

The many colours of student support: perspectives and practice of Enabling education practitioners

Marguerite Westacott, University of the Sunshine Coast

Juliette Subramaniam, Western Sydney University

Gemma Mann, Ana Larsen and Trixie James, Central Queensland University

Susan Hopkins and Kieran Balloo, University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

Student support, in its cloak of many colours, is a rising priority for universities. Recently, the Australian Universities Accord has recognised the vital role of Enabling courses in increasing participation in higher education from underrepresented groups. Enabling education contributes significantly overall, to the nation's economic prosperity and social cohesion. While we share the Accord's vision that higher education access should be universal, we believe access without multi-faceted and holistic support (beyond improved income support) could potentially hinder equitable outcomes. Our research will shed light on what holistic student support is and the praxis of quality student support. This collaboration of seven experienced Enabling education practitioners from four Australian universities, includes examining factors that hinder and facilitate effective student support. In post-pandemic times, within neoliberal institutions and constantly shifting priorities, Enabling educators are at the coalface of supporting equity group students. Their perspective makes a valuable contribution to this complex area.

Rationale

As practitioners in Enabling education programs, we lead the way in the transformative widening participation agenda in higher education. Facilitating successful transitions for non-traditional students is a vital and fundamental aspect of our daily practice, embedded in an ethics of care (Motta & Bennett, 2018). We understand and enact student support comprehensively and recognise that it is often misconstrued. This research is diving deeper into the construct of 'student support', examining and qualifying what this currently looks, and feels like, in practice. We draw on our expertise in the field of Enabling education to contribute to and develop a more comprehensive, multi-faceted understanding of student support. This involves deconstructing assumptions and ambiguities that can render 'student support' vulnerable to agendas that may not prioritise equity. This research extends on previous collaborative publications focusing on emotional labour in Enabling education, which we, as members of the National Association of Enabling Educators in Australia (NAEEA) Mental Health Special Interest Group, have participated in (Crawford et al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2018; Olds et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2023). Our lens now focuses on the details of student support, and is a timely project given the recent legislative requirements for universities to prioritise student support in policy, systems, and practice.

Approach/Method

An autoethnographic approach has provided qualitative data in response to key questions that draw on the participants' professional experience, in the context of their institutions and their

The many colours of student support: perspectives and practice of Enabling education practitioners

practice as Enabling educators. Preliminary analysis of these responses has been conducted, with detailed coding and identification of emerging themes currently underway. We envisage this research initiative will provide clarification, from practice, to definitions of student support from a pragmatic perspective, and advocacy for broader, multi-faceted and holistic approaches to supporting students and educators.

Questions

1. What is your institution's approach to defining and implementing student support in Enabling education?
2. What factors or resources facilitate or frustrate impactful student support within Enabling education?

References

- Department of Education. (2024). *Australian Universities Accord: Summary of the Final Report*. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/australian-universities-accord-final-report-summary-report>
- Crawford, N., Lisciandro, J., Jones, A., Westacott, M., Jaceglave, M., McCall, D., Cameron, H., & Andersen, S. (2016). *Models of support for student wellbeing in Enabling programs: comparisons, contrasts and commonalities at four Australian universities*. [Paper Presentation] Foundation and Bridging Educators of New Zealand Conference, Auckland. <https://fabenz.org.nz/proceeding-from-fabenz-conference-2016/>
- Crawford, N., Olds, A., Lisciandro, J., Jaceglave, M., Westacott, M., & Osenieksa, L. (2018). Emotional labour demands in Enabling education: A qualitative exploration of the unique challenges and protective factors. *Student Success*, 9(1), 23-33. <https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.593031594861183>
- Jones, A., Hopkins, S., Larsen, A., Lisciandro, J., Olds, A., Westacott, M., Sturniolo-Baker, R., & Subramaniam, J. (2023). Looking into the “Dark Mirror”: Autoethnographic Reflections on the Impact of COVID-19 and Change Fatigue on the Wellbeing of Enabling Practitioners. *Student Success*, 14(3), 41-52. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2779>
- Motta, S. C., & Bennett, A. (2018). Pedagogies of care, care-full epistemological practice and ‘other’ caring subjectivities in Enabling education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(5), 631–646. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1465911>
- Olds, A., Hopkins, S., Lisciandro, J., Jones, A., Subramaniam, J., Westacott, M., Larsen, A., Sturniolo-Baker, R., & Scobie, H. (2023). Stop the clocks: Enabling practitioners and precarity in pandemic time(s). *Access: Critical Explorations of Equity in Higher Education*, 11(1), 12–27. <https://novaajs.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/index.php/iswp/article/view/193>