel I belong as a student at the University of Newcastle	3.85
I spent time using library resources	3.76
I interacted with my teachers while studying	3.37
I worked with other students as part of my study	3.14
I participated in online discussions	2.85
I interacted with students outside study requirements	2.83
I accessed learning support services (e.g. PASS, BOOST, Learning Development)	2.76

Thematic analysis of the qualitative responses in this section of the survey revealed two main themes: the way students interacted with others in their learning, and the students' view of themselves as independent learners. Both themes are discussed in the following sections.

Interactions with Others

Whilst accessing learning support rates the lowest in the quantitative data, it features quite prominently in the qualitative feedback, as did other activities based on interactions with others, including teaching staff, students, and other (external) parties. In the quantitative data, students tended to rank individual activities or materials offered by teaching staff (e.g. assessments, Blackboard online course materials, classes) more highly. However, among the open-ended questions, the themes of interacting with others (compared to working independently) arose. In addition to students reporting connections with teaching staff (e.g. "I email teachers for clarification about essays", "Discussion with lecturers"), respondents also commented on interacting with peers or former students either as a group or individually (e.g. "Email contact with other students", "I have organised and participated in study groups"). In

addition, students' comments detailed their engagement in terms of additional support provided by the institution, such as by attending Learning Development workshops, consulting the Learning Adviser, going to PASS sessions or drop-in sessions, and participating in UONPREP preparatory short-courses.

Another notable aspect of learning engagement includes seeking assistance from external sources. For instance, students noted that they were receiving private instruction from paid tutors (e.g. *"I saw a science tutor... once a week, she was really helpful to have for the year. Made understanding [my course] much easier"*, *"I have study groups with other students and I go to tutoring"*). Others framed their learning engagement alongside assistance received from family (e.g. *"My brother (physics student) and sister (nursing student) both attend university, I utilised their wisdom for help with mathematics and nursing – 'academic writing'"*, *"Tutoring from family members"*), even if this meant simply being able to discuss their studies with family members (e.g. *"Talking with family about what I am learning"*).

Independent Learners

Although working with others was a clear theme in the qualitative data, some students did stress the importance of independent study as a key factor in their engagement with learning (e.g. *"I set myself homework as I feel I am not retaining information - so I review work"*). Building upon this independent approach is the student practice of seeking additional information from the open internet (e.g. *"Following podcasts and Facebook pages related to my classes for extra information"*, *"I used YouTube a lot. There is a video for everything on YouTube"*). Another set of comments that further reflect the need for increasingly flexible teaching approaches relates to where these students are attempting to engage with their studies. According to a number of respondents, the physical location of study varied, including the university library, home, outdoors, or on public transport (e.g. *"Spend time while travelling by train studying"*, *"I use my time on public transport and in breaks to complete lots of tasks and study, I find it challenging to study and work at home"*).

Open Foundation Experience

In this section, participants were asked to relate their experience in the program by ranking 16 items on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). As shown below in Table 4, the highest-ranking items in this section related to the program's teaching staff and what they provide (e.g. teaching and learning materials on Blackboard, the

teacher’s knowledge, etc.), a result that might indicate that students expect the teachers to pass on knowledge using a traditional didactic approach. However, it is important to mention here that teaching staff are often the only staff with whom students have contact. Therefore, this may mean that to improve the overall experience of students in the program, a focus on the professional development of teaching staff may be of greatest benefit, along with dedicated time for the preparation of the highest-quality materials.

Table 4 Responses to the item "Your experience so far in Open Foundation", average ratings given out of five.

Answer Options	Rating Average (out of 5)
I was able to access online resources on Blackboard	4.61
Teaching staff had good knowledge of the subject matter	4.57
The learning materials were useful and relevant	4.46
Teaching staff helped me in learning	4.45
I received timely feedback on my assessments	4.45
Teaching staff were available for consultation	4.43
Open Foundation has given me confidence to undertake an undergraduate degree	4.43
Assessment requirements were clear	4.39
Assessment feedback received helped me in learning	4.35
The information received prior to enrolment has been useful	4.16
The academic advice received was useful	4.16
Orientation was helpful in preparing myself for University	4.03
Academic skills workshops were useful	4.02
The timetable was flexible and allowed me to attend classes and manage other commitments	4.00
Careers advice was useful	3.81
Counselling was useful	3.80

The factors that respondents ranked lowest included items that were outside the direct influence of teaching staff (e.g. academic skills workshops additional to their course, flexibility of the timetable, careers advice, and counselling). Although, at first glance, the results in Table 4 appear to indicate that such services were seen as least useful of the options offered, Table 5 below reveals that a number of students chose the “Not applicable” option and those items marked as such are in reverse proportion to the items ranked lowest in the table above. Whilst further investigation is required before making any substantive claims about the rationale behind the relative usefulness of support, this finding does link with previously-mentioned quantitative results suggesting students value independent learning above learning with others. Furthermore, although these findings do suggest that a re-evaluation of the

effectiveness of existing support resources may be required, it is important to note that quite a large proportion of students did not make use of these additional, non-compulsory, support services and therefore could not express a particular opinion of them. This could be related to the abovementioned independence of students, a reluctance to make use of support services, or even a lack of student awareness of the support services available. In case of the latter, one relatively simple solution would be to encourage teaching staff to better advertise and normalise these support mechanisms to improve student perceptions of them.

Table 5 Percentage of "Not applicable" responses to item "Your experience so far in Open Foundation"

Answer Options	% of respondents who clicked N/A
Counselling was useful	41.91
Careers advice was useful	30.88
Academic skills workshops were useful	27.94
Orientation was helpful in preparing myself for University	10.29
I received timely feedback on my assessments	5.88
Assessment feedback received helped me in learning	5.88
I was able to access online resources on Blackboard	2.21
Teaching staff were available for consultation	2.21
Open Foundation has given me confidence to undertake an undergraduate degree	2.21
The academic advice received was useful	2.21
Teaching staff had good knowledge of the subject matter	1.47
The learning materials were useful and relevant	1.47
Teaching staff helped me in learning	1.47
Assessment requirements were clear	1.47
The information received prior to enrolment has been useful	1.47
The timetable was flexible and allowed me to attend classes and manage other commitments	0.74

Motivation to Stay and Complete Studies

Close to one-third (32.1%) of respondents indicated that they had considered withdrawing at some point during the program. These students were asked to respond to the prompt "*I was thinking of withdrawing from Open Foundation because of...*". Table 6 below lists the ranked items in this section. As was the case with responses to the *Engagement in Learning* section of the questionnaire, the results for this category reveal that factors outside the institution's control had caused students to consider withdrawing from the program more than internal factors. In order, these factors were family pressures (e.g. caring for family),

followed by mental health issues, employment commitments, or physical disability and/or health issues. At the other end of the scale, the factors that were least likely to cause a student to consider withdrawing were all within the control of the program (e.g. clear assessment requirements, useful information provided prior to enrolment, flexible timetabling).

Table 6 Responses to item "I was thinking of withdrawing from Open Foundation because of..." (Rating Average given out of 3, where 3 is most important)

Answer Options	Rating Average (out of 3)
Family pressures (e.g. caring for family)	2.09
Mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression)	1.77
Employment commitments	1.74
Physical disability and/or physical health issues	1.40
I felt isolated for other reasons	1.37
Timetable was not suitable	1.33
I felt isolated from the peer group	1.28
Difficulties using online learning technologies (e.g. Blackboard)	1.26
Teaching staff did not give enough feedback or individual help	1.23
Poor quality of teaching	1.12
Open Foundation was not right for me	1.09
Teaching staff were difficult to access	1.07

Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses in this section of the survey provided much more insight into the variety of reasons why students had considered withdrawing. The three identified themes are course-specific factors, student self-perception, and external factors, each of which is expanded upon below.

Course-specific Factors

First, in regards to the comments that were specific to the program, the quantity of coursework apparently caused enough concern for some students to consider withdrawing, with one respondent noting that, "I found it difficult to handle such a large amount of course work for a part time course. As previously stated, I think it would be great to re-evaluate that". Another student encountered similar issues around workload expectations, explaining, "I found it hard to keep up some weeks with the [course], we would have huge weeks that were an overload, and then other weeks that were so small, not really spread evenly". In addition to anxiety caused by the amount of work required, some participants also expressed their distress over the difficulty of some content in courses:

Due to the [course] exam preparation sheet being very hard, with contents in it that we had been taught. I thought the semester exam was going to be as hard and thought if I couldn't complete the practice sheet, I couldn't do the exam. Lucky I was encouraged by my family to give it a go.

Feedback was another issue that students cited as causing some concern and made them consider withdrawing. One student explains, “[I] thought I wasn't doing well enough to succeed, but was half way through before I got any feedback from one of my classes so it is worth continuing”. Another goes into even more detail as they describe their frustration when results do not reflect the effort they felt they had put into their studies:

I find it difficult to understand why my marks for this subject do not improve with each assignment/assessment, when I work so hard to study/read, and understand the subject material, and spend so much time working on each assignment.

In addition, one student stated that they felt being an online student had disadvantaged them, saying, “I do think the staff pick their favourite students to give extra help to. But once again I guess that's a distance thing”.

Student Self-perception

Secondly, and slightly overlapping with some of these comments, are those factors related to a student's sense of self that had caused them to consider withdrawing. Such reasons included students' ideas of their learning style (e.g. “Because of my way of learning”, “I have poor time management skills and focus too much on receiving high marks to be successful in gaining entry into a degree that everything else suffers”) as well as anxiety over assessments (e.g. “It was just me stressing over my first essay ever! I felt I just couldn't do it, but I did! My teacher's words of encouragement got me through”). However, one of the most significant recurring triggers for students contemplating withdrawal from the program was a perceived lack of the student's own ability (e.g. “Wasn't sure I was capable”). Such sentiments are made particularly explicit in the following two comments:

I sometimes feel that I'm wasting the university's time and resources by being there, because I doubt my abilities, and am fearful I won't gain acceptance into an undergrad course.

I felt I was not getting the marks I needed and that I was not smart enough even though I was studying day and night. I now have decided to just complete the course and if I don't get the ATAR needed to get into a course that's ok because I can feel proud that I at least completed it.

External Factors

The final category of factors that made a number of students think about leaving is external to the program. Appearing to cause the most tension were factors involving external commitments, such as family and work. Writing about the pressure of trying to combine new study with family responsibilities, one student explained, *“I was scared trying to fit in children and full time study”*, whilst another rationalised contemplating withdrawal from the program by saying, *“I simply felt I was trying to take on too much in my life”*. The difficulties of working whilst trying to study caused similar tension, with one student noting their anxiety over *“assignment dates and test dates, as I have to apply for leave at work and I might not get that leave”*. Another confessed:

Honestly, it was overwhelming. I work a lot of hours and it can be tough doing a course on top of that. The tutorial timetable rarely worked for me as it was always coinciding with my shifts, so I rarely got an opportunity to get on for the live sessions (not [the program's] fault, just explaining).

The distance from the campus also featured as a factor for at least one student considering withdrawal (e.g. *“I wake at 4:25am, to catch a train to uni and come home in the arvo [...] to get back home by 8pm”*). In addition, students commented upon financial concerns (e.g. *“Government won't support me with any \$\$”*) and even the complications of property damage due to severe weather (e.g. *“We had big storms in Newcastle and as a result of this I had no electricity, water, and house was a mess and thought I would get behind but I slogged it out and got there”*) as factors that had prompted them to consider withdrawing from the Open Foundation program.

Conclusions

Within the current climate of tertiary education, pressure to enhance student engagement, demonstrated through the expected subsequent improvement in student retention and success, is mounting. University administrators have a stake in student engagement, but enabling educators, often by their very nature, wish to see their students

engage and succeed in their courses. With such keen interest at the level of both policy and practice, a number of concrete strategies may improve the engagement of enabling students.

First, it is important to recognise that a good deal of the students surveyed here prefer to work independently. This could mean reducing or even removing the expectation that students work in groups in class or on assessment tasks, or introducing better strategies to help ease students into working in groups to better prepare them for that requirement at undergraduate level. Regular reviews of teaching and course materials that reflect this awareness of the need for flexible approaches will most likely further enhance the student experience.

Second, the outside commitments of students could be more greatly considered. Because of this, students may have outside responsibilities that may be more pressing than university study at any given time – they are parents, carers, hairdressers, receptionists, nursing assistants, etc., who also happen to study. To address this, flexible pedagogies surrounding attendance (day and night classes, online courses), assessment due dates, etc. could be considered to make allowances for these outside responsibilities.

Third, it should be recognised that many students have at some point considered leaving the program. It is quite a revelation to note that, even though the survey was completed by those students who had progressed three-quarters of the way through the part-time program, or two-thirds of the way through the full-time program, nearly one-third of all respondents had considered leaving the program at some point during their studies. Given that quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that external factors (i.e. those beyond the control of program designers) featured heavily in reasons for students considering withdrawal from the program, perhaps additional information and support via teaching staff could be made available early in the program, or even before the program starts. This may help students to better manage those external factors, or at least consider them more carefully before even enrolling in the program. This is especially important for students enrolling in the full-time program because many underestimate the amount of work required to do well in this mode. In regards to the internal factors that may cause students to withdraw, improved awareness of these factors through better-integrated support in conjunction with additional training of teaching staff may help mitigate such issues.

Educators can provide the opportunity for students to engage in an enabling program (potentially in higher education as a whole). However, although teaching staff are the main contact students have with the university and the key providers of engaging opportunities, the students themselves play a decisive role in engaging with a program. This point relates to students being independent learners and possibly not accessing the additional support services on offer either by choice or by ignorance of their availability. There are many other competing demands beyond the control of the educators that negatively affect student engagement. So, although there is always room to improve the impact that teaching staff can have on student engagement, there will also always be factors beyond the control of the staff or institution that negatively impact student engagement.

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ⁱ Yapug is the University of Newcastle's tertiary preparation program designed to provide a pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to qualify for entry into the University's undergraduate programs. Established in 1990, Newstep provides people aged between 18 and 20 with the opportunity to build their knowledge and skills as they work towards gaining admission into tertiary study.