



# EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF LOW-SES STUDENTS FROM ENABLING PROGRAMS: A REPORT ON EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

---

**Jennifer Stokes, Dr Chad Habel and Dr Kirsty Whitman**

UniSA College, University of South Australia, and The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia. Study funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University



# Acknowledgements

This study was undertaken by researchers from the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia and funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) at Curtin University.

The authors would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of both staff and students of their respective institutions (especially those involved in the administration and delivery of enabling programs), and also the participants who gave up their time to honestly discuss some sensitive matters.

Thanks also to colleagues at the NCSEHE for supporting the project.

This work is dedicated to Robert Graf, one of the first and best students of the University Preparatory Program.



# Introduction

- Enabling programs as entry path to university
- Designed to support equity groups and widening participation
- This research aimed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of students in these programs and on into undergraduate degrees
- Phenomenology and class analysis
- Education as a transformative experience, not without complications
- Themes include: gratefulness, complexity, and multiple sites of disadvantage, encouraging intersectional approaches



# Student Equity in Higher Education in Australia

- Role of the 2008 Review of Higher Education in identifying targets for widening participation.
- The implementation of an enabling program at The University of Adelaide in 2012 was in reaction to the Bradley Review's recommendations and increasing participation is an implementation of the University of Adelaide's Strategic Plan: The Beacon of Enlightenment (2012: 6).
- In comparison the University of South Australia has equity and diversity as a core tenant of its founding legislation (Klinger and Murray, 2011).
- There are many challenges inherent in the equity project and this research project hoped to open dialogue around complex issues.



# The Programs

The University Preparatory Program



The Foundations Studies Program



# Theoretical Framework

## Socio-Economic Status and Social Class

- In Australia 'socio-economic status' is largely used as a quantitative measure of social, political and economic equality and disadvantage.
- Asking participants about their classed background allowed for them to identify themselves in classed terms beyond the economic.

## Bourdieuian Theory and Habitus in Higher Education

- 'If cultural capital is naturalised and habitus invisible, students are expected to transform themselves one way or another to make themselves amenable to the liberating effects of educational advancement' (Habel and Whitman 2016: 74).

## Intersections of Advantage and Disadvantage in relation to HE

- While utilising Bourdieusian theories of field, cultural capital and habitus, we must also recognise some of the limits of Bourdieusian theory – one of such being that with its focus on class it may occlude the important roles of gender, race, age and ability (Reay, 2004).



# Methodology

## Phenomenology

Allowed us to collect data which focused on the lived experience of the students.

## Critical Pedagogy

Allows for the critique and deconstruction of systems of power, privilege and marginalisation. Explores the role of education as 'a political act' that empowers students (Freire 1994 in Stokes and Ulpén 2015).

## Qualitative Methodological Approaches

Qualitative approaches can explore the nuances of these experiences to help shape discourse, policy and pedagogy in the light of authentic human experience. This project relies on participant data that reflects the complexities of lived experience and how participants make sense of how they 'experience the world and/or how they make sense of it' (Gomm 2004: 7).



# Participants and procedures

- 20 in-depth interviews of 1-2 hours duration
- 12 current or former students at the University of Adelaide
- 8 current or former students at the University of South Australia
- 14 identified as 'working class', and 6 discussed issues with physical health, mental health or both.
- In the previous project, overwhelmingly students had very mixed experiences of educational transformation, undergoing both positive and negative experience (Habel and Whitman 2016). Furthermore, these experiences were largely informed by the classed positions of students.
- Students from The University of Adelaide were interviewed in 2015
- Students from the University of South Australia were interviewed in 2016.





# Key findings

- Transition to New Environment (Enabling Program to Degree Program)
- Positive experience of enabling programs
- Space and Place: The importance of spatial relationships to University
- Self-efficacy and confidence
- Foundation Programs and Developing Skills: Academic Literacies



# Key findings

- Transformation, Class and Habitus: Challenges, Negotiating Change and Resilience
- Trauma, disruption and relationship breakdowns
- Relationship Breakdown
- Other Relationship Friction: Friends and Family, Classed-fractioning



# Key findings

- Financial Resources: Being Poor at University
- Resolution into Adaptation
- Pride and Tenacity: Positive overall transformation
- Enabling Programs: Developing resilience and creating a safe space to experience transformation



# Case Studies

- The phenomenological approach of this research led to the decision to include in the findings several case studies, based on unique narratives of experience that emerged.
- A case study analysis serves to highlights some of the main issues as a guideline for further research.
- Pseudonyms are used throughout.



# Case Study 1: Problematic 'Choice' and Classed Constructions of Higher Education

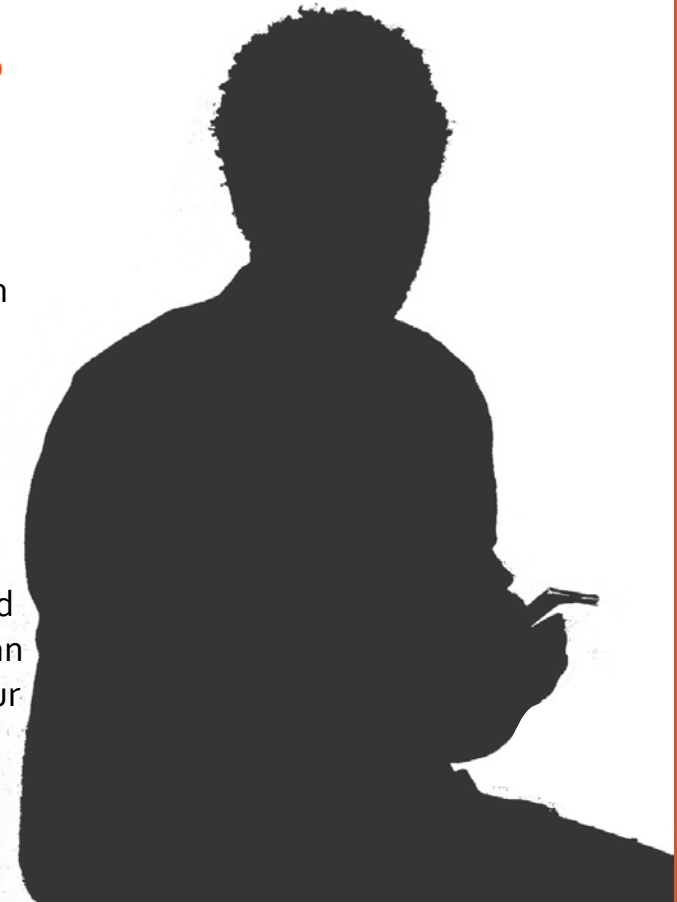
Rosemary (23) and her Mother Wanda (53) both studied Foundations together at The University of Adelaide, commencing in Semester 2, 2012. They had a hiatus before commencing their degrees in Semester 1, 2014; in part due to the birth of R's first child in September 2013. They then commenced Bachelor of Social Science programs, however both had left by the beginning of Semester 2, R had two children within 18 months, whereas W had issues with citizenship and the dissolution of her marriage.

## Shaped by classed and gendered factors

Both R and W, who identified as working-class and had working-class friends and family, needed to defend their choice of degree in both classed and gendered terms – with them getting questioned both about 'what they could do' after finishing a degree not specifically aligned with a profession (such as nursing or teaching), and how their choice to study would affect 'their families' iterating gendered narratives around responsibility for family happiness and the overall pressure for women to engage in emotion work. As working-class women, R and W had to defend their decision to undertake a degree that was seen as having less value.

## Experienced backlash from friends and family in relation to studies and had to defend their choices

R: But even J at the start used to say ... W: We ended up printing off something for J ... because he asked R, so what are you going to do? What are you going to get? Is it really worth it? He hounded R more than I got hounded. I ended up giving him a piece of paper that listed — we'd gone into careers services in our Social Science degree, a careers lady ... and she gave us this paper, and it listed some of the things that students who had graduated were doing. R: I got it constantly, constantly, constantly. Even S, my best friend, was constantly like, well, what are you doing afterwards? I'm like, I don't really know. I said I don't know, and I'm not really bothered. I'm just doing it because I enjoy uni, more than anything.



# Case Study 1: Problematic 'Choice' and Classed Constructions of Higher Education

Importance of the program for preparing them with confidence, academic literacies and a sense of belonging

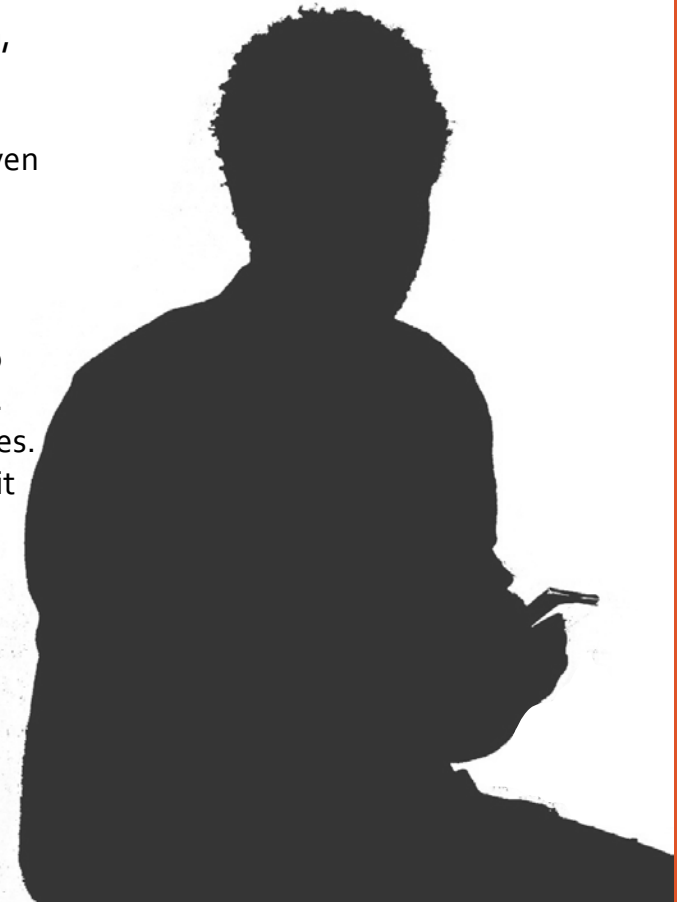
Both saw undertaking Foundation Studies as key to developing the confidence to undertake a degree program, and to challenge any questioning of their choice to undertake a degree, and in the area they had chosen: R: I think that's why I found the UPP so enjoyable, because I felt safe and it was like everyone knew everyone and your teacher sort of looked after you, and you felt a bit more coached and if you needed any help, you were given a bit of help. W: It was sort of like you were nurtured. You were like eggs being incubated around the university.

Themes of empowerment, agency and study as personal development, not just a means to an end.

W: If I went into my bachelor degree, I would feel so much better after doing the UPP. I would have felt like an absolute stunned mullet and dropped out within — I would have had to leave class because I would have felt so lost and like I didn't belong here, what am I doing? All of them things would have been going through my head. Like you said, the referencing, we got taught how to do referencing. There was like the annotated bibliographies. We got taught how to do all different writing, so we knew when things were up, and we had assignments due, it was like, I know what that is, and you knew how to do the research, and yes, it was just becoming familiar with the uni. We got taught so many good things. For people going into uni I couldn't recommend any more highly than I do now.

Transformation through education

W: Yes, everything had to crumble. Everything had to be broken down for it to be — all the building blocks had to be reshuffled and the ones that I didn't need had to be moved aside. What was important, what needed to be there, and if I had to suffer, which I did, because I didn't want to break up with my partner because I loved him very much, but I had to give him up to go forward in my life. That was really hard for me, but I did it. We ended up back together anyway.



# Case Study 2: 'At-risk' students negotiating poverty and (mental) health



Lisa-Marie (25, Bachelor of Business, UniSA), had navigated insecure housing, mental and physical health issues (which were exacerbated by each other) and poverty. However, despite belonging to multiple and intersecting 'at-risk' groups, L-M had not only stayed engaged with her course, she had maintained a high GPA and excellent outcomes.

**Successfully navigating HE despite obstacles, including negative prior educational experience and homelessness:** I dropped out when I was 13. I went to private school for a year and a half because I skipped a grade and stuff when I was 4, so I started high school when I was 11. I went to private school for a year and a half, transferred to Modbury [a public school in a working-class suburb], lasted about one semester, and couldn't do it anymore. So I dropped out when I was 13. Went into foundation studies; I'd already been out of school for eight years, with a year nine education...

I've lived with my mum, never with my dad, and because she was unemployed I grew up in poverty ... It was a lot of home issues. I was just — I rebelled, and decided to party instead of study. I had a truancy officer which I got legal permission to leave school early. They just said, there's no point you being here; you're not doing it, so I had to be employed to be able to leave, so I went to Hungry Jacks and I did night shifts at the age of 13, like \$6 an hour.

L-M worked in various hospitality jobs until the onset of her illness resulted in her losing both jobs within a couple of months, resulting in her deciding to consider study. Rather than see the development of her illness as a negative however, she has constructed a narrative of empowerment and choice, one in which the development of her illness allowed her to consider other options: The upside of getting IBS is that's what made me go to uni in the first place. I had two jobs, not good jobs, but I had two jobs; I got sick; I lost both those jobs within a couple of months, and I was like, I'm not going to sit around and do nothing, so I started doing research, and that's how I found out about Foundation Studies and how I ended up back at uni. So that's one positive with chronic illness.

L-M found that the development of her chronic illness had a direct causal effect on her mental health, with her developing, as she expressed it, 'severe anxiety'.

# Case Study 2: 'At-risk' students negotiating poverty and (mental) health



Completing Foundation Studies in 2013 gave her a solid grounding to enter into undergraduate studies, and allowed her to develop her confidence: I wouldn't have been able to go to uni without it, because I hadn't done year 12. But I did consider sitting the STAT test, and I just said, no, I needed that bridging, and it definitely gave me that. Like, we had a subject introduction to Tertiary Education, which really taught you a lot. I'd never written an essay before, because I left school in year nine, so just having that chance to sort of ease into it with small, you-know, 500 word essays and things, I don't think I could have gone straight into a full degree without that... But the confidence to do uni in the first place, it really gave me that, which I think is an important thing. Without Foundations Studies, I wouldn't have had the confidence to start doing a degree.

Interested in post-graduate study and determined to maintain high grades. This was a goal she discussed in relation to being on the High Achiever's list and winning merit awards: So yes, definitely improved my confidence, and I'm a very goal-orientated person. I don't think I'll get a Dean's Award. It was my goal. I have to keep trying in my next degree. Top 15 percent isn't good enough, you've got to be top 5 percent.

Constant negotiation and determination to succeed. Despite falling into several categories that would deem her 'at risk', she has forged a successful academic career. She chose a 'safe' Business degree rather than her dream career of Nursing, but intends to return to study at a later date.

L-M saw education as a pathway out of poverty and marginalisation. She also came to view study not only as a step to something better, but as a space in which she experienced success, pride and enjoyment: But yes, for me this degree has been very much about the academic stuff done and if I do another one, I would love to experience the whole university experience, because I do think everything, including pub crawls, clubs, all that sort of stuff, is part of the experience of being at university, and building friendships and things like that.

Ultimately L-M was intensely proud of her achievements, and the fact that overall, she had managed to achieve a university degree by the age of 25 despite extensive personal and external factors that seemingly could have worked against her. Being able to say I did it. Leaving school when you're 13 and partying your teenage years, my family never thought I would do it, and they were disappointed because I had skipped a grade and was in all the gifted programs and all those sorts of things when I was a kid. They had all these high hopes, so I think just having that pride that, you know, I went back and I did it is the most rewarding thing to me. That's why, even though I don't necessarily think I went into the right area for me, I'm dedicated to finishing this degree because I can graduate. I never had a year 12 graduation.

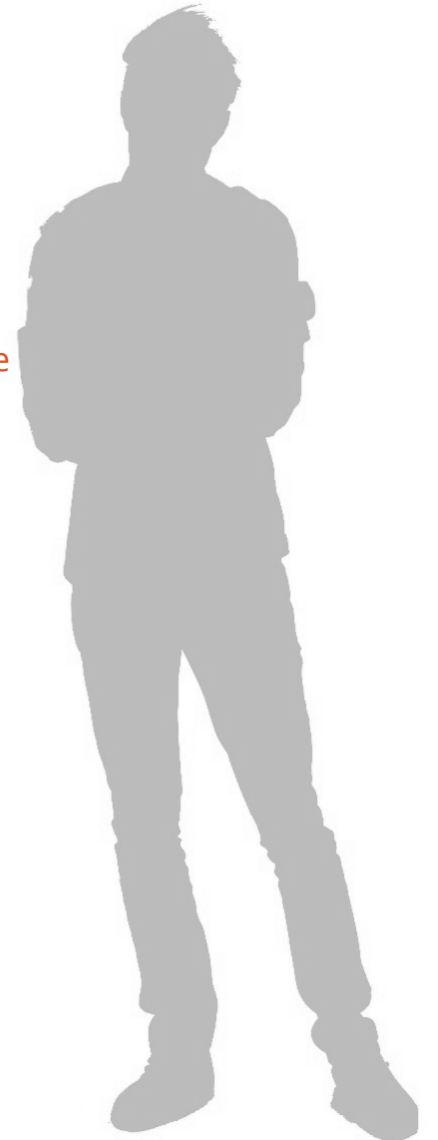


# Case Study 3: Embracing Change, Negotiating Transformation

Simon (28, Bachelor of Science, Adelaide), like the previous participants, found himself undergoing considerable transformation through his engagement with higher education. His story is different from the preceding ones in that he was financially secure and in a chosen career when he realised that he wanted a change.

Foundation Studies gave him the confidence and self-efficacy to both negotiate starting university, and to negotiate undergoing educational transformation. He identified as working-class, and had, as many working-class people do, focused on becoming financially stable when he left school. He had disrupted schooling, following his parents' marriage breakdown he was in a single-parent household from the age of four, moving between Queensland and South Australia. I think most of the reason why I didn't continue with high school was that, by the time I got to year 10, I'd missed so much. Like, background, basics, and I just lost interest. It got too hard and I lost interest... so there were constantly different high schools I was going to. I think the main thing was they were public schools as well, and not once did anyone really mention university. It was get a trade, do something practical. As soon as I was offered a Cert 1, I took it and got a trade out of it. That was like, get out of here as quickly as possible, that sort of thing ... In 2006 I was offered an apprenticeship and left [school] in year 10.

Reflecting on his first days highlight his educational transformation. He relates undertaking the UPP to a sense of preparedness and confidence with starting his first day of his bachelor degree, a confidence that was helped by starting with the close cohort he had within Foundation Studies: Oh man, my first day in the UPP I was peaking. I was freaking out. I just remember I couldn't wait to get home, because I was so stressed... But the first day of uni, I think after doing the UPP, I was like, I've got this, like, I'm ready for this, I can smash this out. I was to always do the science core course, so I transferred over with a bunch of UPP students that were doing it at the same time, and we all kind of just walked into it, and went, ah, group — UPP group, right in the middle of the class, and it was good. Having that support, especially from fellow students in the UPP, it was great.



# Case Study 3: Embracing Change, Negotiating Transformation

**Reflecting on why he was in the program:** Yes, [the UPP is] extremely more diverse, but the interesting part about it is most of us were there for the same reason. With the UPP, we all pretty much made a big mistake at some point in our lives, and just kind of woke up to that and went, oh, I need to do something with my life.

**He found empowerment and connection through the UPP studies and sense of purpose through his degree:** The most rewarding part I guess would be, not directly, but when I was 11, I built my first computer from scratch. However it was crap. This guy next door had a new shed, and when I finally got it working, six months, and installed some random OFs on it, and finally got it working; like, this is what I want to do with my life. Something went horribly wrong and I became a chef. I think the time I wrote my first code, it was so basic, it was just printing letters, I was like, Yes! I'm now doing that! Like, I just felt so empowered by that, because I told myself that's what I wanted to do, and I got the option to do it, and it was very rewarding.

**He actively negotiated class change: and a growing sense of disconnect from some friends and family. Simon, like many of the other participants who underwent tension in their personal relationships, was extremely perceptive of the classed causes, and how expectations around the 'authentic' classed self were being subverted and making people uncomfortable: [talking about his ex-partner]** She liked being kind of dominant in the relationship, and I don't mind that. It doesn't bother me at all. As far as academically, she was just smarter than me, and she liked being smarter. When I started climbing that ladder, like every time I got a little bit more — every time I understood a little bit more about what she was talking about, she seemed to get more and more frustrated.



# Case Study 3: Embracing Change, Negotiating Transformation

[talking about his family] Yes, family is the hardest ... it's full on for them. We've got a lot of electricians and mechanics and plumbers, and for them it's like, oh yeah, good on you, good on you, but they find it very hard to engage, especially like people call it school. It's like, it's not school, it's so different to school. Don't call it that, because it's so different to school. My mum's parents are extremely supportive. They're just so proud of me, but they don't really know what they're proud of. Like, they don't get it, which is fine

.... me and my brother have different last names to the rest of the family. So there's a social gap there already, and I think every family has this thing where your uncle's kids have to be better than his brother's kids. There's this thing, and then all of the sudden you've got all these kids who have trades — and we all have trades — and then all of the sudden one of them goes to university, and all my mum's brothers just went, oh, your son's going to university, is he? It's like, ohh, it's extended that gap.

S was particularly good at negotiating these challenges through his understanding of the classed dynamics of such change, but also his own sense of being on the right path. He felt the change he was undergoing was overwhelmingly a positive one, that he was becoming the person he was meant to be through educational transformation – a transformation made more smooth by his undertaking Foundation Studies.

How have I changed? Dramatically. I'm a lot more confident than I used to be. Actually, I'm a little bit too confident sometimes. I'm a lot more stressed out, I'm very tired, I've never been so tired. But no, I can feel myself slipping into a new skin, almost, a skin that's preparing me for the rest of my life, which is an interesting way of feeling. This is me, this is it. This is pretty smart; this is what I'm going to do. I was not prepared for the rest of my life in any way, shape or form ... the person I'm supposed to be is, yes — I've always like, most of my life I've stayed away from that whole, I'm on that path that I should be on. ... I feel like I'm more ready to be an adult.



# Discussion & Recommendations

- This research has begun to unearth an enormous depth and complexity behind the student experience of studying a Bachelor's degree, having entered via an Enabling program from a low-SES background.
- Overall, students had an enormously positive experience of adapting to academic culture, and felt grateful to the staff involved, the Program itself, and the University as a whole for the opportunity to have another chance at studying..
- They often framed their experience as a journey or a path, and articulated their lived experience as a connected series of phenomena from their earliest experiences of formal education to their current situation. However, this was rarely a universally positive transformative experience.
- The case studies remind us that the results of such qualitative research are not always predictable, and don't always fall within our standard frames of reference. They also provide important suggestions for further research. Of course, it is an ongoing challenge to explore the experience of students who are not so successful in their studies.
- The programs are essential in the access and equity ecosystem, and so this research serves as a strong recommendation that they should continue to be supported and resourced. The social value they provide goes beyond quantitative or economic measures.
- Despite the narratives of positive transformation and social mobility that emerge from this kind of research, it must also be acknowledged that student journeys also involve significant change, trauma, disruption and social stigmatisation.
- Because of this, institutional support structures are essential and should be given a more prominent place as essential instruments in building towards student success.

W: Yes, in this space, and like I said, everything had to be broken down and crumbled, and to come back and start learning now, because still wouldn't have been prepared then. I'm prepared now, and my position in life is prepared



# Questions?

Please view the full report at <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/exploring-the-experience-of-low-ses-students-via-enabling-pathways/>

## **Jennifer Stokes**

UniSA College, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia.

[jennifer.stokes@unisa.edu.au](mailto:jennifer.stokes@unisa.edu.au)

## **Dr Chad Habel**

The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia.

[chad.habel@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:chad.habel@adelaide.edu.au)

## **Dr Kirsty Whitman**

The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia.

[kirsty.whitman@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:kirsty.whitman@adelaide.edu.au)

