**What we are doing works! Maintaining favourable retention in the STEPS enabling course in an Australian university**

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**Abstract**

Retention strategies in higher education contexts continue to be posited as an antidote for attrition, yet many complexities are embroiled in this problematic dichotomy. With far broader access to higher education by a more diverse group of citizens than ever before, and varied entry points to facilitate such inclusion, significant emphasis is being placed on how to retain contemporary university students, growing numbers of whom do not necessarily fit the mould of the ‘traditional’ student'. For many years, the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) pre-university enabling course at CQUniversity Australia has typically attracted students from one or more multiple government designated equity groups, and experienced a sustained record of retention. Why such favourable retention persists in STEPS is the motivation behind this paper, findings from the analysis of student data revealing preeminent factors positively impacting their engagement and consequent retention. In summary, these factors include pedagogical and relational strategies that promote a sense of belonging, and comfortable learning environments that enhance self-development, self-awareness, confidence and empowerment. However, overwhelmingly rated highly by students was the significant role of empathetic lecturers who challenged and supported their students through scaffolded, meaningful learning resources and who provided pastoral support. Examples of best practice outlined in this paper not only have leverage in facilitating student retention within enabling education contexts, but also in the undergraduate arena, in which growing numbers of non-traditional students now participate.

**Introduction**

This paper commences with background information about the context in which research was undertaken to identify retention strategies. This was a pre-university enabling course offered by a regional Australian university, undertaken by those students not able to enter via traditional pathways as a segue to a university education. A brief explanation of data gathering and analysis is presented, and then using the student voice as evidence, salient findings about what they considered to be the ‘best aspects’ of their STEPS units (subjects) are evidenced through three emergent themes. These include a sense of belonging, confidence through competence, and feeling more future-proof. Interspersed with these findings is research in the field of enabling and higher education that substantiates the main points made in this paper. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of implications for practice.

**STEPS as an enabling course**

The Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) enabling course provides a pathway for non-traditional students into university. It aims to develop in such students the concepts, skills, strategies, knowledge and subsequent confidence to assist them in their development as lifelong learners, prepared and able to make the transition to undergraduate study. STEPS is offered either full-time or part-time, in internal or online mode, and is available to learners who are 18 years or older, of Australian or New Zealand citizenship, or a holder of a permanent resident or humanitarian visa. Applicants are expected to have completed the equivalent of a Year 10 education, or show a propensity to succeed at the tertiary level. This is determined by the results of online diagnostic testing that establishes literacy, numeracy and computing competencies, primarily intended to gain an indication of those who have potential to succeed in higher education. A personal interview is conducted with each successful applicant, during which they are provided with an individualised Recommended Study Plan (RSP) that details the units necessary for the preferred undergraduate course they intend to study.

Many lives have been positively affected by STEPS. To date, in excess of 10 000 adult learners have utilised STEPS as a pathway to undergraduate study at various universities throughout Australia. A Centrelink eligible course, STEPS is offered to its participants free of tuition fees and with minimal associated costs. Centrelink is part of the Australian Department of Human Services, delivering social security services and payments to its citizens. This includes Youth Allowance (24 years or younger), Austudy (25 years or older), or Abstudy (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Students). STEPS is for those learners underrepresented at the tertiary level from equity groups who have been traditionally recognised by the Commonwealth Government as disadvantaged in their access to higher education. These include students that: are from non-English speaking backgrounds; have a disability; are women in non-traditional areas; identify as indigenous; are from low SES locations; and are from regional and remote locations. Many STEPS students are identified as belonging to multiple equity groups and most are first in their family to study at university.

On the back of an educationally disadvantaged background impacted by personal, social or cultural circumstances, many STEPS students characteristically doubt their ability to succeed in further study. This resonates with Leathwood and O’Connells’ (2003) findings related to the lack of confidence experienced by non-traditional students in the United Kingdom context. Most STEPS students characteristically lack the essential knowledge and skills associated with study at the tertiary level, including the social and cultural capital that their ‘traditional’ counterparts quite often possess (Gale & Parker, 2016; Munro, 2011; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Willans & Seary, 2011, 2018). However Gale and Parker (2016) found that the retention of students from equity groups in Australian universities is similar to that of their ‘traditional entry’ peers. Thus it would appear that the background of difference is often what drives many STEPS students to be the ‘best they can be’, striving for every chance to experience success. Success in the STEPS context encompasses a variety of aspects. One is evidenced by a student’s completion of the STEPS unit(s) in which they were enrolled. STEPS has long celebrated a favourable retention rate [number of students enrolled at census (Week 4) and retained to course completion] with 73% in both 2015 and 2016, and 65% in 2017. The drop of 8% in 2017 was due to the restricted intake in Term 3 and the institutional directive to abide by the yearly EFTSL allocation and not over enrol. But, the retention rate in STEPS well exceeds the national average retention rate in enabling programs of approximately 50% (Hodges et al., 2013). Another aspect of success in STEPS is the articulation rate to undergraduate studies. In 2015, according to STEPS archival and institutional data, the articulation rate of students into CQUniversity degrees was 57%; in 2016 it was 67%; and in 2017, the articulation rate was 72%. A third aspect of success, is student satisfaction. This research focuses on positive experiences articulated by students via formal unit evaluations.

The STEPS cohort is generally distinguished by highly committed and dedicated learners with a real thirst for knowledge and a dogged determination to improve their lives through education. On reflection, many students speak to that deep-seated doubt that plagued them on entry and which remained with them well into the course, having them doubting they would succeed. The “imposter syndrome” (Clance & Imes, 1978) experienced by many is a common phenomenon not only in enabling education, but in undergraduate studies also (Bennett et al., 2017; Brookfield, 2006; Chapman, 2017; Ramsey & Brown, 2017; Scevak & Cantwell, 2007). Imposter syndrome can be manifested through feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty, which perpetuate the embedded belief held by many students that becoming an undergraduate student was not within the realms of possibility. Yet, on completion of STEPS, many students convey that the self-confidence and belief in their own abilities acquired while engaged in the course, combined with their transformed worldviews and newly acquired skills relevant to tertiary study, empowered them to remain dedicated to the preparation for their chosen undergraduate program. The purpose of this paper is to present data findings substantiating these occurrences, positing ‘best aspects’ highly valued by students as possible reasons for their retention in STEPS. A discussion of reasons as to why students are not retained in STEPS is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Willans and Seary (2018) for information related to attrition in STEPS.

**Gathering and analysing the data**

The data on which the findings in this paper are based were comprised of approximately 2065 end of unit evaluations completed voluntarily and anonymously by students enrolled in one or more of the 12 STEPS units during the period Term 1 2012 to Term 1 2017. This comprised four academic terms. The units evaluated included the core unit, *Preparatory Skills for University (PSU)*,and the electives: *Essay Writing for University (EWU)*, *Technical Writing for University (TWU)*, *Computing Skills for University (CSU), Fundamental Mathematics for University (FMU), Intermediate Mathematics for University (IMU), Technical Mathematics for University (TMU), Foundation Science, Introductory Biology, Introductory Chemistry, Introductory Physics* and *Positive Learning for University.* Given the anonymity of those completing the evaluations, no specific data is available about the age of those responding. However, the age range in STEPS spans from 17-69 years of age, and it is suggested that the responses represent a very broad age range. Fifty per cent of all enrolled students completed the voluntary unit evaluations, equating to approximately 4150 students. One section of the unit evaluations specifically asks students to comment on what they consider to be the ‘best aspects’ of the STEPS unit(s) in which they were enrolled, and also to provide their ‘suggestions for improvement’. The ‘best aspects’, equating to 2065 evaluations, are the focus of this paper. ‘Suggestions for improvement’ are the current research interest of the authors of this paper, and forthcoming. Given that student access to unit evaluations occurred three weeks before the end of term and two weeks after, it can be assumed that most students completed the unit(s) of study they provided feedback on. Included in the following pages are excerpts from the data that represent the student voice. Such are denoted by the use of italicised text.

Ethical clearance was granted by the university for the research to proceed, and the Head of STEPS Course gave approval for the use of institutional data in the form of end of term unit evaluations. A thematic analysis approach as espoused by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to gain the viewpoints of the participants, which were then evidenced through recurring themes. Analysis entailed the following six phases: data familiarisation; generation of initial codes; the search for themes; revision of themes; theme definition and naming; and production of the report. The following table provides a synthesis of the most commonly cited ‘best aspects’ and a tally of their frequency.

Table 1

*Summary of ‘best aspects’ of STEPS*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Caring and supportive teaching staff | 583 | Comprehensible, well-paced and scaffolded learning | 147 |
| Pedagogical resources and activities | 232 | Clear, relevant assessment guidelines/guides/overviews;  assessment types | 100 |
| Miscellaneous (pace; flexibility; quality; content; social aspects) | 224 | Preparation for undergraduate studies | 87 |
| Self-development and enhanced confidence | 179 | Lecturer communication and feedback | 69 |
| Enhanced self-knowledge – learning styles & career planning | 173 | Fun, positive and supportive learning environment | 68 |
| Skills development – academic and personal | 151 |  |  |

The dominant theme to emerge from the data was that the provision of caring and supportive teaching staff was pivotal to positive student engagement in STEPS. Relevant and appropriate pedagogical strategies and relational practices, advocated and utilised by the teaching staff, were identified by students as pre-eminent aspects in enhancing their inclusion and consequent retention in STEPS. The following section provides a discussion of those factors that likely influenced the students’ feedback regarding the ‘best’ aspects of the STEPS unit(s) they participated in. These include: a sense of belonging; confidence through competence; and, feeling more ‘future proof’.

*A sense of belonging*

It is well documented that a sense of belonging is important in enabling and higher education contexts. Research in both enabling and undergraduate education in international contexts, attests to the importance of students experiencing a sense of belonging and feeling that they are valued and acknowledged in the context in which they participate, interact and invest much time and energy (see for example Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; Lane & Sharp, 2014; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Masika & Jones, 2015; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Thomas, 2015; Tinto, 2017; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). A sense of belonging is fundamentally described by Strayhorn (2012) as being related to the degree to which students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for and included – in other words, that they matter. Vital to establishing a sense of belonging is the establishment and maintenance of a “humanising relationship between teacher and student” (Motta & Bennett, 2018, p. 640), as is being ever mindful of the possible anxieties students bring to their return to study (Hodges et al., 2013; Leach, Zepke & Prebble (2006); Willans & Seary, 2011; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

A sense of belonging can be imbued in many ways. For example, by nature, most teachers are caring people, motivated by the need to assist their students in the acquisition of skills, knowledge and confidence, and committed to seeing them successfully participate in further education. Findings in this study, similar to those of Burke et al. (2017), highlight how a teacher’s commitment to their student’s learning and participation is highly valued by students. Online (distance) students in this current research clearly valued the personalised support they received from lecturers, articulated by one who shared that: *Just having a lecturer talk to you via a video, mak*[es] *you feel connected and helps keep you on track.* Others commended the follow-up and timeliness of communication from lecturers, sometimes expressing surprise at*: Having someone that actually sends you a personal email half way through term just to see how I was going and that I hadn't dropped the ball.* Due to the relay of timely lecturer communication, student uncertainty about how to engage and access lecturer support right from the beginning of STEPS was quickly overcome for many. Reflective of many students, one wrote: *I thought I would be left alone and just be expected to learn without any interaction… but I've been very well looked after with the lessons posted each week online.* Weekly communication from lecturers that enhanced this sense of inclusion was highly valued, particularly by those who identified as online students. As one wrote: *It* *really made me feel part of the learning experience,* similarly reflected by others who said that it made them feel: … *more like one of the students*, and that: *Having a lecturer actually talking to you made it feel like you were actually participating in the course.*

A sense of belonging can be manifested when students express appreciation of the encouragement they receive from teaching staff in supportive learning environments. This emerged strongly from the data findings. Teaching staff were variously described as: *Supportive*, *fabulous*, *amazing, helpful, brilliant, friendly, understanding, patient* and *encouraging,* and students appreciated being in supportive learning environments in which teaching staff: … *make you feel welcomed and relaxed … always there to help out.* Students frequently referred to lecturers who were: … *easy to talk to and always willing to help us when needed*. Students cited the best aspect of STEPS as being lecturers who: … *showed a real passion for their fields and were very informative when additional help was needed*; who were: … *very helpful with questions and any problems;* who had: … *a very fast response time* and who gave: … *helpful and constructive advice in a positive manner*;who: … *took the time to explain things*; who were: … *available when I needed to ask for support;* who were: … *very kind and flexible;* and who made learning: … *enjoyable and actually loveable.*

The notion of ‘feeling comfortable’, important to creating a sense of belonging, frequently emerged from the data and can be generally associated with feeling ‘safe’. The notion of ‘safety’ in the classroom is problematised in higher education contexts. Of course it is important for teaching staff to build an environment of safety and belonging (Motta & Bennett, 2018), but in reality, a ‘safe’ classroom is indeed a complex term. Boostrom (1998) challenges educators to ask to what extent should students feel safe in classrooms and is staying safe counterproductive to intellectual challenge? Discomfort and resistance can and do inevitably arise for students within the classroom (Bennett, et al., 2017; Lane & Sharp, 2014), yet these feelings are anticipated, and considered to be important pedagogical moments (Bennett, et al., 2017; Motta & Bennett, 2018). Nevertheless, some students did cite the best aspect of STEPS as being: … *the safe atmosphere* in which they learned, and many expressed this notion through the construct of ‘feeling comfortable’: … *in both our ability to do the work load, and in our environment*; … *with the information we needed; … with the pace and rate of learning;* … *in an environment that allowed debate amongst the students who had differing viewpoints*; and …*about joining in class discussions and contributing.*

A sense of belonging can be evidenced when students speak of their engagement in supportive learning environments. Students in this study said that they enjoyed participating in: … *interesting courses and a great environment*, and that they highly valued lecturers who showed that they were deeply invested in their students’ learning experiences. Students appreciated the time lecturers took in teaching their students and preparing them for future studies. They perceived that lecturers: … *went above and beyond to provide help and clarification*,appreciating that they: … *took a great deal of their spare time to assist myself and fellow students with their individual needs and questions that we had…* [and making] *the transition for myself to understanding the demands of Uni life a lot easier*. Students also valued interchange with their classroom peers about such topics as assessment, believing these gave students; … *new and broad perspectives on tasks that they may not have been able to comprehend or link ideas as efficiently.* Others highly valued group sessions: … *where we can all input into different topics and hear others opinions.* As Hellmundt and Baker (2017) suggest, practices that are supportive of the development of strong peer and tutor-student relationships are considered to have a significant and positive influence on student retention in enabling courses.

Integral to a sense of belonging is a student feeling cared for by the institution (Relf et al., 2017; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). The term ‘care’ is somewhat problematised in neoliberal higher education contexts, illustrated by Motta and Bennett (2018), whose recent work theorises ‘care’ as identifiable with “feminised subjectivities, pedagogical relationships and affective power dynamics”, in opposition to “careless hegemonic masculinities and neoliberalism” (p. 632). In acknowledging their non-gendered use of the terms “masculinised” and “feminised,” they foreground the “centrality of caring work,” and its potential role in the democratisation of higher education pedagogical practices in challenging the “exclusionary politics of knowledge” (p. 632) that characterise the academy. The notion of care was embedded in the comments of many students in this study, and attests to the important role it can play in supporting a student’s formal learning journey. This is encapsulated in comments about the role of STEPS and the thoughtfulness of teaching staff: *Such beauty in the obvious care and love that you guys have put into this course, the content and the nurturing of your students*. Similar sentiment was expressed by another student who: … *loved the help throughout this course*, and expressed their gratitude for the lecturer’s: … *understanding, care and help through this term.*

A sense of belonging can help to ward off a student’s thoughts of departure from an enabling course. It is well known that attrition rates are high in many enabling courses (Hodges, et al., 2013). However, in this study, in the face of personal challenges, student persistence was encouraged by caring teachers, who in the words of one student: … *offered endless amounts of help throughout the term.* The student attributed this caring as pivotal to their persistence, saying they: … *truly believe it is the only reason I decided to stick it out… because I knew I had a teacher who cared and would not let me get to the point of failing.* This impetus to persist was similarly reflected by others, one of whom: … *appreciated the care the lecturer took to ensure I was feeling confident and comfortable with where I was at*. They also commented that: … *this really helped me with my confidence to continue*, [putting] *them in the right frame of mind to continue with what* [they] *set out to do.*

Self-doubt, fear and anxiety commonly beset many enabling students (Bennett, et al., 2017; Blair, Cline & Wallis, 2010; Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2015; Lane & Sharp, 2014; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Shields, 2015; Willans & Seary, 2011), yet appropriate levels of lecturer support can make a difference to students. In this study, for some students, significant personal fears were overcome by high levels of support. As one shared:

Being a student nearing her mid-40s, I was incredibly nervous while looking through the text books before the course commenced. There was no way I was going to be able to do this stuff! I shouldn't have worried as everything was explained so clearly, in easy to understand step-by-step processes. I can’t believe what I can do now!

Another student shared that engagement in STEPS: … *pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me face my fears*; while others said that they valued the fact that lecturers: … *give you an opportunity to face your fears and be able to stand out*; and in perhaps underestimating their abilities and potential, one said that they had: … *amazed* themselves by what they *actually learnt from this course.* Students were also appreciative of teaching staff who acknowledged and understood the competing life demands of many of their students. This was reflected in comments such as: *The best was having lecturers that understood that life is hectic and were able to help me when I needed it most.* Also appreciated was the flexibility and degree of tailoring that suited individual students, one of who shared that she: … *found it was such a supportive learning environment that totally suited my needs as a working mum. I also found the staff to be very understanding when I hit a few personal issues three/four weeks ago.*

*Confidence through competence*

As is the intention of all enabling courses, a fundamental aim of STEPS is to provide students with the skills and knowledge to feel confident in undertaking higher education studies. Upon entry to STEPS, and for varying periods of time, many students experience what Reay et al. (2009, p. 1112) refer to as a “crisis of confidence”. Thus, practices that work towards reducing anxiety and increasing confidence to support students are vital (Shields, 2015). Findings in this study suggest that scaffolded learning activities are very important in helping students gain knowledge and competency, and in turn, confidence. From a cognitive perspective, students could grasp meaning from thoughtful ordering of content. As one student said*: I liked how the learning was scaffolded, with each module building on the last. All the pieces came together in the end for the final finished product.* This was similarly cited by another, noting: *I liked how the steps started off easy and then gradually built into more complicated equations.* In demonstrating the cognitive nature of learning and the need for thoughtful curriculum design, another student shared that this: … *set up a good understanding of content and built the knowledge up in different topics as opposed to one big thing full of different information*.

Many students referred to the step-by step nature of the knowledge they were exposed to as the best aspect of STEPS. They variously described this way of learning as: … *extremely helpful*; *easy to understand*; *consolidating*; *easy to follow*; *incredibly helpful in giving a clear idea of expectations; creating an atmosphere that made learning easier*; *providing a thorough step by step process* *to complete a task*; making the learning of new skills: … *less overwhelming*; *clearly understandable*; *broken down into portions for easy understanding*, and as *stress reducing*. Another student attributed scaffolded learning as: … *instrumental in the successful completion and understanding of the course material*... *creating a good platform for the successful course completion*. In showing the strong influence of the affective domain in the commitment to learning (Burke, 2017; Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2015; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Whannell, 2013; Willans, 2010), one student attested to the value of structured work and the impact it had on their learning, saying: *The course built me up and made me feel really confident that I could do it and do it well.* Another referred to the repetition of tasks, and despite the speed at which they were taught, provided them with: … *the responsibility to control* [their] *own learning.* As they said: *It made me feel like an adult and that felt good.* It became evident in the findings that many students experienced great pleasure and experienced intrinsic rewards in completing learning activities that honed their academic and other skills. As one said: *I love the weekly* [practice] *tests… you have the chance to do the tests, get feedback and know where you are going wrong and where you need help before the 'real' tests.* Others similarly expressed this sentiment, saying that they *loved* many aspects of STEPS. These included: … *the sample tests and the videos which accompanied them which were extremely beneficial in understanding the content and the working out of what was required to successfully complete the unit; the flexibility of the course*; *the course layout*; *the online support*; *online resources*; *the delivery of the units*; and *the self-indulgent nature of the course – all about me!*

The findings show that through competence came increased self-confidence for many STEPS students in this research, corroborating previous findings (Willans, 2010; Willans & Seary, 2004, 2011). Students spoke glowingly of new computing, essay writing, information literacy and mathematical competencies, one sharing that: *At first I was really worried about it as I was never a good Maths student but as the weeks progressed I found myself getting more confident*. This comment was typical of many others, similarly expressed rather flamboyantly by the following student who shared that: *Prior to starting STEPS I had NO CONFIDENCE AT ALL* [emphasis in original] *in my mathematical ability. Now I am confident that I can approach any mathematical task and feel that I CAN UNDERSTAND the task!* Another student felt the clearly defined topics each week: … *built up to a complete array of psychological tools that…* *will greatly assist* [them] *in completing each unit with an amazing amount of confidence as a result*. Another wrote of enhanced skills and application, and the positive feeling this evoked*: I have loved this unit so much! I have used computers for years but never really knew totally what can be done or how to do it properly. I feel 100% confident now to navigate around and produce quality documents.*

The progression of confidence, knowledge acquisition and consequent pleasure was evidenced in the words of one student who found that the lecturer’s: … *positive attitude and the emphasis on ‘keeping on going’ was a great way to install* [sic] *confidence in students.* Some admitted to being: … *personally a bit overwhelmed at the start,* but said that: … *true to the lecturers’ advice, things became clearer as I went along, and I am now having a great time learning.* Self-esteem can be enhanced through increased confidence, illustrated by the following student who shared that they: … *learnt so much more than* [they] *anticipated*, commenting that they had: … *gained so much confidence by studying the Unit*. They cited their lecturer’s positive acknowledgment of their work and said how much they: … *loved gaining a "brilliant gold star"*. This thirst for learning was evidenced in the student’s comment that: … *it makes me want me to learn even more.* Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010) articulate the crucial role tutors play in building levels of confidence in their students, as well as making them aware of their attitudes to previous learning and life experiences and how these can change. Other researchers recommend enabling pedagogies and appropriate strategies and practices to build confidence in students (for example Bennett et al., 2017; Hodges et al., 2013; Lane & Sharp, 2014; Morrison & Cowley, 2017; Relf et al., 2017). However, as Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) point out, this is not always easy.

*Feeling more ‘future proof’*

The increased confidence expressed by many students in this study suggests that they felt more assured of a future identity in the university, with clearer career goals and greater self-knowledge than at the outset of STEPS. Many students wrote that they felt better prepared for undergraduate studies and alluded to enhanced self-assurance and optimism about their future: *I have more confidence in myself and have enjoyed proving to myself that I can do anything I put my mind to.* This included: … *the confidence to start my undergraduate degree because of the knowledge and university experience I have gained*; the: … *confidence in knowing that my studies are on the right path*; and: … *a really solid foundation and confidence to move forward.* As another student wrote: *It allowed me to cement that I should be studying Secondary Teaching and helped me to realise that I am more than capable of studying and being successful in my chosen field.*

Students highly valued pedagogical activities that empowered them to learn more about themselves as learners and gain clarification regarding their future career aspirations. The influence of greater self-knowledge was reflected in the comments of many students. One shared that: *I learnt more about myself, instead of just dreaming I could do this Uni thing, but now I am more confident in what my future can look like*. Another student positioned greater self-knowledge as: … *a pathway towards my future*,similarly expressed by another who demonstrated a sense of self-assurance, feeling that self-discovery activities: … *confirmed that* [they were] *heading in the right direction.* Another student wrote that such activities: … *have changed* my *world for the better as I now have a clear path towards my future in Business.* Others cited these activities as helping to gain a greater understanding of: … *where I want to head career wise and how to achieve these things*. Some perceived that this new self-knowledge would provide some future direction: … *hopefully help*[ing] *me to continue as I seek to pursue nursing as a career*,and for another: … *helping me to finally decide what I wish to do for my undergrad.* Another alluded to gaining more clarity, writing that: … *it has given me a clearer picture of what I need to do and what some job specifics are.* Others were empowered to: … *start dreaming about* [their] *career*, sharing that they were: … *really inspired by STEPS*,and in suggesting some previous imprecision, saying: *I now have my goal*. For some students, future aspirations were validated and cemented. As one wrote: *The opportunity to explore further what career choices you have chosen for yourself helped with clarification, identifying further opportunities and confirmation of this choice.*

Some students could appreciate the transferability of newly acquired skills and knowledge both in future university studies and in their everyday lives. In terms of future studies, many valued the assistance and guidance they received in STEPS and how this could be of personal benefit in *my academic future*, as visualised by one student. They expressed gratitude, one saying *I’m so glad I completed this course first* [as it] *really gave us a good overview and plenty of invaluable information to carry with us through our future studies*. Others expressed the value of lecturer feedback which helped them *to understand and prepare for future assignments.* Another student reflected similarly, perceiving that newly acquired skills such as *technology elements* [would] *definitely help in future studies.* Another cited the best aspects of their course as being able to understand *how I could use everything I have learnt in my future studies*. Students could also see the value in the application of new skills in their everyday lives. As one wrote rather expansively: *The information obtained from this course will benefit all students in further study with university or even in the* workforce, reiterated by another student who could see the relevance of what they had learned *not just for University but personally* as well.

While many enabling students inevitably bring degrees of experiential capital (O’Shea, 2016) to the classroom environment, most students lack the cultural or social capital to fully understand what is required of them at university. Due to the fact that many are first in family to attend a university, there is a general lack of familiarity with university life and the expectations that will be placed on them as students (Australian Government, 2017) and the whole experience of university, “with its disciplines, conventions, discourses, genres and expectations creates a challenging ‘academic culture’ even for mature learners” (Lane & Sharp, 2014, p. 67). However, as Bennett et al., (2017, p. 59) contend, pedagogical practices in enabling programs can consciously “seek to make visible the approaches, values and assumptions about specific discipline knowledges and … to make explicit the ‘rules of the game’” that students need to engage with. The research guiding this paper suggests that many students certainly gained a good understanding of the institutional expectations for their engagement in STEPS and expectations associated with future undergraduate studies. As one student wrote: *STEPS really helps with getting to know the university campus and its rules and regulations.* Another student responded similarly in terms of expected procedures, citing: … *learning how to edit writing to make it tighter and less 'wordy', the rules for instructions, on grammar and punctuation etc.* [asaspects that made them] *feel that all of these things will be extremely useful skills as I move into undergrad next year*. Another student could appreciate the motivation for particular curriculum delivery, recognising: … *the way the content was presented and expected to be followed*, while others recognised the relevance of skills learned in STEPS and: … *a greater understanding of what is expected of me throughout my future degree*, or as one student wrote what had been: … *extremely helpful in giving me an idea as to what is to be expected in the University environment.* Another wrote that they: … *now know what to do to improve* [their] *skills to help* [them] *achieve good grades in the future for undergrad.*

The rather prevalent notion of *insight into what is expected of a student at university* was gratifying to find, yet it is a fact that enabling contexts are often quite different from undergraduate contexts in many ways (Hodges et al., 2013), so caution must be exercised in making claims about the readiness of enabling students in the undergraduate arena. As noted by one of the students STEPS: … *was a great stepping stone to what is expected in university*, or*, a great platform to start my university study from*.

**Implications for practice**

Findings in this study indicate that relational practices used by STEPS teaching staff to imbue a student’s sense of belonging clearly impact the classroom experience of their non-traditional learners, and that empathetic teachers do make a significant, affirmative impact on the type of learning experiences their students have. Although there can be no guarantee of a completely ‘safe’ learning environment, when students feel valued, respected and comfortable, a positive learning experience can occur, regardless of whether students study on campus or online. Thus, educators in the enabling sector would ideally be those who exhibit empathy as a characteristic and who acknowledge, respect and accommodate the complexities associated with a non-traditional student’s return to formal study. Findings also show that scaffolded pedagogical strategies and resources do provide a structured way of learning that facilitates students in their acquisition of the necessary skills and knowledge to adequately prepare them for university studies. Hence, this approach to curriculum should be championed as an appropriate way to develop student competencies, and in turn, enhance self-management, self-development, self-awareness and ultimately, increased confidence.

**Conclusion**

The findings in this paper clearly show that the relational strategies that enhanced student inclusion and a sense of belonging were very highly regarded by students. This can likely be attributed to sustained pedagogical practices focused on self-development and self-awareness, cited by students as facilitating the development of their self-confidence and empowerment. Students also highly valued the pragmatic relevance and real life application of newly learned relational and academic knowledge and skills. However, as in previous findings (Seary & Willans, 2004; Seary, Willans & Cook, 2017), it was the role of empathetic, engaging lecturers who provided both challenge and support that was the most highly rated aspect cited by students. Students indicated their appreciation of the high level of ‘care’ provided by lecturers who acknowledged and took into consideration the competing demands on many STEPS students and the consequent impacts on study commitments. Furthermore, scaffolded, pedagogical strategies and self-development activities were found to be of great importance in empowering students, facilitating their retention, and positively influencing their future aspirations.

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