ASSESSING DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS’ CONFIDENCE IN LEARNING: A CASE OF ENABLING PATHWAY PROGRAMS

Mirella Atherton and Angela Bailey
The University of Newcastle, Australia

Abstract

The widening participation policies have increased the access and opportunity for many diverse groups of students in higher education. In recent years there has been an increased participation of underprivileged students in higher education. This paper is based on a study undertaken in an Australian University with students who have embarked on enabling or preparatory programs to access undergraduate studies in various disciplines. It assesses student self-confidence in undertaking science courses in the Open Foundation program over a two year period. The study uses the ‘third person effect’ to show that students in enabling or preparatory programs are less confident to undertake course requirements compared to their rating of a third person. The paper argues the need to build student confidence and raise aspirations in early stages of study to optimise student engagement, retention and success.

Keywords: enabling education, student confidence, disadvantaged students, widening participation

Introduction

Attracting and retaining students has become increasingly important as competition intensifies and as institutions endeavour to attract a greater share of both domestic and international students (Helgesen, 2008; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Bowden and Wood, 2011). Bowden and Wood (2011) have suggested that institutions build relationships to develop and maintain the student university relationship. In particular universities should be cognisant of the importance of developing a strong psychological attachment and emotional bond between the student and the institution in the development of enduring loyalty (Bowden and Wood, 2011). Student confidence in university study is an important factor in determining their success. The study of confidence has a long history in psychology (Fullerton and Cattell, 1892; Henmon, 1911). Students who repeatedly underestimate their performance may lose motivation for learning due
to a lack of self-confidence. Similarly students who overestimate their performance may be at a
disadvantage in the long term as their over confidence may impede their motivation to learn new
techniques (Stankov, Morony, and Lee, 2014). It is argued that building confidence where
confidence is low is critically important for the student’s success.

After 100 years of science education there has been an improvement in the form of assessment
but there is an over emphasis on lower order reasoning. The dominance of recall is one of the
main reasons cited for student disenchantment (Osborne and Collins, 2001). Teaching staff play
an important role in student learning and their success. Teachers provide assistance to students
and develop teacher-student relationships. Teaching needs to involve active learning experiences
and aim toward students reaching an understanding of key concepts (Leung and Kember, 2006).
It is typical of enabling students that their past educational experience has been less than
satisfactory and indeed at times negative (Hodges et al., 2013). A recent Australian Government
report on University Experience found that both first and final year undergraduate students rated
the skill ‘developed confidence to learn independently’, as high in undergraduate study (Coates,
2012, p.112). Studies on first year experience and retention has shown that students who are
confident in their university study have better chances of remaining and progressing compared to
less confident students (Archer, Cantwell and Bourke, 1999; Habel, 2012).

The level of student preparedness for University-level study has been widely debated (Coughlan
and Swift, 2011). The transition to university – level study can place great demands both
academically and socially on the student. The student’s experience during first year is said to be
the most critical (Gourlay, 2009). Poor transition into higher education can impact on the
student achievement and the drop-out rate, particularly in courses where there are high attrition
rates (Beaubouef and Mason, 2005;James et al, 2010; Kift, 2009,). There is an increasingly
diverse student population and students now coming from non-traditional backgrounds in the
context of widening participation exacerbates concerns. Expectations of education in the 21st
century increasingly focus on higher order thinking (Osbourne, 2013). Higher order thinking
involves synthesis, analysis and evaluation, and these are impacted when confidence is low.
Different levels of preparedness for University study can also have an effect on confidence
influencing the transition to higher education (Boyle, Carter and Clark 2002; Ertl et al., 2008).

There is a powerful emotional component underpinning the transition to university. It can be an
intensely emotional process which brings with it conflicting feelings of uncertainty about student
life, age, class and gender. The risks and uncertainties involved in becoming a student often
outweigh anticipation, pleasure and self-esteem (Christie, 2009). Movement into a semi-
structured institutional environment, loss of identity within the new institutional environment and
adaptation to the new lifestyle have been identified by Bowden (2012) as key elements in the
transition. In addition(Waycott et al, 2010) observed that young people who have grown up with
computers and the internet are said to have a natural affinity with technology and are able to
effortlessly adopt and adapt to changes in the landscape. Older people who have encountered
digital technology later in life are thought to be more challenged by technology than their
younger counterparts (Waycott et al., 2010). Prensky (2001) described this gap as the biggest
single problem facing education today.
An important aspect of disadvantaged student motivation to undertake undergraduate study is raising their aspirations and building confidence. Studies have suggested that dreams and aspirations in learning give courage to pave a road to collective and personal betterment (Sizer, 1996). Sizer (1996) further argues that student aspirations need to be honoured, and institutions should rearrange support structures for the pursuit of what it believes to be worthy aspirations (p.125). Rudduck et al. (1996) suggest the need to engage young students to reflect on issues affecting their lives. A UK-based study on disadvantaged students found that young people’s aspirations are closely bound with their identities and these are shaped by their social class (Archer et al. 2005).

A study by Thomas et al. (2012) found disadvantaged students play an important role as advocates in raising aspirations with similar groups of students. Studies undertaken by various scholars (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Kao and Tienda, 1998) suggest parental educational attainment and income exert significant influence on educational aspirations. Studies in Australia with high school students showed regional students expressed high-level aspirations, most of which centred on future careers. The study found disadvantaged students aspired to obtain an education to improve their life and contribute to the community (Alloway et al. 2004). Similar studies with Indigenous students at Australian high schools suggest that the key inspiration for these students is to undertake post-secondary study and get a job (Craven et al. 2005). Studies undertaken in the US with disadvantaged students suggest that education systems have so far not met heightened aspirations with sufficient or well-targeted resources to help all students prepare adequately for college education (Venezia et al. 2004).

There is a body of contemporary studies, writings and reports on assessment and enhancement of university student experience. Most of them are based on student feedback surveys, sometimes in combination with other data, such as student demographic details and/or academic achievement indicators (Grebennikov and Shah, 2012). This is the first time this type of study has been undertaken with students from an Australian university who are undertaking preparatory or enabling programs. According to Shah et al (in press) students enrolled in enabling programs have experienced a range of barriers limiting their access to higher education. They include, but are not limited to, location and distance from the University, financial pressures, academic achievement in high school, failure to complete high school education due to illness or other reasons, lack of appropriate careers advice, parental discouragement of higher education due to limited University education attainment within the family, lack of confidence to undertake University education, parenting or carer responsibilities, mental health issues and other social problems.

The ‘third person effect’ has been used in previous research to question responders about an ordinary reasonable person in comparison to a public figure (Baker, 2011). In this study the ‘third person effect’ has been used as a technique to get an insight into the thought patterns of enabling students. The student is asked to judge the performance of a third person in comparison to their own performance. The third person acts as a reference point so that students can score their performance on a scale with reference to another student. When compared the scores for the third person and the student can show up a lack of confidence on the part of the student in comparison to others. In this study students in an enabling program seeking entry to University courses were surveyed to compare themselves to another student and rate their ability against the
other student. It is important to note that the other student is the third person and is a figure of their imagination. Appendix one lists the questions in the survey.

This study is significant to disadvantaged students who experience lack of confidence in University study. Disadvantage arises from being first in family students seeking entry to university, refugees, Indigenous backgrounds, disability, single mothers, mature aged, remote regions, and students that suffer from mental health. Assessing their confidence in learning is critical to assess their expectations and to develop teaching strategies and support mechanisms to engage and retain students in learning. Assessing student confidence with disadvantaged student is also critical to prepare student for success in undergraduate education with effective transition from enabling to undergraduate study in various disciplines. Lack of student confidence will no doubt result in high attrition, low engagement of students, and limiting their access in undergraduate education.

Methodology

The quantitative investigation in this paper aims to gain a better understanding of the student’s thought processes. The paper also aims to quantify the student’s confidence level. The surveys were conducted with students enrolled in enabling or preparatory programs taking part in the full time and part-time courses in science. The surveys were paper based and the student demographic encompassed both males and females predominantly in the 20-40 age bracket. The experiment reports results of ongoing surveys from two consecutive years, 2013 and 2012. The numbers of students involved in the courses in 2013 were Full time = 59, Part-time = 58, and in 2012 Full time = 95, Part-time = 64. Students completed the survey in class.

The survey was designed with the intention of gaining a further understanding about the confidence of the student going into the exam, determining if the ‘third person effect’ exists in the realm of education and if so, what is the underlying cause of the ‘third person effect’ for these students. The surveys were designed with six parallel questions asking firstly about the third person and secondly about the student. The questions on the survey commenced by putting the student at ease before teasing out as much third person effect as possible with the subsequent questions.

Findings

For every question in the survey there was a disparity between the response concerning the third person and the response concerning the student. The greatest disparity occurred when the student was asked about the tests they completed and the exams to be done for their science course. The disparity in the responses is evidence that the third person effect exists to some extent for the students as a group. The students rated their performance lower than the third person who is a hypothetical ordinary person. The results show that the students’ poorer rating may be due to a lack confidence about their performance. The data had a similar pattern both for 2013 and 2012 despite the fact that the students in the courses in each year group were different. Figure 1 displays the data for 2013 and Figure 2 displays the data for 2012. There was little significant difference between the full time and part-time student responses which was surprising. Overall the results reveal an imputation that the third person effect exists and that it
is significant for quizzes, tests and exams. The most important features in both the data sets are that the students are more uncertain when rating themselves than when rating another person. Students felt that they understood and related to the lectures and tutorials but when it came to their own performance in the quizzes, the test or the exam they were more uncertain and rated the third person higher than themselves.

![The Third Person Effect 2013](image)

**Figure 1 - Third Person Effect 2013**

**Table 1: Means, standard deviations and count of survey participants in 2013 full time course.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2013 Full time</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Count</strong></td>
<td>59</td>
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</table>
Table 2: Means, standard deviations and count of survey participants in 2013 part-time course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2013 Part-time</th>
<th>1</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.699</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td>0.736</td>
<td>0.926</td>
<td>0.552</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>0.913</td>
<td>0.938</td>
<td>0.758</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td>0.917</td>
<td>0.937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>58</td>
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Figure 1 relates to the 2013 student’s perception of a third person and themselves in relation to the course, their performance in the mid-semester test, how strongly they relate to the course material, if they perceive that it is important to get the textbooks, their performance in the quizzes and their performance in the exam. Figure 1 represents the mean scores for the six pairs of questions in the survey. Columns 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 are a rating of the third person by the student and columns 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 are the student’s rating of their own performance. In each of the questions there was a disparity between the student’s rating of the third person and the student’s rating of themselves. The most significant disparity occurred in relation to the exam and it is clear that the students rated a third person performing better than themselves. Tables 1 and 2 contain the means, standard deviation and numbers of participants. It is clear that the question relating to the exam created the highest uncertainty and highest deviation from the mean in the responses.

![The Third Person Effect 2012](image)

Figure 2: Third Person Effect 2012
Table 3: Means, standard deviations and count of survey participants in 2012 full time course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2012 Full-time</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.724</td>
<td>0.643</td>
<td>0.698</td>
<td>1.142</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>1.042</td>
<td>0.926</td>
<td>1.051</td>
<td>1.064</td>
<td>1.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>96</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Table 4: Means, standard deviations and count of survey participants in 2012 part-time course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2012 Part-time</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.557</td>
<td>0.613</td>
<td>0.637</td>
<td>0.908</td>
<td>0.744</td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td>1.105</td>
<td>1.133</td>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>0.948</td>
<td>1.027</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>64</td>
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</table>

Figure 2 represents the 2012 student’s perception of a third person and themselves in relation to the course, their performance in the mid-semester test, how strongly they relate to the course material, if they perceive that it is important to get the textbooks, their performance in the quizzes and their performance in the exam. The greatest disparities between the third person and the student were apparent in the assessment items. The full time students rated themselves significantly lower in their performance in the mid-semester test. Both the full time and part-time students rated their performance lower in the quizzes and exam. Tables 3 and 4 present the means, standard deviations and number of participants. The greatest deviation from the mean was present for the student rating their performance in the mid-semester test, the part-time students’ assessment of whether it was important to obtain the textbook early and both full time and part-time students in assessing the quizzes and exam. The results show a general uncertainty in the students rating their performance in the exam.

The 2013 and 2012 results are consistent in all six areas but especially relation to the exam. Students who participated in the survey showed higher levels of uncertainty in relation to the exam than the other features of the course even though the range of answers was greatest. Interestingly the students in both 2013 and 2012 rated the performance of a third person higher than their own performance in relation to the exam. The results show that students in both 2013
and 2012 suffer from a lack of confidence in themselves when considering the quizzes, the test and especially in relation to the exam.

**Discussion**

The results show a collective misapprehension by the students that a ‘third person’ will perform better in tests and exams than the student themselves. The results are consistent over a two year period and provide evidence that enabling students have low confidence when comparing their performance to another student’s performance. Surprisingly the students had the perception that they relate to the lectures and tutorials better than the third person. This contradiction insinuates that they are somehow inferior and amplifies the idea that the students’ confidence is low. Their perception is that although their understanding of the course material is greater there are barriers impeding their success in quizzes, tests and exams. Both cohorts acknowledged that it would be important for the ‘third person’ to get their text books early, perhaps because they felt that would assist in preparation for success.

There was a slight drop in student numbers in 2013 due to a new course offering within the program. In 2013 students strongly agreed that the course was conducted at a satisfactory level. A rating of themselves was slightly lower compared to that of a third person. The full time students rated their performance lower compared to the third person while the part-time student’s rated their performance as equal. Although they related better to the lectures and tutorials than the estimate of the third person, they rated their performance in the exam as much lower. The part-time students seemed not to have such a great difference when comparing themselves to a third person. In 2012 a similar trend was observed with the greatest difference between the third person and the student being in the question relating to the mid-semester test and the exam. Again the full time students rated a third person as having a much stronger performance in the test and the exam. It is possible that the higher workload and higher stress level in the full-time course leads to a greater lack in confidence in the students. The 2012 full time cohort showed a higher level of certainty about their perceptions than the part-time students. In both 2013 and 2012 the only uncertainty in the student’s performance related to their own performance in the exam. This result was clear for both the full time and part-time students and demonstrates a lack of confidence in both groups.

The findings of this study have shown lack of confidence in enabling students in relation to University learning, and especially in relation to exams. The lack of student confidence has implications for engaging students in courses, for retaining students within courses and for overall student performance and success. If enabling student bring low confidence as a result of past barriers to learning they may continue to struggle and they may continue to suffer low confidence within their academic careers. Consequently their performance will suffer and performance may be low compared to traditional entry students. Hodges et al., (2013) reported that mature age students from enabling programs demonstrated more confidence in approaching their studies than younger students following traditional pathways. However the data on attrition for Open Foundation programs in 2007 – 2012 was in the region of 50% and indicates that many students encounter barriers to success. One of the aims of the Open Foundation program is to test student readiness for university via assessment of academic knowledge and skills, as well as
confidence and study habits. Confidence levels continue to be an important indicator of every student’s success.

**Conclusion**

Enabling students come from diverse range of backgrounds and have had to overcome a multitude of barriers to begin studying. It is clear that their confidence is low and that they experience a lack of confidence throughout their courses whether they study part-time with a light workload or full-time with a heavy workload. It is clear from the results of this study that building student confidence early is important to help them achieve their full potential. The research reported in this paper has important implications for university teaching staff. It exposes a potential misconception that enabling students have confidence in learning. Of the multitude of barriers to learning that are encountered by enabling students, a lack of confidence is one of the resounding factors that affects their performance. The study provides evidence that there is a need to assess enabling student confidence prior to commencement of the course. A measure of student confidence will provide a guide to whether relevant academic and non-academic support is required to retain these students and whether support provided will improve their performance and success.

**Acknowledgements**

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**Appendix 1: Student Survey**

I would recommend this course to a friend who might be starting Open Foundation next year?

Were you satisfied with the way the course was conducted?

Would you expect that your friend would do well in the mid-semester test?
   How would you rate your score in the mid-semester test? Did you do well?

Would you expect that someone starting the course would understand and relate to the lecture material and tutorials?

Do you feel that you understood and related to the lecture material and tutorials?

Would it be important for someone starting the course to get the textbooks early?

Was it important for you to get the textbooks early?

Would you expect that someone starting the course would be satisfied with their scores for the quizzes?

Are you satisfied with your scores for the quizzes?
Do you think someone starting the course could achieve a score of 100% in the exam?

Do you think you could achieve a score of 100% in the exam?