

Enabling learners: diverse outcomes

Susan Dawe, National Centre for Vocational Education

Abstract

This paper reports on a follow-up study by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) to the report titled 'Outcomes of enabling courses' (Phan and Ball 2001). Of the total VET student population, around 6% are in enabling courses or lower-level preparatory or pre-vocational courses. The previous research had indicated that one in twelve of the graduates from enabling courses re-enrolled in the same course in the following year. The main purpose of this research was to investigate the reasons why some students who have completed an enabling course remain at the same level of qualification or re-enrol in the same enabling course in following years.

Phan and Ball identified six groups as being most likely to include students who were re-enrolling in the same level of qualification or the same enabling course. These included students:

- ♣ in the 40 to 64 years age group
- ♣ from non-English speaking backgrounds
- ♣ with a disability, particularly an intellectual disability
- ♣ whose highest secondary schooling was year 9 or below
- ♣ of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- ♣ who were unemployed prior to undertaking their course

Case studies undertaken focused on students in vocational preparation, disability and Aboriginal education programs at metropolitan and rural TAFE campuses. Staff report that low-level skills (literacy, numeracy and social) and unemployed status are the usual reasons why students re-enrol in enabling courses. Increased self-esteem or maturity are reasons some young people re-enrol in the same course. In addition, not all students are seeking to enrol in a mainstream course or employment, but are doing the enabling course for personal interest. Positive outcomes also include improved quality of life, health benefits, leadership in the community, encouragement of younger students by mature-aged students, and, with more self-confidence or motivation, personal interest may lead to paid or unpaid work in the community.

Introduction

This paper reports on a recent study by Susan Dawe from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd (NCVER). The published report of this study is titled 'Moving on from enabling courses' (Dawe 2004). The term 'enabling' was used by Phan and Ball in their quantitative study, 'Outcomes of enabling courses' (2001), to describe the lower-level preparatory and pre-vocational courses in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. One of the primary aims of enabling courses is to provide students with remedial education or preparatory activities to facilitate acquisition of the skills necessary for further studies or employment.

Of the total VET student population, around 6% are in enabling courses or lower-level preparatory or pre-vocational courses (that is, 106 700 students out of 1.75 million in 2001). Phan and Ball found that a large proportion of these students were from disadvantaged groups such as people with a disability, from a non-English-speaking or Indigenous Australian background, who were unemployed prior to commencement of their course or who left school before completing year 10.

Through an analysis of the national VET surveys data, Phan and Ball reported positive outcomes for most students who completed enabling courses. Although they found a slight increase in proportion of women employed after course completion compared to men, the proportion from the various 'disadvantaged' groups in employment remained static. However, many graduates indicated that they chose their course for 'personal interest' rather than 'to get a job' or 'get into another course'.

Phan and Ball reported that over 20% of the enabling course graduates went on to enrol in a VET course the following year. Of these graduates, a third enrolled in a course at a higher level of qualification, less than a tenth in a lower level qualification while almost half of these graduates had enrolled at the same level of qualification as their previous course. While some of these had diversified into other areas of learning, over 80% had enrolled in the same course as they had successfully completed the previous year. The tendency for almost 10% of all enabling course graduates to re-enrol in the same course in the following year required investigation.

Successful completion of an enabling course means that the student has demonstrated the competency standards for that qualification - for example, in South Australia, Certificate I in Employment Skills Training, Certificate II in Introductory Vocational Education (IVEC) or Certificate I, II and III in English Proficiency; and in New South Wales, Certificate I in Works Skills, Certificate I in Foundation and Vocational Education (FAVE), or Certificate II in General and Vocational Education (GVE). In general, enabling courses are expected to lead to future activity such as higher-level general or vocational studies or paid employment.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons why some students who have successfully completed an enabling course remain at the same level of qualification or re-enrol in the same enabling course. Six groups were identified from Phan and Ball's findings to be most likely to include students who were re-enrolling in the same enabling course or a similar course. These included students:

- ♣ in the 40 to 64 years age group
- ♣ from non-English-speaking backgrounds
- ♣ with a disability, particularly an intellectually disability
- ♣ whose highest level of secondary schooling was year 9 or below
- ♣ of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- ♣ who were unemployed prior to undertaking their course.

Research methodology

In this study, the data from the NCVET 2001 National VET collection is analysed and compared to Phan and Ball's findings. Further information to investigate the reasons why students re-enrol in the same course or at the same level of qualification was sought from two states: New South Wales and South Australia.

VET Access and Equity managers provided referrals to specific TAFE institute program managers. Three sites in metropolitan and rural regions in South Australia and New South Wales were selected to focus specifically on vocational preparation, disability and Aboriginal education. For the case studies, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff and students at:

- ♣ Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE, South Australia (metropolitan campuses)
- ♣ Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE, South Australia (metropolitan and rural campuses)
- ♣ Djigay Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Education, TAFE NSW, North Coast Institute, Kempsey campus (regional campus).

Literature review

Access and equity in VET

While the National Strategy for VET (ANTA 1998a) aspires to provide access for everyone and to enable everyone to engage in meaningful work, it recognises that there are equity groups which require specific encouragement to participate in VET. If unable to participate in VET these people risk further marginalisation in our society and long-term dependency on government support.

Traditional target equity groups in VET include:

- ♣ women, especially sub-groups of young mothers and women who are unemployed or from non-English-speaking backgrounds
- ♣ people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- ♣ people from non-English-speaking backgrounds
- ♣ people with a disability
- ♣ people living in rural and remote areas.

The ANTA paper, 'Achieving equity outcomes' (1998b) noted that Indigenous Australians are poorly represented among TAFE graduates and module completers and, in addition, people with a disability are under-represented in VET participation by comparison with their proportion in the population. Consequently, two specific national strategies have been developed and implemented to increase vocational outcomes for these two most disadvantaged groups: *Partners in a learning culture* (ANTA 2000a) and *Bridging pathways* (ANTA 2000b).

The paper, 'Achieving equity outcomes', also highlights the role of VET in assisting in the employment preparation and upskilling of people with literacy and numeracy difficulties. It notes the disparity between the literacy skills of employed and unemployed people. A 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey revealed that 80% of long-term unemployed have literacy skills considered poor or very poor (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

A number of researchers (for example, Golding & Volkoff, 1999; Watson et al. 2000) have more recently identified equity sub-groups. These include:

- ♣ people with low socio-economic status within all equity groups
- ♣ people with low-level skills (literacy, numeracy and social)
- ♣ people who left school early (that is, before completing Year 12)

- ♣ people who are unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed
- ♣ people in custody
- ♣ displaced mature-aged workers.

A wide range of outcomes

An 'outcome' can be described as a practical result of undertaking a course. For example, McIntyre et al. (1996) identifies many outcomes of courses for Indigenous Australian students and listed them as being related to employment, knowledge acquisition, community, and personal and social outcomes.

Saunders et al. (2000) note that VET participation enhances employability for Indigenous Australians. These researchers conclude that 'involvement in VET-related learning in itself gives participants satisfaction, a sense of greater control over their lives and can encourage them to seek out new opportunities, enable better informed choices to be made, and to pass on these and other benefits through their interactions with their families and communities.' (p.39)

Recent high unemployment rates for young people and increasing skill demands in most industries have highlighted the importance of providing a smooth transition from school to work for young people. However, for students from the 'disadvantaged' groups problems encountered in entering or re-entering the labour market can appear insurmountable. In some cases, basic life skills and social skills are required in addition to literacy, numeracy and other work skills.

Linking learning to health benefits

There is a wide range of other possible outcomes from undertaking an enabling course. Participants in learning activities often report improvement in their health, their ability to cope with health problems or general well-being (Dench & Regan 2000). Aldridge & Lavendar (2000) note from the findings of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales)—NIACE small-scale survey, 87% of respondents reported benefits to their physical health, while 89% reported positive emotional or mental health benefits. These direct health benefits reflect the greatest general benefits experienced from learning which include increased confidence and self-esteem, new friends and contact with other people, improved relationships with other people, and new employment or voluntary work.

The NIACE survey findings also note that 20% of learners were encouraged to attend adult education opportunities by education staff. This is the key method used by one NIACE project to encourage people to begin to become learners. In this project, 'a learning advisor' offers 'prescriptions for learning' in three General Practice surgeries. The learning advisor offers educational advice and guidance and creates a link between education providers, primary health care professionals and people who may not have participated in learning since leaving school (Aldridge & Lavendar 2000).

Findings and discussion

Enabling courses contain a high proportion of students from 'disadvantaged' groups

About 6% of the total number of students in public funded VET courses in 2001 were undertaking preparatory or pre-vocational courses, that is, 'enabling' courses. There is a higher proportion of the disadvantaged groups in enabling courses than mainstream

VET courses. For example, students who left school before completing year 10 are up to four times more likely to undertake enabling courses than those whose highest school attainment level was beyond year 10. That is, in enabling courses, the proportion of students who left school before completing year 10 is 19.5% compared to 5.6% for those students who had completed year 10.

Multiple disadvantaged groups

There is an even higher proportion of students who belong to more than one 'disadvantaged' group in enabling courses than in mainstream VET courses: for example for women, non-English speaking background students or Indigenous Australian students who were also unemployed prior to undertaking their course (see table 1)

Table 1: Proportion of disadvantaged groups in enabling courses (%), 2001

	Unemployed	All
Females	12.1	6.3
Non-English-speaking background	18.2	13.6
Indigenous Australians	21.4	18.1

Source: NCVET 2001 National VET collection

Students with a disability

Those students with an intellectual disability are most likely to be enrolled in an enabling course compared to a mainstream program. As a result of the implementation of the 'Bridging pathways' strategy, the focus of enabling courses for students with a disability are on achieving the competencies required for the course. Previously there were recreational programs, particularly for those students with intellectual or multiple disabilities, where the students benefited from the social interactions and the carers obtained respite while the student was at TAFE once a week. These programs have been replaced by, for example, the School to Work Partnership Program for students with a disability at Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE, Gilles Plains campus.

Increasing proportion of 15–19 years olds

The analysis of data from the 2001 National VET collection indicates an increasing proportion of students in the 15–19 years age group in enabling courses (see table 2). Some of these are students leaving school early for personal reasons, including disenchantment with the school system or family problems. Other students may be in special programs, such as students with a disability or programs for teenage mothers.

Table 2: Proportion of 15–19 years in enabling courses (%), 1998 and 2001

	1998	2001**
Females	18.7	27.0
Males	29.4	38.6

Source: NCVET 1998 and 2001 National VET collection

** Not directly comparable to 1998 figures as it is no longer possible to select data by 'stream of study' description when defining 'enabling courses'.

Is there a significant problem with students remaining in enabling courses?

It appears that there is not a significant problem with students remaining in enabling courses, as many of these students had in fact progressed to a more advanced course within the same level of qualification, for example, students moving on from

Certificate I in Preparatory Education —CPE to Introductory Vocational Education Certificate II—IVEC or a pre-vocational course. Other students had diversified into other areas of learning at the same level of qualification, for example to explore vocational or personal interests such as office skills or information technology.

For example, the staff at the Djigay Centre for Excellence in Aboriginal Education in Kempsey find that allowing the Aboriginal students to undertake Certificate I in Work Skills before entering a certificate II vocational course enables the students more time to adapt to the TAFE learning environment and increases their chances of successfully completing a certificate II or above course. The Certificate I in Work Skills has a focus on skills in literacy and numeracy, giving and getting information, job seeking and work placement. However, a feature of the Certificate I in Work Skills is that electives can be undertaken from higher-level courses in Arts and Media, Tourism, Horticulture, or Aboriginal Studies. This enables students to try different vocational areas and discover what suits them.

The feature at Djigay is the work-based learning program and there are work-based learning enterprises which include the Wigay Aboriginal Food and Culture Park and the College Café. At the Djigay Centre a particular vocational pathway is determined over time—when the student is ready. The support of staff and fellow students plays a major part in the students' motivation to complete a certificate II or III course.

Building self confidence and motivation

TAFE staff note that often the more important objective of enabling courses is to increase the student's self-esteem, confidence and motivation for further study or employment. In particular, students need to become independent learners who are motivated to succeed by their own goals or perhaps community goals, for example in Aboriginal communities. Most students need the motivation of employment opportunities at the end of their training to continue with further study.

TAFE staff acknowledge that students who have completed an enabling course and are looking for work are encouraged to continue in the same or a similar course in order to maintain their self-confidence and skill levels while seeking work. In addition, there are examples of students who complete an enabling course and then obtain voluntary or paid work. These students may re-enrol in the same course with increased self-esteem and motivation to achieve higher skill levels, especially in literacy and numeracy or English proficiency.

For example, from the Education Manager for Human Services and Aboriginal Education at Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE:

'In fact, the contract with DEST—the federal government Department of Education, Science and Training, allows students to complete Certificate I in Preparatory Education (CPE) twice. This is because the biggest problem is the confidence factor and the course builds confidence and motivation. For example, 'Kenny' was shy with low self-esteem and so struggled to complete CPE. Then, he got a job in a furniture factory and developed confidence. He wanted to come back to do CPE again. He gained more advanced skills from doing the course a second time and also progressed at work. He was given a full-time job.'

So, is there a residual group remaining in enabling courses?

This study found that the return of students to enabling courses was a positive outcome in that these students had increased self-esteem, wanted to retain or improve their skills in the hope that they would obtain employment or gain community, personal and social benefits from further learning.

TAFE staff highlight that for students in vocational preparation courses there are often multiple barriers to learning to overcome to move on from enabling courses. These include low self-esteem, demoralising experiences at school, lack of schooling, immaturity and problems with their finances, health or the legal system. Students who lack self-esteem or maturity take longer to find their area of interest and so may remain longer or try several enabling courses before achieving the self-confidence or motivation to continue with studies for a higher-level qualification. In addition, the increasing number of 15–19 years of age, unemployed people undertaking vocational preparation programs often require other support services including accommodation, rent assistance, suicide prevention, counselling and crisis intervention.

Maintaining an engagement with learning

Some students may re-enrol in the same enabling course or in a course at the same level of qualification because they want to maintain their engagement with learning. These generally comprise students who are unemployed, have a disability, or are from non-English-speaking or Indigenous Australian backgrounds. Other students, especially mature-aged students, may re-enrol to maintain their quality of life through further learning and continued social contacts that are available in training programs. Students have a variety of reasons for re-enrolling in the same or different enabling course, or sometimes in a course at a lower level of qualification. These include:

- ♣ re-visiting prior learning
- ♣ maintaining skills and self-confidence while seeking paid work
- ♣ gaining additional skills and knowledge in new areas of learning
- ♣ maintaining social contacts that are available at TAFE
- ♣ supporting other students' learning.

Some students enrol in enabling courses for personal interest reasons. However, if they experience success this may lead to further studies or paid employment at a later stage. Other benefits of students continuing in enabling courses were also noted.

These include:

- ♣ improved lifestyle and health of individuals
- ♣ increased networks for support and a sense of belonging to a community
- ♣ increased community ownership of courses (eg Aboriginal elders attending TAFE)
- ♣ increased mentoring of students by mature-aged students.

The 'disadvantaged' groups, especially sub-groups such as early school leavers and long-term unemployed people, need specific strategies to enhance their success in moving on from enabling courses to further study or employment. Six successful strategies identified in this study include increasing motivation of students by:

- ♣ customising the curriculum, and assessment methodologies, to the needs of the students
- ♣ allowing students longer, where necessary, to successfully complete courses

- ♣ supporting students with definite pathways to employment
- ♣ providing work experience or work placement as part of the course
- ♣ linking training to employment opportunities or encouraging students to set up small or cooperative business activities to use their skills and create employment opportunities
- ♣ providing mentoring by mature-aged students or supportive staff.

Customising curricula and assessment methodologies

An important strategy for encouraging participation, and successfully moving students on from enabling courses is to increase student motivation by customising the curriculum to suit the location and the needs of students. For example, using project-based learning in a local community and adapting delivery to the preferred learning styles of students. The study found a preference for oral and practical learning by many of the students in enabling courses.

A variety of assessment methodologies should also be developed for enabling courses to ensure these students have as much opportunity as possible to demonstrate their achievement in the required competencies. For example, Indigenous Australian students may prefer oral assessment to written assessment.

Allowing students longer, when necessary, to successfully complete courses

Students with low-level literacy and numeracy skills or those with a disability or having left school without completing Year 10, often need time to overcome multiple barriers to learning. They may lack maturity, trust in teachers and self-esteem to believe in their own ability to learn. These students need extra support and time to build confidence, to become independent learners and move on from enabling courses to mainstream VET courses. In these instances, providing longer than the allocated number of hours for an enabling course or allowing students to repeat the same course is usually beneficial.

Supporting students with definite pathways to employment

Students with low-self esteem generally do not know what they want or are able to do, and hence are often unable to set their own long-term goals or to identify a pathway that leads to paid employment. Supported and directed pathways to employment opportunities should be provided for all unemployed students in enabling courses, especially those students between 15 and 19 years of age.

Initially, some students may be referred to TAFE by Centrelink or enrolled in enabling courses to access government allowances (for example, Abstudy or Austudy allowances). Often these students do not have access to trusted others, such as parents, for support and guidance in career education. They often rely on lecturers and student services officers for long-term support and guidance with respect to possible further studies and employment opportunities.

Making it possible for students to undertake electives selected from suitable modules from mainstream courses, is one example of helping students to explore further study options. Keeping students in the same class groups in the following year, or scheduling the next level course in consecutive semesters, may also encourage more students to progress to the next level of study.

Providing work experience

Most students, but particularly those of low socio-economic status or low self-esteem, are motivated by work to encourage them to become independent learners and undertake further study or set their goals. This could include work-based learning projects such as building and maintaining a children's playground for the community. However, a commendable strategy is to include work experience and work placements as part of the enabling course curriculum.

Linking training to employment

The motivation of students for further study is particularly enhanced by linking training to employment opportunities. For example at the Djigay Centre, training was linked to recruitment for new jobs being created by the extension to the Mid-North Correction Centre near Kempsey.

Encouraging students to use their skills and knowledge in a voluntary capacity in the community, campus-based business enterprises, or small or co-operative businesses for the community is another strategy which may help students to move from enabling courses to more advanced mainstream VET programs or paid employment

Providing mentoring

A primary aim of enabling courses is to increase the students' feelings of self-worth, confidence and motivation for further study. Thus, mature-aged students or staff members mentor new students to provide the long-term support and guidance with respect to possible further studies and employment opportunities. For example, there were 20 Aboriginal part-time and full-time teachers on the staff at Kempsey campus.

Conclusion

The research confirms that a small number of students re-enrol in the same enabling course and others re-enrol at the same level of qualification. However, these outcomes should not be considered negatively as this study concludes that these students are still progressing to a more advanced level of study or exploring a different vocational area. They are gaining further skills and maintaining self-esteem.

This study has shown that there are direct and indirect benefits of students enrolling in the same enabling course. Direct benefits may include increased self-esteem and skills, maintenance of skills and confidence while seeking work, or improved health. Indirect benefits may include maintaining supportive networks through contacts that are available at TAFE, developing personal interest which may lead to part-time or voluntary work, or providing community benefits such as mature-aged students providing role models and encouraging younger people in marginalised groups.

The challenge for VET staff is to engage these disadvantaged people in appropriate education and training to improve their employment prospects and quality of life.

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