Risk or opportunity? The journey of students entering university via an enabling program

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In memory of Eleanor Mary Ramsay 1948–2017

a pioneer of enabling education, a champion of women’s rights,
an inspiring role model and a wonderful friend and neighbour
Abstract

University preparatory or enabling programs operate in most Australian universities. The primary purpose of these programs is to assist students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education. Despite a significant level of engagement and funding across the nation, high levels of attrition, as compared to undergraduate courses, speak to an experience that is not always successful for students. The way students experience and manage their entry into higher education via these programs is not well understood leaving significant gaps in our understanding of the interrelationship between the lives of students and the programs they enrol in.

This thesis explores how students at the University of Tasmania’s enabling program, the University Preparation Program, perceived, managed and experienced risk during their first semester. Qualitative data were collected from both students and staff, via semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. A constructivist approach was employed to explore the ways risk, opportunity and transformation played out in their lives.

Key theoretical perspectives on risk were used in this process, including seeing risk as a growing responsibility of the individual in post-modern society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991); and risk as a socio-cultural phenomenon, impacted by the wider cultural parameters in which it sits (Douglas, 1985). Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986) theory of capital, habitus and field and Mezirow’s (1991) theory of Transformative Learning were also employed to highlight the impact of background and learning experiences in both generating and ameliorating risk.

The data portrayed a complex and nuanced relationship between risk, opportunity and transformation. Notions of risk were influenced by gender, family, personal circumstances, past life experiences and broader social and cultural norms. While facing multiple challenges and issues and actively identifying and negotiating risk, both students and staff overall preferred a narrative of education as opportunity, rather than education as risk.
Students in this study showed considerable skill and proactiveness in identifying and negotiating risk. Initially, the students individualised responsibility for risk, seeing success and failure as a product of their own resources and determination. However, as the semester progressed, and the students experienced a program designed actively to manage risk, a shared responsibility emerged. For the successful students in this study, UPP emerged as a ‘safe space’ where risk could be unpacked and managed and where they could ‘try out’ university. The capacity of an enabling program to create a space where risk is shared and partially minimised represents a key contribution to understanding how risk can be successfully negotiated.

Findings from this study also revealed that UPP students represented a unique group of students within the Australian university sector. While background, such as low socioeconomic or first-in-family, was important, being mature-aged and having a previously low level of or disrupted educational attainment were clearer defining features of this cohort. Thus risk was experienced broadly by the UPP students, not just by certain cohorts.

The research has significant implications for broader policy and practice in the enabling education space. This includes: (1) the provision of ‘risk negotiation’ spaces as an important mechanism in translating theoretical opportunity into realistic access; (2) recognition of the uniqueness of the enabling-program student cohort and accommodating this appropriately; (3) the need to reframe ideas of attrition within the enabling education space to account for the special nature of its students; and (4) suggesting pedagogies and support strategies which augment the considerable resources enabling-program students already bring with them.
Acknowledgements

This degree and research project were undertaken over a six and a half-year period in which a lot of ‘life’ happened. This included working full-time, or often working more than full time; being made redundant and losing the job I loved and the one which inspired me to undertake this study; being unemployed and not knowing what the future held; finding and adjusting to a new job and then another; selling up and moving away from house, city and friends; seeing my two sons grow up and leave home; getting married (thank you Australia); my partner Bronwyn finishing her own PhD and producing a book; her traumatic accident with a ride-on-mower; the sad and way-too-early loss of three people the world could ill-afford to lose – Andrew, Eleanor and Tracey; and the joyous counter-side to loss, the arrival of grandchildren Jeanie, Flora and Otis. In all this, my study remained a constant – sometimes friend, sometimes foe.

Another constant was my partner/wife Bronwyn. Her PhD journey showed me the level of toughness required to get to the end in this kind of endeavour, and her quiet, unassuming brilliance served as something to aspire to, regardless of how unlikely I was to ever achieve the same level. Her place in my life is important above all else, and her love and support during these years has made the difference between staying and leaving.

Crucial as well is the support and skill of my two supervisors, Professor Sarah O’Shea and Emeritus Professor Jan Wright. They have engaged with the topic, have added countless layers of significance to what I have produced, have been extremely conscientious in their roles, and have made the process of working from another state seamless. They constantly pushed me to look beyond what the literature/theory/data says, to see what it means, a process that I can only imagine was at times tiresome for them, but vital for me. As I hear stories from other students who have had less positive supervision experiences, I understand how incredibly lucky I have been.
I owe many thanks also to my great friend, colleague and fellow cheese person, Dr Nicole Crawford. Her stories and enthusiasm have kept me engaged in my field when my direct work in it was lost. Her passion, kindness and love for what she does and the students she supports is admirable beyond words. Her intellectual endeavours have helped me stay connected academically as well, and our long phone chats have helped provide inspiration and motivation to continue with my project.

My last acknowledgement is for the brave students who put their hands up to participate in this study, and for the thousands of other students who enrol in enabling programs in an effort to fulfil their dream of university study. My admiration for you all has grown so much during this project – you are awesome!
Certification

I, Lynn Maree Jarvis declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Education from the University of Wollongong is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Lynn Maree Jarvis

20 November 2018
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATAR</td>
<td>Australian Tertiary Academic Ranking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSI</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALD</td>
<td>Culturally and linguistically diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEC</td>
<td>Further Education College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIF</td>
<td>First-in-family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HECS</td>
<td>Higher Education Contribution Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSES</td>
<td>Low socioeconomic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MyLO</td>
<td>My Learning Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socioeconomic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and Further Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPP</td>
<td>University Preparation Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTAS</td>
<td>University of Tasmania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP</td>
<td>Widening participation</td>
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<td>VET</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

University participation and how to increase it have been on the public and political agenda in Australia for the past 40 years. However, despite a significant increase in the number of students attending university since the 1980s, some population groups remain under-represented. Those less likely to occupy a place in Australia’s universities include students from a low socioeconomic status (LSES) background, rural or isolated students, students with a disability as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Koshy, 2017). Not surprisingly this inequality has been portrayed as undesirable (Dawkins, 1988; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Parallel to this largely social justice agenda is a push for greater participation in general, a push driven by the perceived need for a more educated workforce to meet the economic demands of the knowledge economy (Bradley et al., 2008). This push from both the social justice, and the economic rationalist perspectives is often characterised under the umbrella term ‘widening participation’ (WP).

Since the late 1980s and the first significant government report addressing inequality and participation in higher education (the Dawkins White Paper, 1988), a range of policy initiatives have been implemented to increase participation, particularly from under-represented groups. One of these has been the provision of university preparatory, bridging, access or enabling courses (hereafter called enabling programs) to support participation from under-represented groups and to increase participation more broadly. These programs, which facilitate entry into university for domestic students otherwise not eligible for enrolment (Clarke, Bull, Neil & Birney, 2000), are

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1 There is both a specific and more general understanding of the term ‘enabling’ program in the Australian higher education environment. The specific understanding relates to eligibility for funding under the Commonwealth Government Grant Scheme (CGS) ‘enabling load’ banner. In this case courses must be a bridging program offered prior to or concurrently with award study; available to domestic students only; attract no HECS fees; allow students to qualify for university entry; cannot be credited to award study; and supports participation by disadvantaged groups (Clark et al., 2000). A range of other enabling-like courses are offered which may not qualify for federally subsidised funding but are still referred to as ‘enabling programs’. Some of these charge fees.
now run in the majority of Australian universities (Pitman, Trinidad, Devlin, Harvey, Brett & McKay, 2016). The University Preparation Program (UPP) at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) is one such program and is the site of this study.

The majority of participants in enabling programs are mature-aged students (Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Klinger, Murray, O’Rourke & Schofield, 2013); however, as noted by Ross and Gray (2005) some younger students also select enabling programs as an alternative pathway to higher education. Many enabling-program students have previously rejected education or have been rejected by it (Munns, Nanlohy & Thomas, 2000; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). Enabling program students also typically occupy some position of disadvantage (Clarke et al., 2000), either because they belong to an equity group that is under-represented at university as outlined, or because they belong to a group that has a higher attrition rate than average when they do go to university. These include students who enter with low Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking (ATAR) scores or who have lower levels of educational attainment, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, students from refugee backgrounds and mature-aged students (Rienks & Taylor, 2009; Australian Government, 2010).

From their first appearances in the mid-1970s the number of enabling programs has grown steadily. While they generally sit outside Australia’s formal qualification framework, the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF), they draw in both a significant number of students and significant Commonwealth Government funding. These two factors mean that they are attracting greater scrutiny, particularly in relation to their effectiveness in addressing the needs of disadvantaged students (Pitman et al., 2016) and in terms of their overall economic return on investment (Australian Government, 2017b). A Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation is also offered through the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in Australia and is part of the AQF. Such courses are generally delivered outside the university sector, are available to both domestic and international students, and do not attract Commonwealth Government subsidisation to the extent of enabling programs.
1.2 Contextualising enabling programs

The first enabling program began in Australian in 1976 at the University of Newcastle. In 2014, 39 out of the 40 public and private universities in Australia ran enabling programs of some type, indicating the provision has significant reach and presence in the higher education system. However, although there is some emerging evidence of commonalities (Relf, Crawford, O’Rourke, Sharp, Hodges, Shah & Barnes, 2017), there is, overall, little uniformity in the structure or content of these programs. Some programs are one semester intensive; others two semesters. Most allow part-time enrolment; but a number do not. There are those that embed academic skills in broader content (e.g. history, culture, science); and those that offer direct academic units such as study skills and academic writing. Some programs have entrance criteria; many do not. Face-to-face is common; but many also offer online, or a hybrid. Some have entrance criteria; some do not. Finally, while most are free, a small number charge fees. Given this lack of uniformity there are issues with transferability of enabling program results and most programs offer only admission into their own universities, which has been identified by Pitman et al. (2016) as less than ideal from a student perspective.

As noted above, the first enabling program began in 1976 at the University of Newcastle. However, they began to emerge in a more purposeful way in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an equity measure (DEET, 1990). This coincided with the recognition that universities were not representative of the whole population, and that certain groups of people were much more likely to get a university education that others. The Federal Minister for Education Richard Dawkins’ Government Policy Statement on Higher Education (1988, referred to as the Dawkins White Paper) outlined the government’s commitment to achieving greater equity in higher education. This has been followed by a range of other reviews, as outlined below (Australian Government, 2015):

• 1998 Learning for Life: review of higher education financing and policy (West Review)
• 2002 Review of Higher Education in Australia (Nelson Review)
• 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley Review)
• 2011 Higher Education Base Funding Review (Lomax-Smith Review)
• 2014 Report of the National Commission of Audit
• 2014 Review of the Demand Driven Funding System (Kemp-Norton Review)
• 2017 Higher Education Reform Package.

Since 1988, enabling programs have been supported by dedicated Commonwealth Government funding called ‘enabling loading’. This loading offers supported places to eligible students on a fee-free basis. From 2012 each participating university was allocated a specified number of enabling-load places as part of their annual funding negotiations with the government. In 2017 there were 9686 enabling places, which provided $3223 per equivalent full-time student load (Australian Government, 2017a). However, many universities, including the University of Tasmania, accept student enrolments beyond any allocated places.

In order to qualify for the enabling loading, programs must meet the following criteria (Clarke et al., 2000, p. 10):

• ‘Enabling programs may be bridging, undertaken prior to award study, or supplementary and are a structured program taken concurrent with award study;

• Enabling-program students must be ‘non-overseas students’;

• Enabling programs must enable members of stated disadvantaged groups to take up a Commonwealth-funded higher education place;

• Study in enabling programs cannot be credited to award study; and
• The decision to report enabling-program students, and hence the responsibility for them being granted a Commonwealth-funded place but with HECS-exemption status, is left to the reporting institution.‘

While the social justice rationale for increasing participation is a consistent feature of the listed reviews into higher education, the economic importance of increasing the number of people in Australia with university-level education has become increasingly influential (Zajda, 2013). The 2017 Higher Education Reform Package (Australian Government, 2017b) has recommended the introduction of an alternative funding system, with a fixed number of enabling places to be allocated on a cyclical basis by the Minister through a three-year competitive tender process, and the introduction of student fees together with the abolition of the enabling loading. At the time of this thesis, these reforms were undergoing revision, with the prospect of fees less likely, but restricted and competitive places more likely (Australian Government, 2018).

Even though enabling programs are not solely for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the majority of students belong to an official ‘equity-group’ as defined by government policy such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, women in non-traditional areas, regional and remote students, students with a disability, students from non-English Speaking Background backgrounds and LSES students (DEET, 1990). Others, such as Lomax-Smith, Watson and Webster (2011), include cohorts such as first-in-family students in the equity pool. According to Habel, Whitman and Stokes (2016), LSES students are vastly over-represented in enabling programs. In fact, in terms of total numbers, enabling programs are second only to Vocational, Educational and Training (VET) courses in transitioning equity-group students into undergraduate degrees (Pitman et al., 2016).

Students who do not fall into a particular equity group but see themselves as under-prepared or who do not qualify for university entrance are also targeted by enabling programs. In this way enabling programs help support the overall agenda of increasing

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2 ‘A first-in-family student in Higher Education is the first out of their immediate family, which comprised siblings, parents, main caregivers, life partners and children, to attend university’ (O’Shea, May & Stone, 2015).
participation in higher education from both an equity and economic perspective (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Kemp & Norton, 2014).

1.3 The University Preparation Program, UTAS

The site of this study was the University Preparation Program (UPP) enabling program at the University of Tasmania. At the time this study began I managed this program, and a range of other UTAS alternative entry programs, in my role as Manager, Pre-degree Programs. Tasmania is the second oldest (settled one year after Sydney) and the smallest of Australia’s six states (population approximately 500,000). It is marked by significant levels of disadvantage relative to the rest of Australia, with the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census indicating Tasmania had lower levels of educational attainment, had less people in paid work, a more aged population, more people receiving government supported welfare benefits and lower levels of household incomes than the Australian average (ABS, 2018). Although the trend is now changing (Eslake, 2017), between 1995 and 2015 Tasmania’s economy was in decline and performed poorly comparative to other states as it shifted away from its traditional manufacturing and resource (forestry and mining) base towards a more service-based economy (hospitality and tourism) (Treasury Tasmania, 2013).

Tasmania is also marked by a significant degree of regionality with 49% of the population living in the south (most of whom are in the capital Hobart), 28% in the North (the largest city being Launceston) and 22% in the North West (ABS, 2018).

UPP began at the ‘Cradle Coast’ (also typically referred to as the North West Coast) campus of the University, in the regional centre of Burnie (population approximately 20,000). The North West Coast of Tasmania represents an area of relative disadvantage even within the Tasmania context, with very low levels of educational attainment, and significant socioeconomic disadvantage (Walker & Fairbrother, 2015). The UPP program was created there in direct response to the imminent closure of a large paper manufacturing factory, an industry which had been the life-blood of the town for several decades, and to mark the opening of the University’s ‘Cradle Coast’
campus. It was recognised that without a supported pathway into degree-level study many people in the region would be unable to take advantage of the educational opportunity that a locally-based campus offered (Johns, Crawford, Hawkins, Jarvis, Harris & McCormack, 2016).

The program remained primarily located at the Cradle Coast campus for many years, spreading only in part to Tasmania’s two main urban centres Hobart (the capital) and Launceston over a decade later. However, in 2012 the program was expanded fully to all Tasmanian campuses, thus also including Launceston and Hobart. At this point it was also offered to students attending on campus and to those studying online. In 2014 UPP had 678 equivalent full-time students (Pitman et al., 2016).

The program has no fees other than a student amenities fees, and no formal entrance requirements. However, students who have a particularly low level of previous educational attainment may be asked to do a literacy and numeracy assessment to ensure they have sufficient skills to undertake the program. The program is open for any domestic students who meet the enabling loading criteria (see page 4); however, students from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) background typically do not enrol in UPP as UTAS has a dedicated enabling program for ATSI students.

Students may enrol in on-campus mode, distance mode, or a combination of the two. A full-time load is three to four units per semester. Part-time enrolment is permitted and often encouraged. Theoretically, after successfully completing eight units in total, students meet UTAS’s general university entry requirements (that is, they are eligible for a degree without specific entry requirements or quotas). However, many Faculties or Schools accept students with less than eight units if they have been able to demonstrate capacity to succeed in UPP by achieving good results (typically credit or above though there are no firm guidelines) in the units they have attempted. There is no time limit to finishing the program, but student progress is reviewed each semester, and students are subject to normal university rules in regard to academic progress. Students who fail to progress satisfactorily, that is, they repeatedly fail a majority of their units or the same unit more than once, may be put on probation or be excluded.
The program adopts a skill-based approach, that is, it offers units which target the development of particular academic skills. In 2014–2015, the period during which data for this study were collected, the following units were available:

- Study Skills
- Introduction to Academic Writing
- Academic Writing
- Using Technology
- Academic Numeracy
- Bridging Maths
- Research and Information Skills
- Communications Skills
- Learning Online
- Supported Studies (Jarvis, 2015).

UPP units mimic typical undergraduate delivery. There are weekly lectures and tutorials, regular assessment and end-of-semester grades. Students enrol via the normal University channels and receive a student number and ID card. On campus UPP units are allocated rooms across the relevant campus, in other words, there is no separate space that is just for UPP students. They use all the relevant University systems, including the Student Management System, the online learning system (MyLO – My Learning Online), and the University Library. In addition, students are expected to comply with all UTAS academic rules and regulations.

At the time of the study, there were approximately 35 teaching staff, which represented a mix of full-time, part-time and casual employees. Recruitment of teaching staff emphasised relevant experience and expertise in adult learning. All teaching staff, regardless of qualifications or experience, were employed at the level of Associate Lecturer. A staffing profile conducted in 2014 showed that UPP staff were
highly qualified, with many staff holding PhDs, and many staff also holding additional qualifications in education and learning (Jarvis, 2015).

As indicated, during the design and data collection phases of this study, I managed both UPP and the Diploma of University Studies, which combined were referred to as ‘Pre-degree Programs’. This was a position I had held for several years and which underpinned my interest in undertaking this study (see Chapter Four for a full account of my position as the researcher).

As previously mentioned, there is great diversity in the construction of enabling programs nationwide. Nonetheless, UPP sits within the range of what might be considered typical. It is a non-award, non-fee paying course, targeted but not exclusive to students with a background of disadvantage, offers skill-based units to develop skills and capacity and has both online and face-to-face options. (Pitman et al., 2016). It is perhaps less typical than the majority in that its normal duration is one year (two semesters) as opposed to one semester for the majority of enabling programs (Pitman et al., 2016), although the course can be taken over a variety of timeframes, both longer and shorter.

1.4 A problem of language

As mentioned, the primary purpose of enabling programs is to facilitate entry into higher education for equity students who otherwise do not qualify, or who do not feel confident for one reason or another to start a degree. The large majority of students are also mature-aged students. Students in these cohorts are frequently referred to as ‘non-traditional’ or ‘disadvantaged’ students (see, for example, Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Devlin, 2010; Marks, 2007; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003). Their lower level of participation does suggest they are from groups who typically or traditionally go to university less frequently, and that they do indeed have barriers to participation that others may not. However, the terms can also be problematic.
A key issue is that the use of these terms, however unintentionally, can underpin a deficit discourse, a discourse where the student is seen as problematic. As Smit (2012, p. 369) points out:

The dominant thinking in higher education attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as lacking some of the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society. This constitutes a deficit thinking model: it focuses on inadequacies of students and aims to ‘fix’ this problem.

Such discourses can also characterise such students as ‘other’, leading them to be judged against some perceived norms, and at risk of being found wanting (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope, 1998; Lawrence, 2002; Smit, 2012; O’Shea, 2016a, Hughes, 2017). McKay and Devlin (2016) argue that such characterisations can be detrimental to student success and also that this thinking fails to acknowledge the role of institutions in accommodating to their needs. The terms also characterise such students as passive, as lacking the agency and skills to negotiate university themselves and do not acknowledge the strengths and contributions that diverse cohorts bring to higher education (McKay & Devlin, 2016).

In addition, the use of umbrella terms such as disadvantaged or non-traditional, or even slightly more specific terms such as LSES, mature-aged or first-in-family, fails to recognise the diversity and intersectionality of the student experience. Many students do not fit neatly into one category, and as Edwards and McMillian (2015) found in their study of student outcomes, many students have multiple factors that put them at higher risk of performing below the average level.

However, terms such as disadvantaged and non-traditional have been heavily employed in research and so it is difficult to avoid their use entirely. As such, while these terms are employed in this thesis the limitations and problematic nature of them are acknowledged. This research intends to contribute to a richer understanding of the challenges such students face, and also to recognise the value these diverse backgrounds and life journeys bring to the higher education landscape.
1.5 Rationale and significance

The push to increase participation in university study is reflective of a dominant discourse around higher education in Australia that characterises education as offering opportunity, both for the individual and society. On an individual level, statistics show that having a university education leads to improved outcomes in a range of areas including health, employment, salary and that these benefits flow onto their children (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Bynner, Dolton, Feinstein, Makepeace, Malmberg & Woods, 2003). Education represents a key factor in breaking cycles of poverty and encouraging movement between social classes (Goldthorpe, 2007). National reports commissioned by both Australian Labor and Liberal governments acknowledge the social and economic benefits of greater participation in higher education (Bradley et al., 2008; Kemp & Norton, 2014). A considerable research effort has taken place looking into who is not participating in higher education and why and concluding that this non-participation is less than ideal (see, for example, Coates & Krause, 2005; James, 2008; Cardak & Ryan, 2009; Australian Government, 2010; Gale & Tranter, 2011). Programs and initiatives which encourage university participation have proliferated, with enabling programs being a strategy adopted by many universities.

While few challenge the notion that education is desirable, there have been criticisms of the widening participation agenda, particularly in terms of its ability to deliver on its social justice promise. Zajda (2013) argues that neo-liberal ideologies, which focus primarily on global economics and the need to provide ‘human resources’ for effective market participation, together with the marketisation of higher education itself, have dominated higher education policy decisions in recent times. Even when equity concerns appear to underpin policy reform, the primary rationale remains the delivery of economic opportunity, not humanistic social justice aims (Zajda, 2013). In this neo-liberal environment, higher education also becomes subject to free-market principles restricting its capacity to deliver on ‘individual and public good’ (Hughes, 2017, p. 22).

Such positions reflect the way widening participation has been actualised. Burke (2012) criticises the widening participation movement for its inability to make substantial structural changes to higher education systems, focusing more on
increasing the number of graduates without supporting change that would enable participation from a more diverse population. Without the system changing in any substantial way, individuals are instead forced to adapt. Such a process problematises students, particularly the under or misrepresented, who are often made to feel ‘different and unworthy’ in the higher education arena (Burke, 2012, p. 62). For those that do not make it to higher education despite increased opportunity, the problem is often seen as one of aspirations, where their aspiration is a matter of choice, rather than a complex mix of social and economic forces leading some students down a path to higher education and others not (Taylor, 2012). Finally, widening participation, even when it has delivered both a greater number of students and more diversity, does not necessarily do so equitably. Stratification of the higher education sector, particularly in countries such as the UK, USA and Canada, has resulted in little change to the status quo, with opportunity largely expanded in lower-status higher education institutions (for example, regional universities, colleges, newer universities). Students who graduate from these lower-status institutions typically have lower-status qualifications and poorer outcomes than more established and higher-status institutions (Bennett, Southgate, Shah, 2015; Margison, 2016b: Wheelahan, 2016).

In Australia, while widening participation strategies have delivered an increasing number of students it has been less successful in delivering substantial shifts in the participation for students from equity groups (Koshy, 2017). Similarly, within mechanisms such as enabling programs meant to provide transition pathways to higher education, outcomes have at times been questioned (Kemp & Norton, 2014), leading to calls for reforms which concentrate on better results (that is, higher completion and transition rates). The 2017 Higher Education Reform Package\(^3\), for example, recommends that funding for enabling programs be restricted to ‘higher education providers which achieve high standards of academic preparation and deliver high quality student outcomes, for example measured by student completion rates or student success in further study’ (Australian Government, 2017a, p. 114).

\(^3\) At the time of this study not yet successfully enacted into law.
For those students who transition from enabling programs to undergraduate study, success and retention rates compare well with students entering via all other entry methods (Clarke et al., 2000). However, attrition rates of around 50% within enabling programs themselves are more than two times higher than general undergraduate attrition rates (Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016) ‘Positive attrition’, that is, attrition that comes as a result of a student pursing another, alternative (for example, a VET course or a job) (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000; Hodges et al., 2013; Merrill, 2015), accounts for some of this. However, even when this is considered, the attrition rate within enabling program remains high, suggesting that the experience of students in enabling programs differ in some way to undergraduate student experiences.

While the role of institutions in this attrition rate still need to be taken into account, there is also evidence that many students in enabling programs struggle against considerable odds and encounter significant challenges and issues. These issues and challenges include juggling complex life circumstances (Stone, 2009; Morison & Cowley, 2017), backgrounds that provide little preparation or support for university, fragmented educational experiences (Hodges, et al., 2013), poor health (Crawford & Johns, 2018), work, finance (Stone, 2009; Hodges, et al., 2013), as well as self-esteem issues and unrealistic expectations of university life (Habel et al., 2016). That is, enabling-program students are likely to face and have to manage a range of issues and circumstances which make their journeys more difficult or fraught, more difficult and fraught than some other cohorts. With more obstacles to overcome, the risks faced by enabling-program students are thus potentially greater. Some students overcome these challenges and persist; and others do not. The extent and impact of these experiences; the level of risk enabling-program students must manage to achieve success; and the role of enabling programs in assisting students to manage risk remains unclear. Indeed, given the relatively late arrival of enabling programs into the higher education landscape of Australia, many aspects of the enabling students’ story remain untold, leaving a knowledge gap for both policy makers and practitioners. Risk in the context of this thesis refers to the individual experiences of students and the management strategies employed by students, staff and the UPP program.
The under-researched nature of enabling education also means that there is still a lack of evidence-based literature on which enabling program staff are able to base their practice. While this does not necessarily mean that current construction and delivery is inappropriate, it does mean there is little way to verify this, or to incorporate students’ perspectives into program design and delivery. Given the large number of students now studying via enabling programs, a comprehensive understanding of their experience and journey is critical.

The study of risk

I was initially drawn to the idea of considering risk by the stories of UPP students themselves. I often heard tales, both directly and from staff, of considerable hardship and barriers, of complex life circumstances, of juggling multiple demands, of uncertain self-esteem, of significant physical and mental health concerns, of family opposition and financial stress. I wondered about the extent and impact of these on students, and how, in fact, some students seemed to negotiate these issues and succeed against what I might consider insurmountable odds, while others did not. I was unsure of the strategies students used to negotiate their initial journey into higher education and the role the UPP program itself played. My reading of research outside of Australia suggested that the study of risk had the capacity to add considerably to my own and other’s understanding of the enabling-program students’ experiences. Diane Reay’s (2003) seminal study of working-class women in an Access (similar to an enabling program) course in the UK, for example, concludes that while the women were able to take advantage of the larger number of pathways now available in the UK, their level of risk in doing so was far greater than non-working-class students. As Reay (2003) indicates, ‘The recent emphasis on widening participation and access to higher education assumes a uniformly positive process, yet the reality, particularly for working-class students, is often confusing and fraught with difficulties’ (p. 301). Archer and Hutchings (2000), looking at non-participants in higher education in the UK, also argue that the risks and benefits of higher education are unequally distributed depending on class backgrounds, and that for students from working-class backgrounds the choice of higher education is both more difficult and expensive. This
finding is further reflected in the work of Harwood, Hickey-Moody, McMahon and O’Shea (2017), who found that for young people experiencing disadvantage in Australia, university can, at times, be constructed as a place of risk.

In addition to risks associated with students’ biographical background, evidence also suggested that risks can be associated with the learning process itself. For many students, participating in an enabling program represents a transformative experience, one where they reconceptualise themselves as both people and learners (Willans & Seary, 2007; Willans, 2010), with the potential for upheaval and harm to their sense of self and their lives in general (Lehmann, 2009; Willans, 2010).

In examining the impact of risk for those entering university via an Australian enabling program this research contributes significantly to a more nuanced understanding of the experience of enabling-program students, and of the ability of such programs to provide an effective transition pathway to higher education. The study demonstrates a complex relationship between risk, opportunity and transformation, one negotiated with considerable skill and foresight by enabling-program students. Through interviews with both students and staff these concepts are also shown to be multi-faceted, influenced by gender, age, family, background, individual experiences, and by wider socio-cultural norms and expectations. While considerable risk was evident, there was an unwillingness of all participants, both staff and students, to characterise the experience in these terms. The impact of education as a tool of social mobility, also emerges in the early stages of the UPP experience. Some students undergo a transformation as they adjust and adapt to a new environment, ideas, and ways of thinking and behaving. Here education becomes a double-edge sword, providing opportunity for growth and social mobility, but also potential for dislocation and disruption.

The study demonstrates the capacity of enabling-program students to accept, manage and overcome significant odds to achieve their dream of university success, as well as highlighting factors that might prevent students from achieving their aspirations. The findings can inform program design and policy, and the mechanisms that can support
students to succeed, as well as adding to our qualitative understanding of the experience.

This study contributes to the still relatively unexplored notion that education can entail both opportunity and risk, arguing that education can be a risky undertaking for some students. However, it also argues that there are mechanisms which can help mitigate those risks and, as such, risk does not, as has been theorised (Beck, 1992), always need to be just the responsibility of the individual. The data demonstrates that there are ways that the burden of risk can be jointly shared and negotiated, and that students can use their own resources together with the resources of others to underpin success.

Lastly, this research documents and validates the experience of students hitherto under-represented in higher education literature in Australia. It raises the status and profile of enabling students by highlighting their strength and determination, and the unique contribution they make both to the university and the world beyond.

### 1.6 Aims and research questions

This thesis has three main aims. The first is to create a richer understanding of enabling students as they enter higher education to facilitate more informed decision making at a policy, practitioner and student level. The second aim is to gain a deeper understanding about the ways that enabling students consider, experience and manage risk to help create a more nuanced picture of students in enabling programs and the strategies and resources which might be required to help manage these risks. Lastly, this research aims to consider the ways in which background and the learning experience itself impact students’ perception and negotiation of risk.

These aims are translated below into one main and four sub-questions.

The overarching research question addressed in this study is: how does risk impact students entering higher education via an enabling program?
In order to explore this thoroughly, a number of sub-questions were developed as below:

a. How is risk experienced and perceived by students in a university enabling program?

b. How do students negotiate risks in their first semester of study?

c. What is the relationship between background, the learning experience and risk?

d. How can an understanding of risk contribute to policy and practice within the enabling and higher education sectors?

1.7 Research methodology and design

This research was undertaken with students and staff from the University Preparation Program (UPP) enabling program at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), Australia. UPP has been and remains a key initiative by the University to increase participation from under-represented groups and to address issues related to the low levels of educational attainment in the state. The research was designed to explore the experience of students through their own voices, and through the voices of staff who worked directly with them.

In this study I have adopted a constructivist epistemology where meaning is constructed, not discovered. This comes from an understanding that there is no ‘single truth’ and that ‘there are multiple realities and therefore multiple truths’ (Wetherall, Taylor & Yates, 2001, p. 12). These ‘realities’ can be explored and put together to build understanding relevant to a point of time and circumstances.

The concept of risk has been interpreted in this study to be subjective to the individual and the culture an individual inhabits (Lupton, 1999). The study explored this subjective nature through the personal reflections of the participants. As such, and in accordance with a constructivist approach, I adopted a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research has the capacity to uncover complexity, ambiguity
and other overlooked nuances (Mason, 2002) and allows for knowledge and understanding to be constructed.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with both students (n = 24) and staff (n = 6) from the three UPP campuses in Tasmania at Hobart, Launceston and Burnie. Students participated in two interviews, one at the start of their first semester in UPP, and one at the end of that semester. Staff participated in one interview at times convenient to them. The student interviews provided a real-time exploration of their journey into higher education, while the interviews with staff provided a longer-term perspective of the UPP program and its participants.

Forty-eight interviews were conducted in total. These were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using an inductive coding methodology to identify emerging themes. Themes were entered into NVivo data analysis software as nodes and continued to be adjusted and changed in response to ongoing analysis of the data. A process of axial coding was applied to identify ‘core phenomena’ (Creswell, 2012) which then formed the basis of the two findings chapters (Five and Six). The concepts of risk, opportunity and transformation used in this thesis emerged from the analysis of this data. These core phenomena were explored on an ongoing basis throughout the writing of the findings chapters, being adjusted and adapted as new insights arose. A range of strategies were applied during this process to enhance the credibility of these findings.

1.8 Organisation of the thesis

An introduction to the topic and research methods are provided in this first chapter.

Chapter Two explores and critiques existing research relevant to the topic both within the broader international literature and within the Australian context. The key areas of focus are: the impact of background on access, participation and success in higher education in Australia; the concept of risk in educational participation; enabling programs and the experience of enabling students; and what works in terms of mitigating impacts and supporting students as they transition to higher education.
Chapter Three explores the theoretical underpinnings of the study. It outlines the two key theorisations of risk relevant to the study: the notion of the risk society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), where the negotiation of risk has been impacted significantly by the process of modernisation; and the socio-cultural perspective of risk which sees risk as a product of an individual’s interaction with culture and society. It also explores Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus and field, as well as other emerging ‘capitals’. These concepts are used to help describe and explain systematic causes of educational disadvantage as well as a tool for understanding and exploring the individual challenges and issues faced by students. Transformative Learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) is also outlined for its capacity to explain some of the risks students face entering higher education as a mature-aged student.

Chapter Four presents a detailed description of the research design of this study, outlining the underpinning understandings of knowledge used in this study, and the rationale for the qualitative methodology employed. It also explores my role as a researcher in this project. The chapter then outlines how the study was conducted, including the overall design, the ethical considerations, the data collection strategy and the data analysis process. Finally, it provides an overview of the participants, and describes the strategies employed to enhance the quality of this research’s findings.

Chapters Five and Six present the findings of this research. The chapters are organised largely on a chronological basis to demonstrate the sense of the journey on which students travelled during their first semester in UPP. In these chapters the voices of students and staff are used to illustrate key themes and nuances in their understanding and interpretation of their experiences, uncovering considerable complexity in the way risk and opportunity are conceptualised.

Chapter Five presents the findings from student interviews conducted between weeks three and five of the semester, that is, as they begin their enabling program/UPP journey. It explores the issues and challenges students thought about and faced as they began their studies and highlights the implications of these. It also details the resources and strategies students anticipated using to manage their experience, and how students perceived risk in these early stages. Data from interviews with UPP staff,
who were asked about their experiences with UPP students they encountered over the period of their employment, provide an added perspective to the thoughts and experiences of students. Considerable risk is evident in these early stages, though it is largely seen by students as their own responsibility to manage. Despite the evidence of risk, both staff and students preference a narrative of opportunity, highlighting the overall benefits of education, and the role of UPP in providing a safe introduction to university life and the many changes and adaptations this requires.

Chapter Six presents the findings from the same student participants at the end of their first semester and outlines how they progressed. It explores the extent to which the issues and challenges identified at the start of the semester were realised and how they were managed. Staff again provide a broad overview based on their experiences with multiple students, as well as providing details of strategies employed in the program to directly address and manage risk. The conceptualisation of risk alters during this time, with students adopting the staff and program’s position, of risk being a shared responsibility rather than just an individual responsibility. For the successful students in this study, UPP emerges as a safe, liminal space to negotiate risk. However, staff highlight the potential negative outcomes for students who are less successful.

Chapter Seven summarises the key findings of the research which are then applied specifically to each of the research questions. It outlines the theoretical as well as policy, pedagogical and practical implications of the research. Limitations of the study and areas of future research conclude the thesis.
2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines recent literature and studies on access and participation in higher education by under-represented or disadvantaged students, with specific reference to students in enabling programs, in order to provide a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of this literature. The review will be approached thematically, with four key areas of exploration: an international overview; the impact of background on access, participation and success in higher education in Australia; the concept of risk in educational participation; enabling programs and the experience of enabling students. The chapter concludes with an analysis of what works in terms of mitigating impacts and supporting students transitioning to higher education. Much of the research and literature is not contextualised to enabling programs or enabling-program students in Australia, but rather explores this topic more broadly including the undergraduate experience or enabling-program-like courses within the international higher education sector.

2.2 Access, equity, participation and responses – an international perspective

The higher education widening participation agenda which has played out in Australia over the past 30 years is reflective of a much broader, world-wide movement (Marginson, 2016a). Inequality in access and participation in higher education has been identified as significant in a range of countries and has been the subject of considerable research output in English language-based literature emanating (in addition to Australia) from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), Canada and New Zealand (NZ). Dual drivers of equity and meeting the employment demands of changing economies prevail across all these jurisdictions (Marginson, 2016b; Bathmaker, 2016). Key themes in the research around the unequal
representation of students based on socioeconomic status, race and indigeneity are replicated in the Australian context. Stratification of higher education is also a key theme, though one that has not had the same level of attention in Australia or New Zealand to date as compared to the USA, UK and Canada.

Issues of inequity by socioeconomic status

While higher education participation has increased significantly in the UK, USA, Canada and New Zealand over the past 50 years, deep divisions based principally on socioeconomic status and income remain. For example, Blanden and Machin (2004) demonstrate that between 1981 and 1999, while participation in the UK overall increased significantly, this increase was not equal, with students from poorer backgrounds still less likely to attend university, less likely to graduate, less likely to achieve at a higher level, and less likely to reap the educational rewards of a higher level of education. This trend continues to persist not only in the UK (Crawford, Gregg, Macmillan, Vignoles & Wyness, 2016) but also in Australia, where although there have been gains, significant inequality remains (Koshy, 2017).

Access to higher education in the USA is similarly inequitable with those on lower incomes much less likely to attend university, and if they do are less likely to succeed and less likely to reap similar benefits than their more affluent peers (Cahalan, 2013). Despite considerable efforts to address inequalities in attending universities over many years, in 2013 the gap was still significant with only 9% of students in the bottom income quartile attending university compared to 77% for students in the top quartile (Mettler, 2013).

Inequality is evident from an early age, with the gap between socioeconomic status and achievement widening as students get older (Cahalan, 2013; Crawford et al., 2016; Gamoran & Bruch, 2017). While gender has long been an issue, it is now in the reverse of previous levels of unequal representation by women. Women now outnumber males in the UK, with 60,000 more women accepted into degrees in 2014 than men (UCAS, 2015), while participation in the USA sits at 56% for women and 44% for men and with men also having lower rates of completion (National Center for Educational
Statistics, 2016). Crawford and Greaves (2015) describe the most under-represented group in higher education in the UK as white males from LSES backgrounds.

UK research often addresses the issue of socioeconomic inequality in terms of class, in particular the experiences of working-class students as they attempt to negotiate often difficult paths to and through university (see, for example, Archer & Hutching, 2000; Reay, 2001, 2002, 2003; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Brine & Waller, 2004; Clayton, Crozier & Reay, 2009; Reay et al., 2010). Themes of class dislocation, alienation and the need to adapt to new environments are common in these works. These themes are similarly reflected in the work of Wolfgang Lehmann in Canada (Lehmann, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2016). In Australia, the literature and debate concentrate on socioeconomic status rather than class, but many of the themes are the same (as is outlined further in this chapter).

Issues of inequity by race and indigeneity

Race, though represented in socioeconomic status, is a distinct focus of unequal representation in the USA and UK contexts. Despite the implementation of a number of measures to enhance participation by minority groups in the US, African American and Hispanic representation in higher education remains lower than the average (Perna, 2006), and heavily concentrated in lower status institutions (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004; Gamoran & Bruch, 2017). As with socioeconomic status, disparity emerges in childhood with a larger proportion of African American and Hispanic students attending ‘poverty schools’ (schools with a high proportion of children eligible for free lunch) than white students, and consistently performing at lower levels than their peers elsewhere (Cahalan, 2013). While, for a time, university participation by racial minority groups in the UK was proportionally higher than the average (Modood & Acland, 1988), this trend has now reversed and, similar to the USA, the UK is now significantly impacted by the stratification of the higher education system (Tsiplakides, 2018).

As in Australia, participation by Indigenous populations in higher education in the USA, Canada and New Zealand ranks behind overall participation (Guillory & Wolverton,
In New Zealand, the emphasis on participation and equity for the Maori and Pasifika populations has been particularly strong. Until 2009, New Zealand had the most ‘open’ university entrance policies of the countries under discussion, with students guaranteed admission if over 20 years of age and needing to meet only minimum threshold requirements if under 20 (Healey & Gunby, 2012). While this did result in higher overall rates of participation, participation remained inequitable, with Maori and Pasifika participation lagging behind ‘Pakeha’ (New Zealanders of Caucasian descent) and Asia-heritage students (Healey & Gunby, 2012; Strathdeea & Englerb, 2012). Across all these countries low rates of participation in higher education by Indigenous students remains an ongoing concern.

**Stratification of higher education systems**

The UK, USA and Canada all have highly stratified higher education systems with patterns of participation divided along lines of race and socioeconomic status as well as the prestige of the institution. That is, student from LSES backgrounds, Indigenous students, and students from minority racial groups typically attend lower-status institutions and receive lower-status qualifications. Despite a significant increase in participation in the UK, for example, inequalities have not disappeared, with students from middle and upper-class backgrounds accessing higher status institutions and students from working-class backgrounds accessing lower status institutions and pathways (Reay, et al., 2001; Archer, Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Tsiplakides, 2018). Croxford and Raffe (2015, p. 163) in fact contend that ‘an iron law of hierarchy – unchanging, pervasive, and empirically robust – governs HE institutions in the UK’. Increasingly also, ethnicity is reflected in this UK stratification with students of Caribbean, Asian and African heritage significantly over-represented in newer, lower-status institutions (Reay, et al., 2001).

Similarly, the USA higher education system is ‘complex and highly stratified and influenced by historical conditions of slavery and racial and economic segregation, and the presence of State and local differences’ (Cahalan, 2013, p. 14). For example, while as noted overall participation has increased for African Americans, it has still not kept pace with the overall population (Garmoran & Bruch, 2017) and participation by
African Americans in traditionally ‘white’ and higher prestige colleges remains low (Yosso, et al., 2004). As in the UK, this stratification serves to largely reproduce inequality, not challenge it (Margison, 2016b; Wheelahan, 2016). Cahalan (2013, p. 7) points out that, ‘paradoxically, the U.S. higher education (HE) system functions both as an engine of social mobility and as the major engine of inequality within the so-called “merit” based society.’

Australia is not without issues of stratification. This includes markedly lower participation by equity groups in Australia’s ‘elite’ (the ‘Group of Eight’) institutions as compared to overall national participation rates (Koshy, 2017), and the lower status of degrees offered by TAFE colleges (Wheelahan, 2016). Stratification remains an ongoing issue in widening participation.

**Issues of participation**

Once students make it to college or university, attrition remains a significant issue of concern across the globe, especially in the USA which has the world’s highest rates of attrition (between 30–50%) (O’Keeffe, 2013). Particularly at risk here are students from diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds, including students from LSES backgrounds, ethnic minorities, Indigenous students, students with lower levels of academic attainment (Heisserer & Parette, 2002) and first-generation/first-in-family students (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008). Key themes in regard to persistence emerge including: poor institutional support (Yorke & Longden, 2007); the impact of social integration and belonging (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; O’Keefe, 2012); uninformed initial decision making (that is, choosing the wrong course or institution) (Smith & Hopkins, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2007); and difficulties adjusting to the expectations academically, socially, financially and emotionally (Reay, 2002; Collier and Morgan 2008; Lee, Olsen, Locke & Michelson, 2009).

**Alternative pathways as a response to inequity**

There have been a variety of government and institutional responses across the globe to address the widening participation agenda, including funding mechanisms, the
opening up of places, support incentives and the provision of alternative entry pathways (Bathmaker, 2016). Alternative pathways have played a major role in all countries, although their format differs significantly. In the UK, USA, Canada and NZ, programs are principally situated external to the university sector (though many have partnerships with universities). Further Education Colleges (FEC) in the UK play a key role in offering alternative pathways to university, via both sub-bachelor courses (increasingly with a vocational focus) and the Access to Higher Education Diploma (Bathmaker, 2016), perhaps the closest equivalent to enabling programs in Australia. Unlike enabling programs, the remit of FECs is not purely providing an access pathway to higher education, and in fact a lack of clear focus for the colleges, together with high rates of attrition, are two key criticisms of the system (Foster, 2005). These sub-bachelor pathways are similar to associate degrees offered in the USA and Canada via two-year community colleges. All are important mechanisms for assisting disadvantaged students in these countries to access degree-level study (Wheelahan, 2016). New Zealand offers a ‘Foundation and Bridging’ course pathway via either Polytechnics or Institutes of Technology, while Australia also offers a tertiary preparation certificate through its VET system.

Courses and pathways offered by FECs in the UK and two-year community colleges in the USA and Canada are often seen as somewhat contradictory entities, both aiding and hampering the cause of greater equality, with their overall net benefit still somewhat unclear (Aulck & West, 2017). While Attewell and Lavin (2007), for example, found that US community colleges have been successful in opening up opportunity, particularly to low-income women and minority students, other researchers have pointed out that high rates of attrition and low rates of transition to bachelor-level institutions remain key issues and contribute to the low status of community colleges (Dougherty & Kienzel, 2007; Windham, Rehfuss, Williams, Pugh & Tincher-Ladner, 2014).

In contrast to these countries where pathway courses are offered primarily external to the university sector, Australian enabling programs are embedded in established universities. Also, in contrast of overseas provision, students do not exit with a formal qualification. The development of enabling programs in this way appears to be the
result of the Australian higher education sector’s response to the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission’s 1984 call to enhance equity in tertiary institutions (Clarke, 2000). Universities began developing pathway programs to encourage participation from students who did not meet current entrance requirements and to provide students with skills to negotiate their first year of degree-level study. The sector then successfully lobbied the Commonwealth Government to include students in these pathways in their students load counts, and further to offer these places as subsidised ‘free’ places. As no formal qualifications were issued, students typically also continued at the university where the program was undertaken. Universities derived significant advantage from this system and enabling programs continued to develop in the university sector as a result (Clarke, 2000).

2.3 The impact of background on access, participation and success in higher education in Australia

Within the Australian context, studies into the impact of background relevant to this topic can be organised into research which looks at two main groups. The first are studies which explore the experiences of students who belong to official equity groups (DEET, 1990) or who are typically under-represented and disadvantaged in higher education. This includes students from a LSES background, students from refugee and other non-English speaking backgrounds, students from non-urban environments, first-in-family students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Studies by Lomax-Smith et al. (2011), Hodges et al. (2013) and Pitman et al. (2016) all demonstrated that students from these backgrounds, while under-represented in universities in general, are over-represented in enabling programs. While first-in-family students are not currently recognised as a specific equity group as above, many of the first-in-family students come from these backgrounds, and experience similar issues and challenges (Southgate, Douglas, Scevaka, Macqueena, Rubinc & Lindella, 2014). Research also indicates first-in-family students are both under-represented in the higher education environment, and less likely to succeed than second or third
generation students (O’Shea, 2016b). Research relating to first-in-family status is thus relevant to and included in this category.

The second group consists of studies which explore the experience of mature-aged students. While not exclusive to mature-aged students, enabling programs typically target and overwhelmingly accommodate this cohort (Pitman et al., 2016). Collectively findings in relation to these two groups provide significant insight into the nature of the enabling-program student experience.

**Students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds**

The extent and nature of under-representation in the higher education landscape in Australia by LSES background, students from refugee and other non-English speaking backgrounds, students from rural and remote locations, students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has been recognised and considered in numerous studies and reports (James, 2001; Coates & Kraus, 2005; James, 2008; Cardak & Ryan, 2009; Bradley et al., 2008; Australian Government, 2010; Gale & Tranter, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2013).

The literature points to significant issues for students from these backgrounds in accessing higher education. For example, Young (2004) and Wilks and Wilson (2012) used qualitative methods to explore the barriers and facilitators for LSES students continuing on to higher education, finding that family and community aspirations can hinder progress, as can practical issues such as money and distance. James’s (2010) study looked at decision making in relation to higher education and found that LSES students were significantly less likely to see a degree as providing employment or career advantages. Abbott-Chapman (2011) found that aspiration in rural students was much lower than other students, and also that the pattern of education participation for such students, and students from LSES and mature-aged backgrounds, was much more fragmented. Harris and Marlow (2011) found a similar pattern of fragmentation in students from a Humanitarian Entry Visa background.
For those students who do make it into university despite their background, the effects of disadvantage seem to continue (Devlin, 2010). While on the one hand some research indicates a relationship between entrance method/scores and success which does not discriminate according to background or location (Abbott-Chapman, 2011) or SES (Marks, 2007), other institution-based studies have shown otherwise (Rienks & Taylor, 2009; Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009; Edwards & McMillan, 2015). These studies, while localised, found that students in the under-represented or disadvantaged categories either had higher attrition rates than the average or lower Grade Point Averages.

The impact of background, in particular the lack of prior knowledge, understanding and resources, is identified as significant for students (Leese, 2010; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009; O’Shea, 2016a). Students can arrive at university significantly under-prepared and struggle to transition (O’Shea, 2016a). The very structure of university, with its expectations of independence, can contribute to significant feelings of both isolation and dislocation (Gazeley & Hinton-Smith, 2018).

In the US context, Collier and Morgan (2008) argue that first-in-family university students do not have the same resources as other students to assist them to adjust to the demands of the higher education environment, both in terms of background knowledge and the ability to adapt. Similar students without family support and resources find it difficult to ‘fit’ in and ‘belong’ to the institutions in which they are studying, and this can impact success (Reay, 2001; Wilcox et al., 2005; Tones, et.al., 2009; Meeuwisse, Severiens & Born, 2010; O’Keeffe, 2013; O’Shea, 2016b; Gazeley & Hinton-Smith, 2018). Students have also been shown to experience significant financial (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Tones et, al., 2009; Stone & O’Shea, 2013) and emotional stress, particularly feelings of not belonging and of a lack in confidence (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Kasworm, 2010; Reeve, Shumaker, Yearwood, Crowell & Riley, 2013). Importantly also, the personal circumstances of students play a significant role in the lives of disadvantaged and under-represented students in higher education and can represent significant challenges and barriers to success (Hardin, 2008; Stone, 2009; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Stone & O’Shea, 2013; Willans & Seary, 2018).
Although it has been recognised that students in enabling programs in Australia commonly come from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016), there has been little research in Australia to date about the impact of this background on enabling students specifically. Habel et al.’s (2016) study, ‘Exploring the Experience of Low-SES Students via Enabling Pathways’, is one of the few dedicated research projects in this area. They conclude that the lens of LSES is a useful one for explaining and exploring the experience of students, demonstrating how their enabling program helped bridge gaps in cultural capital. However, the study found that social status alone was not sufficient and that students in their study experienced disadvantage from a variety of avenues, including race and gender. Hodges et al.’s (2013) cross-institutional study sought to understand the inter-relationship between background and persistence across five enabling programs. They concluded in fact that it was the complexity of life events and time pressures which impacted most negatively on students’ persistence in enabling programs in Australia, rather than any specific marker of disadvantage.

Much of the research to date has concentrated on the barriers imposed by backgrounds of under-representation or disadvantage and represents the initial emergence and unpacking of key themes and issues in the field. However, as noted in Chapter One, an alternative discourse is beginning to emerge which, while acknowledging barriers and issues are real, also seeks to understand students more holistically. This discourse explores what strengths such students have to help them negotiate barriers, and the unique characteristics they can bring to enhance the higher education landscape (McKay & Devlin, 2016; O’Shea, 2016a). This research represents a more nuanced understanding of the student experience and one that has the potential to reframe the impact of background on access, participation and success. To date this lens has not been applied to enabling-program students.

A similar move to a more nuanced understanding can be seen in a shift away from focusing on discrete backgrounds, such as the impact of socioeconomic status or of being rural and remote. While such research has provided understanding of single issues, it has failed to explore the impact of multiple identities and/or backgrounds. Research into the topic of ‘intersectionality’, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the
late 1980s (Crenshaw, 1989) initially focused on the intersecting effects of race and gender for African-American women. However, the concept is increasingly, though not without controversy (Bilge, 2010), being applied to other identities and backgrounds such as sexual orientation, gender identity and socioeconomic status (Cooper, 2016). It is now being recognised that single equity-group analysis is not the reality for many students, and that they can experience impacts from a number of diverse backgrounds. For example, Abbott-Chapman (2011) speak of the compounding affect for disadvantage from students from rural backgrounds who may also be LSES or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. O’Shea, May and Stone (2015) have suggested that first-in-family students be referred to as a ‘supra category of students that works across other equity driven categories of low SES, region, gender, disability, linguistic diversity and Indigeneity’ (p. 35) in order to reflect this diversity. As noted previously, Habel, et al. (2016) have flagged the potential importance of this concept in relation to enabling-program students, but little research has been conducted in this area to date.

The research examining the impact of background on access, participation and success in higher education has provided important understanding into the issues facing several cohorts of students, many of which are heavily represented in the enabling program space. It shows that there are significant hurdles for these students to negotiate in order to succeed. However, there are gaps in this research. There is only limited work on the way backgrounds specifically impact enabling-program students. There is also very little research or understanding about the complex ways these backgrounds interact, and about the ability of students to overcome some of these barriers with alternative strategies and resources.

The mature-aged student story

The majority of students in enabling programs are mature-aged4 (Pitman et al., 2016) with a study undertaken at La Trobe University putting the figure there at 86.3% (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014). The student cohort at UPP, the site of this study, and the participants in this study itself, are also predominantly mature-aged (Jarvis, 2015).

4 In this study meaning at least 2 years from completing high school studies.
As such, research which describes the experience of mature-aged students provides an underpinning understanding of the cohort and demonstrates that mature-aged students face a number of issues that do not necessarily affect their younger peers.

For example, there is considerable research suggesting that the tension between family commitments and study are significant for mature-aged students (Reay, Ball & David, 2002; Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite & Godfrey, 2004; Stone, 2008; Stone & O’Shea, 2013), and represents a common reason for withdrawal from university study (McGivney, 1996; Trotter & Cover, 2005; Aird, Miller, van Megen & Buys, 2010). This tension between study and family responsibilities can be experienced in a gendered way, with women making, in general, greater adjustments (i.e. fitting in their study needs around the family) and feeling more guilt than men about taking time away from their family and home duties to undertake study (Stone, 2008; Stone & O’Shea, 2013). Kantanis (2002) in her study of nursing students, also found that the women were more likely to have unsupportive partners, increasing the impact of this tension. The journey of female lone-parents in higher-education is characterised as a particularly difficult act of juggling both social and financial risks (Hinton-Smith, 2012, 2016). While there are fewer studies into the impact of study on mature-aged men, their journeys also are not without stress, particularly in terms of negotiating family, study and work (Laming, Martin-Lynch & Morris, 2016).

In addition to the stresses associated with negotiating a balance between study and family, the literature both in Australia and internationally also indicates that mature-aged students often have to make significant adjustments to their lives to accommodate study, including reducing or changing work, and changing location and accommodation (Kantanis, 2002). They can often feel out of place and isolated (Trotter & Cove, 2005; De Silva, Robinson and Watts, 2011) and struggle to fit in socially with their younger peers (Podesta-Meaney, 2010). On the positive side, mature-aged students have been shown to have better time-management skills than their non-mature-aged peers (Trueman & Hartley, 1996) and to display considerable resilience and determination in managing their studies (Stone, 2008).
These findings and the findings of Stone (2009), who looked specifically at the experience of mature-aged enabling-program students, indicate that there are a number of issues related to being mature-aged that are likely to impact enabling-program students. While some work has been done on looking at the effect of more than one characteristic, such as with the impact of gender on the mature-aged experience, our understanding is incomplete and there is more work to be done in this area.

**The underpinning causes of inequity in participation and the impact on outcomes**

A number of studies looking at the effect of background on access, participation and success in higher education attempted to identify underlying structural causes of these effects. The use of Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital (social and cultural) is particularly popular (see, for example, Reay, 2001, 2002; Lehmann, 2009; Byrom, 2009; Bok, 2010; Devlin, 2010; Leese, 2010; O’Shea, 2011; Luzeckyj, King, Scutter, Brinkworth, 2011; O’Shea, 2016a; Habel et al., 2016). Bourdieu’s ideas provide a framework for understanding how students are disadvantaged in a system (or field) which is built on specific knowledge, experiences, rules and expectations. Higher education is seen as a field rich with such specific knowledge, experiences, rules and expectations and if students are denied access to this because their background they are assumed to be at a disadvantage and may struggle. Bourdieu’s theories also help explain why policy measures such as making university free have not had a significant impact on LSES participation rates in Australia (Andrews, 1999), that is, there are barriers other than financial ones which are preventing LSES students from attending university.

While the use of Bourdieu for explaining the origins and reproduction of disadvantage is frequent, there are voices of dissent. Gale and Parker (2013) have challenged the notion that Australian students from LSES backgrounds have less cultural capital than their peers and as a result do less well. They argue that data between 2009 and 2011, the height of the widening participation agenda, suggests that LSES students had only slightly lower retention rates to the general higher education population, and that Australian LSES students had significantly more access to higher education cultural
capital than their English counterparts. First-in-family researcher Sarah O’Shea (2016a), while not challenging the role of cultural capital in creating disadvantage, has also pointed out that such students are not necessarily without compensating capitals (aspirational, resistant, familial and experiential capital) which can help overcome the challenges they face.

O’Shea’s work contributes to the emerging area of research which challenges the notion of ‘disadvantage’ and cautions against seeing students from certain backgrounds as ‘less-than’ others. O’Shea (2016a) used Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework to show how students draw on existing, but alternative, sources of capital (as outlined above) to successfully enter higher education. McKay and Devlin (2016) similarly challenged the ‘deficit discourse’ often applied in relation to students from LSES background. Using data from 115 qualitative interviews across six universities, they show that rather than such students being some kind of problem, they display high levels of determination and skill in negotiating success within the higher education system.

A number of studies have used Mezirow’s Transformative Learning theory to look beyond the causes of unequal experiences of students entering higher education from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds, to explore their potential impact (Stone, 2009; Willans & Seary, 2007, 2011; Willans, 2010; Stone & O’Shea, 2013; Lehmann, 2014). Lehmann’s (2014) Canadian study examined a broad cohort of undergraduate students, both males and females, from first-in-family, working class backgrounds. He found a variety of transformative experiences, both positive and negative, and speaks of the ‘hidden cost’ (p. 11) of undertaking higher education that some students experienced, particularly in the form of dislocation from family and friends. This notion of hidden costs acknowledges that attending university is thus not without risk.
2.4 Risk and higher education

As suggested above, the lens of risk in this field has the potential to add to our understanding of how background impacts the journeys of under-represented or disadvantaged students as they enter higher education. In particular, it has been used to highlight the potential dangers inherent in entering an arena where there is a high level of uncertainty and where there may be a number of barriers and issues confronting the student (Reay, 2003; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Brine & Waller, 2004). It is also used to describe the impact this risk has on choice (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Davies, 2001; Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004; Lehmann, 2004; Chipperfield, 2013) and as a mechanism for identifying vulnerable students (James, 2008; Rienks & Taylor, 2009; Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009; McMillan, 2011).

University as a place of risk

One of the first researchers to discuss the idea that entering university from a background of disadvantage represented a form of risk was UK researcher Diane Reay in her 2003 study, ‘A risky business: Mature working-class women students and access to higher education correspondence’. She examined the kind of risks and barriers female working-class students experienced as they attempted to enter higher education through a Further Education Access program. Her qualitative study detailed the fears students had of losing their class identity, damage to fragile self-esteem, as well as the complex impact of juggling families, finances, childcare and domestic responsibilities. She concluded that although the women in her study were able to take advantage of opportunities previously not available to many, their journey was considerably riskier than that of students from other, more traditional backgrounds. Reay also identified Ulrich Beck’s notion of the ‘individualisation of risk’ (Beck, 1992) at work amongst her participants, where individuals were both expected to take, and indeed adopted, responsibility for their own success or failure. A further study by Chipperfield (2013) of students in a UK foundation program repeated this finding.

Brine and Waller (2004) also examined the disruptive and transformative nature of embarking on higher education for women, once again from a Further Education
Access program in the UK, in terms of four areas of potential risk as perceived by the participants: academic failure, economic and material loss, disruption to personal relationships and a loss of class identity. They found that while the potential for economic loss and academic failure were understood by the participants in their study, they were less aware of the potential for significant relationships to be disrupted. Still in the UK, Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) reiterated that ‘for many “non-traditional” students studying in higher education is characterized by “struggle”’ (p. 597) and that this struggle can create a sense of insecurity and risk for some students.

**Risk and decision making**

How perceptions of risk influence decision making about going or not going to university has been considered by a number of researchers (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Davies & Williams, 2001; Osborne et al., 2004; Lehmann, 2004, 2009; Stone, 2009; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Harwood et al., 2017). Particular risks include the financial implications of study, both in terms of current incomes and student loan debts and the overall cost-benefit of higher education (Andrews, 1999; Archer & Hutchings 2000; Hinton-Smith, 2016); the risk of dislocation from family, friends and class (Reay, 2003; Lehman, 2007; Stone, 2009); the risk to confidence and identity (Reay, 2003; Lehman 2007; Willans, 2010); and the risk to health (King, Garrett, Wrench and Lewis; 2011, Seary & Willans, 2018).

Key findings are that for students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds, including being working class (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Lehmann, 2004), mature-aged (Davies & Williams, 2001; Marks, Turner & Osborne, 2003), and ethnically diverse (Archer & Hutchings, 2000) the decision to go to university is generally seen as ‘risky and uncertain’ (Lehmann, 2004, p. 379). The literature also suggests that despite this greater level of risk and uncertainty the potential benefits (Archer & Hutching 2000; Hinton-Smith, 2016), the hope of social mobility, and the pervasive discourse of the knowledge economy that says students need a high level of education to successfully compete in the job market motivated students to proceed regardless (Lehmann, 2007). These studies indicate that, for students from certain backgrounds, risk is being considered when deciding whether or not to attend
university, though it does not always prevent students from moving into higher education.

**Risk and outcomes**

The other main approach to risk in higher education research is as a way of identifying students who are more likely to perform poorly or not complete their studies, that is, students who are ‘at risk’. These studies tell us that there are a multitude of factors affecting success, some of which (such as part-time status and previous educational attainment) are to do with individual circumstances, while others are related more specifically to background (for example, LSES or mature-aged). This is of particular relevance to this study given that enabling programs typically consist of students from a variety of backgrounds, with a variety of personal circumstances which interact in complex ways (Cullity, 2006; Habel et al., 2016; Willans & Seary, 2018). A number of studies (Rienks & Taylor, 2009; Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009; Li & Carroll, 2017) have found direct associations between certain characteristics and attrition or poor performance. These characteristics include lower levels of previous academic attainment (Reinks & Taylor, 2009), or being part-time, from a non-English-speaking background or mature-aged (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009). Reinks and Taylor (2009) also found that attrition and under-performance increased depending on the number of risk factors attributed to a student.

**Risk in the Australian context**

In Australia, research into risk and higher education is limited, focusing on the notion of risk from a small number of viewpoints. Abbott-Chapman (2011) highlighted the difficulty of the ‘choice’ narrative (Beck, 1992) for younger students from disadvantaged backgrounds including LSES and rural and remote students. Abbott-Chapman described how students are often forced into making complex choices about their ongoing studies, which while theoretically ‘informed’ are in fact constrained by their background and circumstances. She writes that the decision-making process in the neoliberal world, where individuals are in charge of their own destinies, ‘makes
the search for independence more acute and the risk of failure more intense’ (p. 62). In keeping with this, Harwood et al. (2017) found that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds commonly constructed university as a place of significant difficulty and potential risk and harm, and not a place for them.

Focusing specifically on the experience of rural students, King et al., (2011) identify a direct relationship between attending university and possible negative health outcomes, associating attendance with a level of risk. A number of other researchers as mentioned above (for example, Rienks & Taylor, 2009; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; O’Shea, 2016b) discuss how an individual’s background can impact on being ‘at risk’, finding that students from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds are at greater risk than their peers of failing or leaving prematurely.

Missing from the work on risk, particularly in the Australian context, is a broader understanding of how students perceive risk, not just when deciding to embark on their study, but during the program of study itself. Little is known about the extent to which students pro-actively consider risk, if they put in place strategies to manage these risks, and the effectiveness of these personal strategies. Also, it is not clear how effective enabling programs are in identifying or minimising any potentially negative outcomes of the experience.

2.5 Enabling programs and students

Much of the research and literature described to date has not related specifically to enabling-level programs. While still limited due to the short length of time enabling programs have populated the higher education landscape, research that is available provides important understanding and context to this study. This research can be divided broadly into two main areas of focus: the characteristics and experience of enabling-program students and the design and efficacy of enabling programs.
The characteristics and experience of enabling-program students

As noted in Chapter One, enabling-program students are predominately mature-aged, are often from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds, typically have lower levels of previous educational attainment and often have a history of disrupted educational achievement (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Kemp & Norton, 2014; Habel et al., 2016; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). Research indicates that they may experience a range of issues. Many students feel the impact of financial stress as their life changes course and they need to change or reduce employment or make other financial adjustments in order to study (Stone, 2009; Aird et al., 2010; Habel et al., 2016). The stress of negotiating family and children can be considerable, leading to feelings of guilt and of being overwhelmed (Stone, 2008; 2009; Willans & Seary, 2011; Stone & O’Shea, 2013). Stresses in significant personal relationships can even, on occasions, lead to relationship breakdowns (Habel et al., 2016).

An emerging area of research is the prevalence of mental health issues amongst enabling-program students and the implications for both students and teaching staff (Habel et al., 2016; Crawford, Lisciandro, Jones, Jaceglav, McCall, Bunn, Cameron, Westacott & Andersen, 2016; Willans & Seary, 2018; Crawford & Johns, 2018). Habel et al. (2016) in their study of LSES students in enabling programs, found that mental and physical health problems proved to be a significant additional burden for students attempting to adjust to the new world of academia, putting them at significant disadvantage.

Personal characteristics such as confidence and self-efficacy in enabling-program students have been considered in a number of studies. These show that students typically enter enabling programs with low levels of confidence and self-efficacy as a result of previous under-achievement in education, and by an awareness that they may not be adequately prepared for the academic environment which they are entering (Cantwell & Mullhearn, 1997; Archer, Cantwell & Bourke, 1999; Cantwell, 2004; Cullity, 2006, 2007; Klinger & Murray, 2009; Stone, 2009). Atherton (2015), in a quantitative study at the University of Newcastle, found that confidence levels at the start of an open access enabling program were lower in women than men, despite
women generally doing as well as or better than men. Low self-confidence and self-efficacy were seen to be the cause of considerable anxiety in enabling-program students, and as a result it was recommended that enabling programs put in measures to address these issues (Cullity, 2006).

Transformation and identity reconstruction have been identified as a distinctive feature of enabling-program experience (Stone, 2009; Willans, 2010) with the potential for both positive and disruptive outcomes. Willans (2010) notes the positive effects such as increased confidence, but also the more disruptive effects, finding it can be an ‘emotion-laden process, fraught with contradiction and tension’ (p. ii). Willans (2010) found that this ‘reconceptualization of self as a learner’ (p. 153) entailed an element of risk for enabling-program students.

**The design and efficacy of enabling programs**

The outcomes of enabling programs have been the subject of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The higher than average attrition rates for students in enabling programs has raised concern from policy makers (Kemp & Norton, 2014) and enabling-program practitioners alike (Hodges et al., 2013). Kemp and Norton (2014) questioned the economic effectiveness of programs, while Hodges et al. (2013) considered the impact on students and staff. In a cross-institutional quantitative study, Hodges et al. (2013) identified a very high initial attrition rate amongst the five enabling programs under study. That is, a large number of students who enrolled did not actually engage with the program or engaged only briefly within the first two weeks of a program and then dropped out. Overall, they described an attrition and retention rate of approximately 50% as typical across the institutions in their study.

In contrast to these high rates of attrition, a more recent analysis of Commonwealth Department of Education and Training data by Pitman et al. (2016) puts attrition in enabling programs closer to 20%. The discrepancy is possibly explained by different interpretations of retention. Indeed, Hodges et al. (2013) highlight this. In their study they calculated retention by subtracting persisting students (end of semester) from enrolments in week one (commencements). However, Pitman et al.’s (2016) study has
used official data collected by the Commonwealth. Here retention rates were calculated as the proportion of actual total student load (TSL) for units of study that were passed divided by all units of study attempted (passed + failed + withdrawn). Despite differences in approach, Pitman et al. (2016) acknowledge in their work Hodges et al.’s findings of high attrition rates in enabling programs. The use of consistent methods to understand attrition and retention would enhance our understanding of what is happening in relation to enabling-program student outcomes and higher education student outcomes more generally (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017).

Qualitative research into the outcomes of enabling programs is generally positive. For example, participants in Stone’s (2009) qualitative study of 20 mature-aged students who had entered university by an enabling program at the University of Newcastle expressed a raised level of self-confidence as a result of their enabling program experience; a finding reflected in other studies on enabling programs (Archer et al., 1999; Clarke et al., 2000; Cullity, 2006; Broughton & Merley, 2003; Crawford, 2014). Abbott-Chapman et al.’s (2004) work on the outcomes of students transitioning to undergraduate study from an enabling program found that such programs helped students in the early stages of their degree, and also increased student motivation. Crawford (2014), as a result of her study of UPP students who had transitioned to degrees at the University of Tasmania, points to the role of enabling programs in providing practical support, such as increasing academic skills, helping students gain confidence and connections, and unpacking the expectations and demands of university life and study. She also identifies some less obvious outcomes, those which she characterises as ‘profound’ (p. 15). These include the extent to which UPP students often took on leadership roles in their undergraduate degrees, helping other students understand the ways and methods of academia and how the cultural mix of the UPP cohort also helped to positively influence long-held attitudes towards people from other cultures.

A longitudinal look at students who had studied on the Burnie campus of UPP in the North West of Tasmania (Johns et al., 2016) showed that the outcomes were significant, and extended beyond just the individual achieving a better job and
lifestyle, to positive impacts on families and friends and the wider community. The study found that the program was important in enhancing human capacity within a region and for providing people with the education to take on roles in key areas of industry. This study concluded that enabling programs, ‘are a powerful but under-valued tool in helping to unlock and harness the potential within rural communities’ (p. 70). Bunn and Westrenius (2017) take a similarly broad view and discussed the role of enabling programs in helping universities engage with key stakeholders, including the general community and students from non-traditional backgrounds.

Studies into the effectiveness of enabling programs detail a somewhat complex landscape, one currently not completely understood due to a lack of research into students who fail or discontinue. Habel et al. (2016) undertook an in-depth study of the effectiveness of enabling programs for LSES students at two universities in South Australia. They interviewed 20 students, both during their enabling-program studies and then again once they had entered a degree. They also attempted to interview students who had failed to continue but were ultimately unsuccessful in this endeavour. They found that while the programs studied were generally effective, supporting a process of transformation and adaptation, and that the lens of LSES was useful in understanding the experience of students, there were many additional layers of complexity. They identified how the experience was different for men and women, with women in particular experiencing difficulties resulting from gendered expectations of them as wives, mothers and care-givers. Physical and mental health challenges also crossed any socioeconomic divide. The researchers ultimately argue for an intersectional approach to research on enabling students, one that is not based on a particular marker of disadvantage.

Habel et al.’s (2016) study affirmed the role of enabling programs in acclimatising students to university space and culture, of developing students’ self-belief and confidence, and of developing academic skills. However, the study found students in enabling programs were often challenged by changes in relationships (both within key personal relationships, families and amongst friends), by financial hardship and by the general process of change and transformation.
Literature about the ‘effective’ design of enabling programs (Lane & Sharp, 2014; Dinmore & Stokes, 2015; Jones, Olds & Lisciandro, 2016; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Seary, Willans & Cook, 2016; Relf et al., 2017; Motta & Bennett, 2018) has been a focus of recent research and represents the beginnings of the identification of best practice in ‘enabling pedagogy’. Key themes to emerge include the importance of participation and engagement (Jones, et al., 2016), the provision of dedicated support and individualised study plans (Seary et al., 2016); clear expectations, guidelines and online resources (Lane & Sharp, 2014); and an overarching approach underpinned by care and support, called an ‘ethos of care’ by Relf et al., (2017, p. vi) or ‘pedagogies of care’ by Motta and Bennett (p. 644). This ethos or pedagogy of care refers to teaching and support provision that consistently went beyond providing just the ‘nuts and bolts’ (Relf et al., 2017, p. iv) information about academia to also providing personal support and empowerment, by unpacking the hidden curriculum and by supporting the development of student learning communities. Lane and Sharp (2015) and Motto and Bennett (2018) both characterise the pedagogical approach of enabling program as something beyond strategies and methods. In Lane and Sharp’s (2015) model of enabling pedagogy, quadrants of leadership, teaching/learning, community and the individual interact to provide holistic support. For Motta and Bennett (2018) enabling pedagogy reflects a broader philosophy of education, one where the personal, intentional, inclusive and dialogical approaches challenge the sometimes deficit narrative of equity and inclusion and the neolibralisation of higher education.

While we are beginning to learn more about the issues and challenges of students who study in enabling programs, and what helps them succeed, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of students who do not succeed. Hodges et al. (2013) identify some predictors of attrition via a quantitative analysis of an exit survey. However, they acknowledge the number of completed exit returns was low. The main themes which emerged were:

- time pressures;
- life events which impact a person’s ability to cope;
- not understanding or accessing student support services; and
• a lack of interaction with peers and the program.

Their findings were confirmed and augmented by Willans and Seary (2018) in their study into students withdrawing from the Central Queensland University STEPS program between 2013 and 2015. Here personal issues such as mental and physical health issues, juggling study and work circumstances, and feelings of trepidation and a lack of confidence were key factors in attrition. Some students also concluded that the program simply was not for them. In addition, institutional issues such as inadequate support, issues with technological interfaces, and a disconnection from the University and its services were identified as underpinning reasons for withdrawals. Staff similarly identified the demands of juggling life and study and mental health as key issues, along with students at times enrolling in the program for the wrong reasons (for example, to get Centrelink benefits or to meet parental expectations). While such research begins to unpack potential causes of attrition, at this stage our understanding of both what causes attrition, and the ability of enabling-programs to prevent it, are weak.

In general, while what we know about enabling-program students and enabling programs themselves has increased significantly over the past 20 years, gaps remain. These gaps include our understanding of the student experience, and the kind of supports which allow students to succeed. Ongoing work, including this study, is important in continuing to fill these gaps.

2.6 Transition pedagogy

Research into the experiences of students transitioning into university for the first time has led to a greater understanding of these experiences and also to the development of strategies which encourage retention. While it typically concentrates on the undergraduate experience, it is also of significance to the enabling-student experience.

A key concept in this research is the concept that universities play an important role in assisting students to adjust to university life and study, that is, it is not just students
who must adjust to university, but that universities also need to adjust to students (Tinto, 2003; Kift, 2004; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Lizzio, 2006). An examination of this ‘transition pedagogy’ (Kift & Nelson, 2005, p. 226) provides insight into factors important for supporting students as they transition into university. Such support gains increasing relevance with the widening participation agenda and the influx of students from a variety of educational, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Kift, 2004), and for mature-aged students, for whom transition can be particularly challenging (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

Vincent Tinto, who studied student attrition and retention in the USA, is widely recognised as one the of the pioneers of the ‘student integration’ model of retention which associated successful integration into the university environment with persistence (Tinto, 1975). Since his initial model his work has been widely studied, criticised and revised, with key criticisms centred on his model’s inability to account for the experience of ‘non-traditional’ students, and for personal motivation (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborsk, 2012). Despite these criticisms, his ideas remain influential (Swail, 2004). Tinto outlines five key strategies which underpin persistence at university (Tinto, 2003, pp. 2-3):

1. ‘Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that expect them to succeed.
2. Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support.
3. Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide frequent and early feedback about their performance as they are trying to learn and persist.
4. Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution.
5. Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning.‟

In the Australian context, Lizzio (2006) echoes Tinto’s strategies for success, with the notion of the ‘five senses’ that students transitioning to higher education needed to succeed: capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness and academic culture. Lizzio outlines a range of strategies universities should employ to develop and grow these senses. These include: providing entry-level development of academic skills; engaging students in a learning community; clarifying expectations; providing opportunities for students to connect with both their peers and the wider university; helping students engage with both their vocation and their discipline; providing easily accessible support mechanisms and encouraging help-seeking behaviour; and unpacking academic values and culture.

Emerging research relevant to the enabling education context is that which looks at effective transition strategies for LSES students. On the basis of their research via a four-year project funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, which incorporated evidence from interviews with 26 experienced staff and 89 successful LSES undergraduate students at 17 Australian universities, Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith and McKay (2012, p. 3) list five key strategies for universities and their staff:

1. ‘Know and respect your students.
2. Offer your students flexibility, variety and choice.
4. Scaffold your students’ learning.
5. Be available and approachable to guide student learning.
6. Be a reflective practitioner.’

Combined with the outcomes of research into the effective design of enabling programs (Jones, et al., 2016; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Seary et al., 2016; Relf et al.,
2017) our understanding of how to best support enabling students as they begin their educational journey is beginning to solidify. However, an understanding of how enabling students interact with these strategies, in particular how they combine them with their own resources, is still unclear and more study in these areas will help enhance our understanding and build robust models of program design and delivery.

2.7 Conclusion

This broad literature review provides insights into the issues and experiences of students who typically inhabit enabling programs, that is, students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds and mature-aged students. It demonstrates that these backgrounds potentially present students with a range of issues and challenges to overcome, both in accessing and then transitioning into higher education and then in completing their studies. The potential for negative or uncertain outcomes arising out of this transition period has led a small number of researchers to suggest that undertaking university education is in fact riskier for some students than others. Despite suggestions via the work of Bourdieu (1986) that these issues are often structural not personal, students nonetheless largely individualise this risk. Universities have increasingly understood that they have a part to play in negating the impact of the challenges faced by beginning students and this has led to the creation of a specific understanding of ‘transition pedagogy’ as well as the beginnings of an ‘enabling pedagogy’ (Tinto, 2003; Kift, 2004; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Lizzio, 2006; Relf et al., 2017).

Often missing from this research is contextualisation to enabling-programs and a full understanding of the complexity of the enabling-program student. Research to date has concentrated primarily on the experience of undergraduate students, and often looking at the student experience through one lens, such as LSES or mature age. There are significant gaps in understanding the lives of enabling-program students and the way their backgrounds and circumstances interact and impact their journeys into higher education.
Largely missing also is an interrogation of the concept of risk in the Australian enabling program context, and the way in which risk, if present, is actually negotiated by the student. While it has been recognised that an appreciation of risk may affect students’ decision-making process before entering university, there is currently little understanding of how this impacts the students as they go through their transition into study. Further, there is a significant lack of research into the role the student themselves play in negotiating potential risks, and the way this role intersects with program design and pedagogy.

This thesis will build on this background understanding and determine the extent to which it relates specifically to enabling programs and their students. It will explore in more depth the experience of enabling-program students as they embark on their studies, with particular reference to the issues and challenges they face, the relationship between these and background, and how they consider and then manage risk. Their experience is re-examined at the end of their first semester in the program to discover if and how the initial assumptions may have changed, and if and how the program itself impacts the experience of students.
Chapter 3: Theoretical frameworks

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the key theoretical underpinnings of this study. Bourdieu’s (1986) ideas of social reproduction are used to explain the societal mechanisms which work to exclude or make it difficult for individuals to move between social realms, as in the case of under-represented or disadvantaged students attempting to enter higher education. Risk theory is employed to explore the potential consequences of attempting to enter a world for which students may not be prepared, and their role and the role of others in managing these consequences. Finally, Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning theory is employed to understand why learning can be more than just the acquisition of knowledge or the adjustment to a new environment; that learning can, in fact, also provide a space for fundamental change and disruption.

Bourdieu’s theories provide key tools to analyse why a journey to higher education might be more difficult for some students than others. Concepts such as ‘cultural’ and ‘social capital’, ‘field’ and ‘habitus’ all speak to a process whereby students need certain knowledge, behaviours and attitudes to unlock the often-hidden rules and expectations that can be found in higher education environments. Without the right knowledge, behaviours and attitudes the student journey can be more difficult and less successful. The limitations of Bourdieu’s theories and how they have been adapted and expanded upon will also be considered.

Two contemporary perspectives on risk are utilised to unpack the process of people taking advantage of opportunity, such as the opportunity to go to university, that may have once been denied to them, and the benefits and costs associated with this. The first are those ideas on risk enunciated by Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991). They fostered the idea of a ‘risk society’ whereby we live in a world increasingly dominated by the notion of risk (Giddens, 1991) and how the way in which we understand and manage risk is fundamentally impacted by the process of modernisation (Beck, 1992). These ideas provide an analytical framework for how
individuals, and society, are positioned to take responsibility for and manage risk. The second perspective draws upon the ‘cultural/symbolic’ perspective. Here risk is seen as a by-product of both the individual’s culture and world, and society more generally (Lupton, 1999). This is particularly useful in understanding the decision-making process people go through when encountering something risky.

The theory of Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991) is employed to help examine the impact of the learning experience itself, that is, not just the process of adjusting to a new environment and expectations. Mezirow’s theory explains how the acquisition of new ideas and new ways of seeing the world and self can be a transformative experience which entails disruption, danger and risk.

Together these theories provide different pieces of the ‘puzzle’ that represents students’ experience. They explain cause (Bourdieu), impact (Beck/Giddens and Mezirow) and outcomes (Beck/Giddens), as shown in the figure below:

![Diagram of Transitioning to Higher Education](image)

*Figure 1: Theoretical overview*

### 3.2 Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, habitus and fields

As noted in the literature review, the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) has been extremely influential in research into the experience of under-
represented or disadvantaged students in higher education, with his theory of social reproduction, which includes the concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus and field, used widely to explain ongoing inequality. Bourdieu extended the concept of ‘capital’, which hitherto had been principally perceived in economic terms, to include resources associated with one’s class and upbringing (cultural capital) and with one’s family, friends and associates (social capital) which could be exchanged for advantage (Bourdieu, 1986). The embodiment of cultural capital is represented in Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’, while ‘field’ represents those spaces where capital and habitus play out to create advantage for some and disadvantage for others.

Altogether, Bourdieu saw a system which has the capacity to inherently reproduce itself. Those with advantage who knew the right way to act and speak, who had the right contacts and who understood how the system worked and what was expected, naturally did well in that system, and had the capacity to pass on this advantage to their children. Such a system of reproduction renders Bourdieu’s theories as potentially deterministic, only ever explaining why things stay the same. However, there are others (for example, Mills, 2008) who find far more scope in Bourdieu’s theories, especially that of habitus, as potentially both reproductive and transformative. In this way Bourdieu helps explains both why inequality in higher education persists, but also what needs to change for inequality to be challenged.

Cultural and social capital

As noted, Bourdieu (1986) expanded on the fundamental idea of capital, which had previously primarily referred to economic resources, to suggest that there are other forms of capital such as cultural and social capital which individuals acquired for the purpose of negotiating life.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital referred to the range of knowledge, skills, mannerisms, positions and tastes that one acquires in the process of growing up. He proposes three kinds of cultural capital: embodied, which refers to the way people act and talk; objectified, which refers to the goods and possessions individuals owned and used; and institutionalised, which refers to credentials and qualifications recognised as
symbols of knowledge and competence (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is accumulated according to class and, like economic capital, is an important resource for negotiating social mobility. According to Bourdieu (1977), without the right cultural capital it is difficult to move beyond the status one was born into. Thus, it is a powerful force in maintaining social stratification and preventing people from being socially mobile.

Bourdieu also saw the association between individuals as a form of usable, and potentially beneficial, capital, and this he termed ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977). This includes direct access to knowledge and opportunity via family and friends, but also indirect access by belonging to certain groups, cultural affiliations or by associations (for example, by family name or trade). The kinds of networks of friends and contacts who one knew become valuable resources for supporting (or not) one’s place in society, providing access to advantage and facilitating the awarding of ‘social rewards, such as status, privilege, and positions in certain social circles, professions, or organizations’ (Brown & Davis, 2001, p. 41). Bourdieu linked social capital intrinsically to cultural capital, for without the ‘right’ cultural capital, it is not possible to cultivate the ‘right’ friends and networks which bestow social capital. The two support and cement each other: ‘the profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes them possible’ (Bourdieu, 1977. p. 52). For Bourdieu, social status was largely reproduced or constrained by one’s access or lack of access to cultural and social capital.

Bourdieu saw educational systems in industrial, Western societies as functioning to legitimise existing class boundaries and inequalities (Sullivan, 2002) and he drew heavily on higher education to demonstrate his theories. For Bourdieu, higher education was largely driven by the dominant culture. He argued that those who did not understand or share this culture, who did not have the cultural and social capital recognised by these institutions and the people who constituted them, were at a considerable disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1977). In this theory of social reproduction, he argued that the ‘dominant culture’ of most education systems belonged to the upper classes, making it largely unintelligible and inaccessible to those not belonging to those classes and thus an inhibitor to social mobility (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu asserted
that the rise of formal education systems had led to some groups/classes being able to dominate and monopolise cultural capital and its inherent advantages to the extent that educational qualifications in fact equated to a form of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Inequality was thus not just about having money to pay for things like formal education but produced through largely inherited access to the capital that underpinned an ability to succeed in an educational environment.

Bourdieu’s theories (1986) of social reproduction and capital have subsequently formed the basis of many empirical studies examining the participation and experience of students hitherto marginalised from higher education and used to explain why such students are lacking the right cultural and social capital because of their backgrounds and are thus at a disadvantage (for example, Reay, 2001, 2002; Lehmann, 2009; Byrom, 2009; Bok, 2010; Devlin, 2010; Leese, 2010; O’Shea, 2011; Luzeckyj et al., 2011). Bourdieu allows us to conceive of higher education as not necessarily an environment which allows each person entering it to operate equally (Habel et al., 2016) but rather one where some people have privileged access to the resources and knowledge required to succeed. This privileged access particularly relates to the concept of the ‘hidden curriculum’, a term coined by Sambell and McDowell to describe, ‘What is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curriculum and the surface features of educational interaction’ (1998, pp 391-392). The hidden curriculum accounts for the differences between ‘curriculum as designed and curriculum in action’ (Semper & Blasco, 2018).

In this study, which looks at students entering a system for which they are generally ill-prepared, and in which they typically are both under-represented in, and/or do less well, Bourdieu’s ideas provide an explanation for why this might be so. They also provide some insight into the way in which enabling programs such as UPP might be designed to better account for such gaps in capital.

While acknowledging the value of Bourdieu’s theories of cultural and social capital as a very useful way of explaining the dominance of certain groups in higher education and the exclusion or difficulties of others, his ideas have not been without criticism (Reay,
Bourdieu’s concentration on class as the means of social reproduction, leaving out or only marginally addressing other important characteristics of exclusion and division such as race, gender, sexuality, age and disability, has been seen as problematic (Reay, 2004). Further, it has been argued that this mono-dimensional view has failed to recognise the intersectional way that these identities and characteristics may impact individuals (Habel, et al., 2016).

Bourdieu argued that forces such as cultural capital have kept the established order static and repressed social mobility, that is, his theory appears both deterministic and constraining. There is significant research worldwide that would support his view, including significant disparity in Australia between educational participation depending on one’s socioeconomic status (for example, James, 2008; Bradley, et al., 2008; Koshy, 2017). However, his concepts of cultural and social capital in particular are seen as limiting in terms of the types of capital he identified. Various researchers have argued that by concentrating on the resources available to an individual only in terms of cultural and social capital, important elements are missed (Shilling, 1991; Verter, 2003; Yosso, 2005; Côté, 2005).

Côté (2005), for example, describes one of these missing elements as ‘identity’ capital. Identity capital represents ‘attributes associated with sets of psychosocial skills, largely cognitive in nature, that appear to be necessary for people to intelligently strategize and make decisions affecting their life courses (i.e., to individualize), especially in the absence of cultural guidance and societal norms, as in the case of de-constructed late-modern societies’ (Côté, 2005, p. 225). These strengths and capacities enable individuals to negotiate different circumstances and experiences in their work, educational and social lives. They also allow individuals to develop a sense of purpose in life and plan courses of action. Identity capital has the capacity both to be influenced by social interactions and to contribute to the development of social capital. Côté (2005) further argues that identity capital can be the missing explanation for differences in student educational outcomes and performance, once background and intelligence measures are accounted for.
Bourdieu’s concentration on cultural and social capital has also been challenged by Yosso (2005), who examines the notion of alternative forms of capital in terms of race. She identifies a range of capitals including ‘aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital’ (p. 69) which students of colour bring with them to the educational environment.

Thus, while Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital provide a framework for understanding disadvantage, they cannot be used singularly or without an appreciation for the possibility to expand the ideas to encompass greater diversity, changing times and emerging understandings of social mobility, the possibility of transformation and new forms of capital.

**Habitus**

Along with Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital is that of habitus. Bourdieu saw habitus as the embodiment of dispositions, the deeply ingrained habits and tastes that come from a person’s social background, childhood experiences, and individual encounters with the outside world (DiMaggio, 1979). As explained by Reay (2004), ‘Bourdieu developed the concept of habitus to demonstrate the ways in which not only is the body in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body’ (p. 432). Habitus is an interpretive and perceptual lens through which the social world is viewed, and can be reflected in attributes such as speech, attitudes, behaviours and ways of interacting in certain environments or fields (Edgerton, Roberts & Peter, 2013).

Habitus can be intangible and hard to quantify. Bourdieu (1990) referred to it as a ‘feel for the game’ and to ways ‘people like us’ behave; habitus is generally associated with certain classes or groups. However, habitus could also be individual given that it is a product of one’s upbringing and experiences, and that no two individuals have exactly the same upbringing or experiences. Habitus is both past and present, it represents a gradual process of accumulation and acclimatisation as one grows up, but also operates and is shaped by the present (Mills, 2008). As Reay (2004) explains, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is unpredictable, capable of both being an agent for
reproducing existing social structures, but also with the capacity to differ and change depending on one’s specific circumstances and life trajectory. Thus, it becomes, as described by Farrugia and Woodman (2015), both structural and structuring.

Like Bourdieu’s notion of capital, this concept has also been criticised as being too deterministic, that the constraints of habitus are such that they prevent social mobility. However, Reay (2004) and Mills (2008) argue that this in fact misinterprets the notion and that while on the one hand habitus acts to shape a person’s life, it does not determine all life choices. Reay writes, ‘while habitus reflects the social position in which it was constructed, it also carries within it the genesis of new creative responses that are capable of transcending the social conditions in which it was produced’ (pp. 434-435). Habitus may, when activated, be an agency of negotiation, a way to change individual circumstances. It can in fact be both reproductive and transformative, especially if, through education, students can be explicitly taught the dominant rules of the game (Mills, 2008).

This concept is important in this study as we observe students who are attempting to bridge a specific social structure: to enter into the higher education environment, often without the required cultural and social capital, and the development of an associated habitus. In this process, ‘habitus’ is initially a way of explaining the position of disadvantage they find themselves in, but as they begin to acclimatise to the new structures, and acquire both cultural and social capital, they ultimately have the capacity to adapt and change their habitus. In doing so they become able to transgress the boundaries; as Mills (2008) argues, ‘habitus sets the boundaries within which agents are free to adopt strategic practices’ (p. 82).

It could be seen that Bourdieu’s ideas of social reproduction are at odds with Beck and Giddens’s ideas of reflexivity in late modernity. While Bourdieu describes how a lack of capital and habitus hinder social mobility, Beck and Giddens argue that in late modernity structural constrains are breaking down, with the individual freer to cross traditional boundaries of class, gender and race. The critical realist Margaret Archer (2010) argues that the pace of change in late modern societies renders Bourdieu’s notions unworkable, with the individual now taking primary place in the negotiation of
their own histories, through their inner conversations and decisions (sounding boards) and subsequent actions or reactions. Social structure and embodied dispositions represented by capital and habitus are no longer overarching forces, but rather more localised constraints to be negotiated by the individual.

Farrugia and Woodman (2015) suggest there is perhaps middle ground between Bourdieu and Archer, that the internal sounding boards individuals negotiate are in fact shaped by social position and structure. They argue for a position which allows for ‘socially embedded, embodied dispositions [habitus] as generative of the personal investments and ultimate concerns that give meaning to life in late modernity’ (p. 462). In this space, individuals are influenced by their background, but are not totally bound by it. They are able to adapt and negotiate new environments and change, that is, be reflexive. In this middle ground, the risk associated with negotiating a reflexive biography (Beck, 1992) can sit alongside Bourdieu’s concepts of ongoing social reproduction.

Field

Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus represent the rules, both hidden and overt, of ‘the game’. The site of ‘the game’ was what Bourdieu referred to as a ‘field’, a place which had attached to it certain knowledge, rules, expectations and assumptions. These include areas such as art, law, education, politics, the labour market or religion. Each field can contain numerous, often hidden, rules, regulations and underpinning standards, that is, specific types of cultural and social capital. These in turn influence habitus and thus the way habitus operates in each field can change.

Arguments about exactly what counts as ‘cultural capital’ in various fields have arisen since Bourdieu’s work became widely understood. In the field of education, Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue that traditionally in the educational setting cultural capital has been conceptualised as being associated with ‘knowledge of or facility with “highbrow” aesthetic culture’ (p. 567), which has not necessarily incorporated more down-to-earth technical skill and knowledge. They go on to suggest that this interpretation is incorrect, and that Bourdieu did, in fact, value the acquisition of skills
and knowledge (particularly about systems such as education) for both their inherent value and for the social status they brought with them. In the academic ‘field’ there is a range of skills and knowledge which students are expected to use in the production of their work, including academic writing, academic integrity, numeracy and critical thinking, as well as a knowledge of systems and processes. In this thesis, this skills-related cultural capital required in higher education will be described as ‘academic capital’ (Roberts, 2011). This broader understanding of cultural capital is important for examining programs such as UPP which typically provide mechanisms for students to acquire the capital and the associated habitus required to succeed at university.

Summary

Overall, despite some limitations, Bourdieu’s ideas and language give this thesis a means of understanding and describing ongoing disadvantage and inequitable outcomes for students from certain backgrounds entering higher education in Australia in the 21st century. The concepts of cultural and social capital help account for the barriers which confront students who have not acquired the capital vital to success. The other forms of capital emerging as a result of Bourdieu’s work allow us to consider more broadly what alternative resources students have at their disposal to help bridge these gaps. The concepts of habitus and field, and the interrelationship between the two, and their ability to be both reproductive and transformational (Mills, 2008), further situate the individual in spaces which can both inhibit and foster their progress. Bourdieu can be read as deterministic, that the elements of cultural and social capital and habitus can keep a student from succeeding in spaces in which they do not belong. However, looking more broadly, seeing habitus as being a product of both the past and the present, and thus adaptable to change, and seeing capital as something that can be taught and acquired, allows us to see the role education can have on changing the influence of background.
3.3 Risk theory

Risk in Western societies has become a widely used concept to explain events which occur contrary to expectations, and which frighten or cause harm (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011). The study of risk, while in itself a fairly recent phenomenon in terms of human history, is part of a larger, ongoing attempt to make sense of the unknown (Lim, 2011). Risk has been examined from a diverse range of theoretical approaches and intersects with a number of different disciplines, including economics, science, psychology and sociology (Lim, 2011).

The meaning of the word ‘risk’ is both historically and culturally bound, changing significantly over time (Lupton, 1999). While there is a general understanding that ‘risk’ today refers to the potential or possibility of some kind of harm (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011) there are more nuanced interpretations of how risk is actually determined. The theoretical approaches can be categorised in a number of different ways, but at an overarching level the study of risk can be divided into two main categories: the technical/scientific or realist approach commonly adopted in the sciences, and the sociocultural approach commonly found in sociology and political science (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011).

Lupton (1999) describes the technical, realist/rational actor approach as one where risk is an objective hazard that can be measured by science and managed by the rational application of appropriate strategies. In this world, individuals make objective, rational choices based on scientific information and mathematical calculations to minimise risk. Contrasting this is the sociocultural approach where risk is not just an objective hazard, but a phenomenon situated in a range of social and cultural contexts. Within this approach, theories of risk can be further broken down into the three major groups: the ‘risk society’ perspective proposed by Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991); the cultural-symbolic perspective proposed by Mary Douglas (1985); and the ‘governmentality’ perspective outlined by Michael Foucault (1977).

Lupton (1991) divides these three sociocultural perspectives into epistemological positions which are typified by the extent to which risk is seen as a social construct.
The ‘risk society’ and ‘cultural/symbolic’ perspectives are characterised as ‘weak constructivist’ positions, where risk is seen as an objective hazard mediated through social and cultural interpretations. The ‘governmentality’ perspective is characterised as ‘strong constructivist’, where all risks are a product of ‘historically, socially and politically contingent ways of seeing’ (Lupton, 1991, loc. 623).

Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) propose that in late modernity risk has become more pervasive and is no longer just distributed according to economic wealth (that is, the wealthier you are the better able you are to manage risk); rather, individuals are required to play a much more significant role in the management of risk (reflexivity). The cultural/symbolic perspective argues that the immediate social and cultural context of the individual significantly impacts their perception of risk (Douglas, 1985; Henwood, Pidgeon, Sarre, Simmons & Smith, 2008; Lim, 2011). The governmentality perspective of risk was developed from the ideas of the French philosopher Michael Foucault (Lim, 2011). Foucault described the development of European institutions which saw populations as groups requiring protection and management for the good of the whole (Lupton, 1999). In this view, government becomes the holder of ‘expert knowledge’ (Lupton, 1999, loc. 1379) and plays a significant role in both defining and solving problems, including risk (Lim, 2011).

As noted in Chapter Two, some overseas researchers have already applied the concept of risk to the journeys of students from backgrounds of disadvantage into higher education (for example, Reay, 2003: Brine & Waller, 2004; Lehmann, 2004). These studies frequently reference the work of Ulrich Beck, in particular, to understand the mechanisms by which students, in taking advantage of opportunities hitherto unavailable to them, are at the same time confronted with greater levels of risk. As this study is interested in exploring these ideas in the context of an Australian enabling program, the ‘risk society’ perspective of Beck (1992) was similarly of use. Further the cultural/symbolic perspective provided a framework for understanding how students situate themselves in this environment: if and how they perceive what they are doing as a risk or risky, and how this perception of risk impacts their decision making and risk negotiation strategies.
The Risk Society perspective

The study of risk and its relationship to modern society gained prominence in the late 1990s when both Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens independently came up with similar ideas about the interplay between risk, society and the individual. Beck’s thesis of the ‘Risk Society’ (1992) has been particularly influential. While Beck acknowledges that historically risk had been unevenly distributed according to wealth (those with less wealth are less able to avoid risks), he argues that new forms of risk have emerged with both globalisation and individualisation. Globalisation has resulted in new risks, many environmental, which shifted the paradigms of risk from being purely based on one’s wealth and a corresponding ability to manage risks with the use of financial resources, to risks which are less controllable and which cross both national and socioeconomic boundaries (Beck, 1992).

Beck (1992) theorises that the increasing individualism of late modernity has created an increased preoccupation with risk which, for the individual, has on the one hand created more opportunity, but on the other exposed them to greater risk. Old boundaries and structures (for example, of gender, class, education, work, family and marriage) no longer exert the influence they once did. In the increasing absence of strict norms and social expectations which previously shaped one’s progress through life, individuals are required to be much more active players in their own lives (reflexivity), while simultaneously often lacking the expert knowledge required to make and manage increasingly complex and difficult choices (Lupton, 1999).

Beck sees the welfare state, mass education, improved living standards and the second wave of feminism as particularly important in breaking down the structures of traditional roles imposed by class, gender and families. In this state ‘class biographies, which are somehow ascribed, become transformed into reflexive biographies, which depend on the decision of the actor’ (Beck, 1992, p. 88). Thus, while life choices are more flexible it is now up to the individual to take advantage of them. According to Beck (1992), educational and other ‘institutional biographies’ (Beck, 1992, p. 131) now play a greater role in determining status than previous class and gender structures. Here the individual’s decision making becomes paramount and the individual is
required to pay for poor decisions or decisions not taken in these realms. What might previously have been characterised as a ‘blow of fate’ (Beck, 1992, p. 136) is more likely to be seen now as some kind of personal failure. Thus, the individualisation of choice comes with the individualisation of the responsibility and risk attached to that choice.

Giddens (1991) similarly theorises that change, uncertainty and risk are dominant discourses of modern, Western societies, and that for the individual this means that the self is no longer a stable entity based on class, family and other structures. One’s identity needs to be constantly constructed and our lives are a product of ongoing reflection and decision making. According to Giddens (1991), this is an activity which is both difficult and time consuming. In this context trust becomes an increasingly important tool to assist in this decision-making process.

For Giddens, trust is a crucial mechanism used by people for managing risk; a mechanism which allows them to get on with their lives, not to dismiss fear altogether but to displace it sufficiently with a ‘pragmatic acceptance’ of risks (Giddens, 1991, p. 130) to allow life to function. While trust in some of its more traditional forms (for example, trust in family, trust in local communities) becomes weaker, newer forms of trust emerge such as trust in counselling, advice on the internet and systems (of which university qualifications would be an example) (Giddens, 2009).

It is possible to characterise students from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds, such as those found in enabling programs, in the framework provided by Beck and Giddens. Class, gender or family expectations may have previously limited their higher education aspirations and choices. However, today, with clear policy directives and initiatives aimed at encouraging and increasing participation in higher education such individuals are, theoretically at least, provided with greater opportunity and choice. However, without support, such students are potentially left to negotiate their journey across traditional boundaries and into higher education without the skills and knowledge they require, thus exposing themselves to risk. Trust in the institutions of higher education, and in the qualifications and benefits they entail, may be a mechanism to allow individuals to accept these risks.
However, the Beck/Giddens approach has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on cognitive processes as driving human decision-making (Henwood et al., 2008). In reality, many people’s decisions are not made on a conscious level, on the weighing up of various options and pros and cons of a particular decision or course of action (Lupton, 1999). However, Beck himself understood that the use of the term ‘decision making’ was perhaps a misnomer, but argued that, regardless of terminology, the individual was still left with the blame.

Decisions on education, profession, job, place ... can no longer be, they must be made. Even where the word ‘decision’ is too grandiose, because neither consciousness nor alternatives are present, the individual will have to ‘pay for’ the consequences of decisions not taken. (Beck, 1992, p. 135)

Lupton and Tulloch (2002) suggest that even if in reality capacity and real choices are missing, individuals see the negotiation of risk as an important part of modern life, and also seek to play an active role in controlling it.

There remains another serious criticism of the risk society theorisation, a criticism which might suggest the use of it and Bourdieu’s concept of social reproduction in the same thesis would be problematic. Beck and Giddens talk about the breaking down of social norms and the ability of individuals to cross boundaries of class, gender, ethnicity and family, whereas Bourdieu emphasises the ongoing structural barriers created by class, and how a lack of cultural and social capital can prevent people from crossing class boundaries. The truth perhaps sits mid-way between these two positions, with the influence of class, gender, family and ethnicity weaker in late-modernity, but not gone or without power (Lupton, 1999). Many young people, in particular, while having greater choice and opportunity, are still constrained by class, gender and ethnicity (Furlong & Carmel, 1997).

For this thesis both theoretical perspectives provide pieces of the puzzle, if not the whole puzzle entirely. Bourdieu helps us understand that socially constructed constraints still exert significant influences on people and can make social mobility difficult. However, as noted in the previous chapter, there is evidence of movement, and people are beginning to transgress traditional structural boundaries. In this space,
the work of Beck and Giddens helps us to understand what is expected of the individual in this movement, and how this move away from what is known and expected into realms which individuals may not fully understand or be prepared for, presents an element of risk.

**The cultural/symbolic perspective**

The cultural/symbolic perspective of risk proposes that multiple aspects of a person’s life, their history, their personality and their culture effect the way any given situation is perceived and how risk is framed (Douglas, 1985; Henwood et al., 2008; Lim, 2011). As such, it provides a counter-balance to the ideas of Beck and Giddens, and some of the criticisms outlined in the previous section. What might be perceived by one person as a risk may not be seen by another as such, nor by society in general. An event, such as jumping/diving from high cliffs, might be seen in one society as foolish and risky, and in another as an important rite of passage. As Henwood et al. (2008, p. 424) explain, it is necessary ‘to see risk both as a constructed, if sometimes conventionalised, quality or potentiality of an object and as one frame amongst many through which that object or situation might be perceived and understood’.

The writings of anthropologist Mary Douglas have been influential in exploring this conceptualisation of risk. Douglas (1985) argues that too much emphasis has been placed on the role of an individual’s cognitive choice in assessing risk, and insufficient consideration of the influence of culture. For Douglas (1985), risk is a strategy by which modern, western societies deal with danger and otherness. Douglas saw risk as a mechanism for maintaining boundaries between the self and one’s social groups and others, and a way of dealing with social deviance and maintaining social cohesion. By assigning both risk and blame to people, groups and institutions, those who act in a way contrary to that which is collectively desired can be forced into corrective behaviour which ensures they do behave in the desired way. Risk thus serves as a mechanism for maintaining social and moral order (Douglas, 1985).

Douglas was critical of the notion that an individual’s cognitive input into decision making was the primary force in people’s management of risk: that is, that decision
making was some kind of private process, divorced from the influences around them, both cultural and personal. Douglas saw danger as real, but the moralisation and politicisation of this danger and associated blame was a product of the culture and society in which it sat (Douglas, 1992), so that certain dangers are highlighted and identified as a risk, others are not. In the context of this study, for example, it will be argued that education is rarely seen as a risk even though objectively there may be risks associated with both attaining and possessing educational qualifications.

Overarching these two theoretical approaches is the concept of risk as something associated with potential uncertainty and harm (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011). Current research in relation to risk and higher education (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Davies & Williams, 2001; Reay, 2003; Brine & Waller, 2004; Osborne et al., 2004; Lehmann, 2004) indicates that certain factors within the higher education system have the potential to create adverse outcomes or contain significant levels of uncertainty. These include issues related to self-confidence, finance, work, ability, previous study, health and family and community relationships, responsibilities and expectations. The cultural/symbolic framework will be employed to see if and how students and staff characterise these ‘risky’ experiences as they enter higher education via an enabling program.

In summary, while there are multiple interpretations of risk (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011), the two employed in this thesis are Beck’s concept of a risk society, and the cultural/symbolic perspective. Most enabling programs, including UPP, were established to provide a mechanism to support the entry of students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education. In this, they represent the individual described by Beck, who takes advantage of opportunity hitherto denied to them by society. This thesis considers the impact of this action in terms of risk and the way responsibility for this process is managed, particularly through individualisation. The cultural/symbolic perspective of risk provides a way of examining how risk is perceived by students, staff and the wider social and cultural framework in which education sits, and how this also impacts the negotiation of risk. Together, these two theoretical lenses allow for a multi-dimensional exploration of risk.
3.4 Learning theories

Jack Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning theory has been used in the literature to help describe the way in which higher education can both change and disrupt student identities/life courses, particularly students in enabling programs (Stone, 2009; Willans, 2010; Willans & Seary, 2011) or students from LSES, first-in-family backgrounds (Lehmann, 2014). These researchers show how transitioning to higher education as an adult is not always a smooth process, or one without risk. Mezirow’s ideas thus provide more tools to address the ‘risk puzzle’, along with Bourdieu and Beck. If, as discussed above, Bourdieu helps explain the challenges some students face as a result of being ill-prepared because of their background, and Beck helps us understand why negotiating this space without the support of traditional structures can be risky, Mezirow allows an examination of the process of learning itself in creating some of this risk. That is, students may not just be impacted by being without the necessary capitals required to succeed, but that the very act of acquiring these capitals can be a disorientating and potentially risky process that in turn needs to be managed.

The educational theories of Mezirow (1991) in many ways fit well with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus in that they help describe a shift in a learner’s fundamental ways of understanding and reacting to the world, or, in terms of Bourdieu, their embodied dispositions or habitus. Mezirow developed his theory of Transformative Learning after investigating the experience of women returning to university study via re-entry programs in the United States. His theory describes a process whereby learners make meaning from their experiences:

Transformative learning involves an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s belief and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, an assessment of alternative perspectives, a decision to negate an old perspective in favour of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new; an ability to take action based upon the new perspective and a desire to fit the new perspective into the broader contexts of one’s life. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 161)
Mezirow (1991) describes learners as transitioning through a number of stages as they adapt and adjust themselves to the new world opened up to them by learning, typically starting with some kind of disorientating dilemma or experience which required a reassessment of self. For Mezirow this typically ended with successful integration of the old with the new, allowing the individual to continue on with one’s former life but with a new perspective (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow sees the learner as actively engaging in critical reflection and change. Initial critics of Mezirow postulate that Mezirow concentrated too much on the cognitive, and not enough on the social, emotive, affective and even spiritual aspects of learning, though in later works Mezirow has acknowledged the more complex nature of meaning making (Baumgartner, 2001).

There has been considerable debate about Mezirow’s theory, and his theory has been interpreted and used in a number of different ways to explore the experience of adult learners (Casebeer & Mann, 2017). However, in this thesis, Mezirow’s ideas are applied broadly, that is, that for adults learning can lead to individual change and transformation. The disorientating dilemma, which Mezirow saw as the first part of this transformative process (Mezirow, 1991), may be precipitated by the acquisition of new cultural capital, as well as the new learning (skills, knowledge, concepts and ideas) and the formation of new associations and friendships (social capital) which occur within an enabling program. While many writers have seen this experience as emancipatory and positive, there are others who have explored the way in which it can also be disruptive, causing students to question their identity and alienating them from family and friends (Reay, 2003; Brine & Waller, 2004; Willans, 2010; Lehmann, 2014). Mezirow’s theory will be used to examine if and how a process of transformation contributes to the ‘riskiness’ of the enabling education experience; and what implications this has for the design of programs and the delivery of support services.

Other learning theories, particularly that of Critical Pedagogy as first developed by Paulo Freire (1972), may have also been applied to this research project. Freire saw education as a method of challenging inequitable power relationships between the oppressed and their oppressors, and his theory described the experience of those on
the margins. Like Bourdieu’s theory of cultural dominance, Critical Pedagogy sees education as complicit in the reproduction of social norms and inequalities; however, it goes further believing that a ‘revolutionary critical pedagogy will allow educators to realize the possibilities of democratic social values within their classroom’ (Breuing, 2011, pp. 4-5). The fact that enabling programs, in reality, do little to challenge the accepted norms of higher education, that they may even be considered quite complicit in the transmission of the existing cultural dominance, makes Mezirow’s theory more suitable for use in this research project than these theories which seek to disrupt or challenge an existing order.

3.5 Conclusion

The theoretical perspectives used in this study work in parallel to explain and explore the experience of students entering university via an enabling program. Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital, together with habitus and field, provide a way of understanding why certain students may be underprepared and thus disadvantaged in the higher education setting. Students from LSES backgrounds, and those with similarly limited exposure to the cultural/social capital commonly exercised in the field of higher education, such as students who enter university via enabling programs, have fewer resources with which to negotiate their experience. The ability of enabling programs to both identify and bridge these gaps is one of the fundamental questions of this study. Côté’s (2005) concept of identity capital is drawn on to provide a missing link to explain the resources available to an individual over and above cultural and social capital.

Beck’s (1992) concept of the risk society has the capacity to explain why this lack of appropriate capital can create greater risk for students even though educational opportunity is now theoretically greater. Without some of the previous restraints imposed by class, gender, ethnicity and family the individual is positioned in late modernity to experience and to take responsibility for their decisions relating to their future (Beck, 1992). However, those students with fewer resources, including limited cultural and social capital, face a more difficult and uncertain path.
The cultural/symbolic framework of risk (Douglas, 1985) helps to frame this experience from the individual’s perspective and also helps explore the attitudes to education and opportunity in our society, and the way in which students actually negotiate perceived risks.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, and the ability of habitus to be both a product of an individual’s past, and present, dovetails with Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning theory. Mezirow’s ideas explain the process of reflection, meaning making and change which adult students experience when exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world as part of the learning process. In terms of Bourdieu, this can also describe the adaptation of one’s habitus to a new environment or field. Mezirow characterised this process as a ‘transformation’, a fundamental shift with potentially profound outcomes, both positive and negative. These negative outcomes can contribute to the experience of risk and, as such, Transformative Learning theory provides a mechanism for unpacking the profound impact learning itself can have on students and the way a program such as UPP may or may not support students in this process.
4. The research design

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research approach and design adopted in this study. The research questions underpinning this study explore how students in an enabling program are impacted by risk, both in terms of how it is perceived and how it is negotiated, and the relationship between background, the learning experience and risk. As a researcher I was particularly interested in the different experiences of individuals as they attempt to transition to the higher education environment and how they conceptualised this experience. Also, as outlined in the previous chapter the constructivist cultural/symbolic perspective of risk is used in this thesis, whereby risk is seen as a product of a person’s life, history, personality and culture (Douglas, 1985; Henwood et al., 2008; Lim, 2011). Given these two overarching parameters, a qualitative approach has been adopted which allowed for the documenting and interpretation of individuals’ experiences and their perceptions of risk (Ezzy, 2000). In line with the constructivist interpretation of risk, a constructivist interpretation of knowledge was also applied, which holds that there is no one version of truth, rather it is constructed by different people in different ways (Crotty, 1998).

Data was collected for this study via semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with students and staff in the UPP at the University of Tasmania. The methodology and methods were informed by a pilot study undertaken between February and May 2014 (Jarvis, 2014). In this pilot the qualitative methodology of semi-structured student interviews was tested and refined for use in this main study. This chapter begins with an overview of the rationale for my methodological choices and decisions, followed by a description of how the data were collected and analysed and what methods were employed to enhance the credibility of the findings.
4.2 Research design and methods

Research approach

As noted a qualitative research approach was adopted in this study. Qualitative research relies on non-numeric forms of data, principally in the form of words (Schenk, 2001) and it has the capacity to uncover complexity, ambiguity and other overlooked nuances (Mason, 2002). Qualitative research has at its heart an interest in the experience and life of others, and a desire to document and analyse these (Ezzy, 2002). As an overarching approach qualitative research suits this study as the study explored a concept (risk) which can be experienced by different people in different ways according to a range of different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs which may contain complexity, ambiguity and nuance. In addition, the study explored how individual students negotiated risk within the enabling education context. For myself as the researcher, I was interested in what students thought, felt and did on an individual level rather than on those factors which are best measured by numbers across a broader population.

Within qualitative research there are a range of paradigms which reflect the broad amalgamation of philosophical underpinnings of the research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As this study is concerned with risk, something which is essentially subjective (Lupton, 1999), an interpretivist (or social constructivist) paradigm has been chosen as the most suitable. Interpretivism provides ways of establishing how knowledge is constructed (Crotty, 1998). From an interpretivist perspective, it is understood that people develop meaning from their experiences and interactions with others, and that these meanings are multiple and varied. This leads me, the researcher, to rely on participants’ views in order to examine the complexity of experiences (Creswell, 2012). The technique of semi-structured interviews employed in this study reflected this understanding, in that participants were asked broad and open-ended questions which allowed participants to construct their own meaning, followed by prompts which allowed them to expand on these (Creswell, 2012). In doing so I acknowledge my background and position shaped the interpretation of
knowledge (Creswell, 2012). This is in part dealt with by making my position as a researcher explicit, and by employing a range of strategies to enhance the credibility of the data collection and interpretation.

**My position as the researcher**

My research topic is deeply influenced by my personal experiences and beliefs. I have a career that spans approximately 30 years working in adult, second-chance learning. This includes working in a teaching and managerial role in a Vietnamese refugee camp in my late 20s and as an educator/teacher trainer at the University of Phnom Penh in my early 30s, during the post Pol Pot United Nations intervention. These experiences were seminal for me, illustrating the harsh and cruel realities of many people’s lives, but also, conversely, demonstrating the incredible resilience of humans and their ability to recover and progress when given the opportunity. Subsequently, I spent considerable time working in the field of adult literacy, and adult education in general, before taking up my role as Manager of the University Preparation Program and then the Pre-degree Programs at the University of Tasmania in 2009. In all these roles I have seen both triumph and despair, those who have risen above the odds, and those who have not.

My desire to work in these fields is driven strongly by my commitment to social justice, something I have had with me since a young child. I was always perplexed by the seemingly random dispersal of opportunity and chance, and have always wanted to make some contribution, however small, to addressing this.

While on the one hand I acknowledge my considerable privilege in being white, middle class and well educated, as a child carer of a parent with a significant disability and as a lesbian, I have also experienced what it is like to be ‘the other’ and to witness fear and discrimination. This reality adds to my desire to live in a socially just world.

The study described in this thesis originated with my own observations and an experience with one of my colleagues who worked with me in the UPP. At the time I was thinking about this study she worked in a room directly opposite mine (both glass
fronted rooms). She often described to me her impressions and interactions with students she taught in the Program (my role being managerial meant I did not typically interact with students on a day-to-day basis). She was very expressive and on more than one occasion I witnessed her leaping down the hallway, arms flung wide, greeting me with a story of triumph over what would seem to be unmanageable odds. These stories, along with the sadder tales of students whose circumstances got the better of them and who were forced to drop out, led me to ponder the element of risk these students took on when they began their university journey. I saw anecdotally that, for some students, the risks were extremely high, I felt incredible respect for those that survived and nodded my head knowingly for those that did not. I thus became interested in the extent to which these risks were known or considered by participants themselves, and how documenting this more systematically might influence enabling program design and delivery.

As manager of the University Preparation Program I was also concerned about whether we were offering a valuable experience to students. The idealist in me wanted to change the system to make it more equitable; however, in reality, we were altering students to fit the system, rather than changing the system in any substantial way. In fact, we were actively reinforcing the system. The pragmatist in me accepted there was not much chance of my changing the system, so with a slight sigh of acceptance, I set about making sure that we at least did the best job we could. Although I inherited a program already significantly developed, from that time I had a large influence in broadening its delivery, and in reviewing and renewing the curriculum, support and teaching strategies and associated systems and processes. Despite being made (very sadly) redundant from that role in 2015, I have a deep affection for UPP, its staff and its students. I acknowledge, therefore that my background, beliefs, position and attitudes towards the program will impact my interpretation of the data in this study.

**Insider/outside status**

In this research project I operated both as an insider and an outsider, and acknowledge the tensions both these positions create.
I acted as an insider in relation to the data collection from staff. Insider research is research undertaken within an organisation, culture or group to which one is a member (Greene, 2014). I was part of the UPP ‘team’ and although in a mainly managerial role, had significant involvement in the development and implementation of curriculum and teaching/support strategies. However, not being in a specific teaching or direct support staff role, I was most accurately described as a partial insider (Chavez, 2008).

As an insider it was easy for me to recruit staff participants, and to gain their acceptance and trust which allowed for in-depth and open discussions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In addition, we shared a common language and understanding, enabling discussions to occur with a sense of familiarity and comfort (Greene, 2014). These represented significant advantages of the insider status.

However, there were also disadvantages. As an insider there was a danger of inherent bias with my personal position influencing the research design, methodology and outcomes (Greene, 2014). Also as an insider there can be confusion about how the researcher is reacting to the participants and the data. That is, was I reacting as a researcher or as a member of that group, with the later clouding the interpretation of the data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009)? In this study, there was also the power differential, with participants potentially reacting to me in my role as their manager, rather than that of a researcher.

With the student interviews I acted as an outsider. Their experiences were not something I had personally been through, and I could only interpret not claim to understand their experiences first-hand. This can cause issues of trust, with participants not sure if the researcher can really ever understand the true nature of their experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, Fay (1996) argues that there are also advantages of the outsider status. These include that it can provide a level of objectivity; can help unpack the often complex and contradictory feelings of individuals; provide context from a wider perspective; and that being an outsider can help disentangle our own personal fears and emotions.
The importance of both these statuses is in recognising the position and applying a high degree of reflexivity and engagement with these statuses (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), as well as employing strategies, as discussed further in this chapter, which underpin the overall reliability of the data and outcomes (Angen, 2000).

**Methods of data collection and analysis**

*Pilot Study*

A small pilot study was undertaken in early 2014 as a means of testing various approaches related to recruitment, data collection and analysis that could be applied to the larger study. The pilot involved interviewing six participants in the University Preparation Program (UPP) in the early stages of their program, three students each from the Launceston and Hobart campuses. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted within six weeks of students starting the program to explore: the factors they had considered in coming to university; their experience so far; and whether or not they considered what they were doing was in any way risky. The methods and processes adopted for the larger study were informed by insights gained from this pilot (Jarvis, 2014). This included affirming the value of one-to-one interviews, but also highlighting the need to collect more detailed biographical information, and to tweak the semi-structured questions to ensure there was sufficient space for students to talk about what resources of their own they brought to the experience.

*The site*

Data for this study were collected from students enrolled in the on-campus mode of the University Preparation Program, studying at either the Hobart, Launceston or Burnie campus of the University of Tasmania (UTAS), and from staff also working on these three campuses. These campuses are the only three physical UTAS campuses in the state, and as UTAS is the only university in the state, the only university campuses altogether. The Hobart campus, situated in the state’s capital, was the largest overall in size, followed by Launceston and Burnie (also referred to as the ‘Cradle Coast’
As outlined in Chapter One, Tasmania is an island state, the smallest in Australia. Compared to other Australian states, Tasmania has a high percentage of its population categorised as LSES, low levels of education attainment and a high percentage of its population living in rural and regional areas (ABS, 2018).

**Ethical considerations**

An Initial Application for Approval to Undertake Research Involving Human Participants was made via the University of Wollongong’s Human Research Ethics committee in June 2014. In addition to ethics approval from the University of Wollongong, ethics approval from the University of Tasmania’s Human Research Ethics committee was also required as University of Tasmania students and staff were participants in this study. This was obtained by submitting the University of Wollongong’s approval along with an ‘Ethics by Prior Approval’ form to the UTAS committee. Ethics approval was granted in July 2014 (Appendix A). Recruitment activities only commenced after all relevant ethics approvals had been received. All students and staff interested in participating were provided with an Information Sheet (Appendix B) and written consent (Appendix C) was obtained from all participants before interviews were started. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could cease at any time without consequences.

Considerable care and consideration has been made to ensure the security of the participants’ data. All interviews, transcriptions and participant data have been and continue to be stored in a password protected, secure electronic environment, to which only I have access. All participants have been provided with pseudonyms, and any information which may point to the identity of any one particular individual was changed or excluded from the study. Paid transcribers were required to sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix D).

I considered this research to be low risk for participants. However, as both a researcher and, more particularly, as the Manager of Pre-degree Programs at the University of Tasmania where I had oversight of the University Preparation Program and responsibility for approval of student results and academic review and progress processes, I acknowledged that I operated from a position of power. I stressed to
participants that I was doing the research as a student of the University of Wollongong and not as part of my work, and that being involved in the study would not in any way (either positively or negatively) affect their results or any other aspect of their participation/work in UPP. I ensured that interviews were conducted in a neutral venue such as a library study room rather than in my office or associated rooms, to help ameliorate the perception of a power relationship.

Students who withdrew from their studies during the semester were important in the overall context of this study, but I was aware that the circumstances behind some students’ inability to complete the program were likely to be stressful. I respected the wishes of students who decided not to participate in a follow-up interview.

**Participants and recruitment strategies**

Both students and staff participated in this study. Staff were included after the presentation of my research proposal. In the proposal hearing, feedback was provided that the additional voice of staff would help flesh-out the experience of students, and also help add credibility to any findings.

Student participants were recruited via a short, in-person presentation in a UPP ‘Study Skills’ unit lecture within the first 2–3 weeks of semester. Such presentations were given in Launceston, Hobart and Burnie in semester one, and Launceston and Hobart in semester two. The presentation gave an overview of:

- who I am and why I was doing this study
- what the study was about
- who I was interested in talking to
- what students were required to do
- how their privacy would be protected
- what time commitment was required, and
- what the likely outcomes and benefits of the study were.
I was available afterwards to answer any questions. Students were invited to take an Information Sheet, and to express interest in participating by completing an ‘Expression of Interest’ slip which was placed in an envelope left in the room, or by emailing or calling me as per the contact details on the Information Sheet and Expression of Interest slip. This was followed up a week later by the lecturer in that unit reminding students about the project and making a further request for volunteers (Information Sheets and Expression of Interest sheets were again available). All students who volunteered to participate were interviewed. Beyond ensuring that there were students from each of the campuses, and that there were both male and female participants (which happened organically without intervention), no effort was made to recruit or select students with any other particular quality or identity.

A $20 Co-op book voucher was offered to student participants, both to encourage people who might not normally agree to be involved in such research and to acknowledge that many students are time and money poor and some compensation for participation in this research project was reasonable. Twenty-three students were recruited to participate in the study. Initial interviews took an average of 45–60 minutes. Follow-up interviews took an average of 30–45 minutes. Some follow-up interviews were conducted by phone as students were no longer on campus as the semester had finished. Data were collected over two separate semesters. This was done to spread the data collection work out to a manageable level given I was working fulltime.

Staff recruitment was via a generic email to all UPP staff and associated academic support staff. As with students, staff were given key information about the study, were provided with an Information Sheet and were given the opportunity to ask any follow-up questions. As I was the supervisor of most of the staff emailed, I made it clear that participation was completely voluntary and that there would be no consequence for any staff electing either to participate or not participate in the study. Six staff were recruited to participate, including staff from each campus.
Data collection strategy

I employed semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to collect data about the diverse and complex ways students and staff understood the concept of risk and how they interpreted their own and others’ experiences (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2006). The informal nature of the interaction allowed for divergences which emerged both from the discussion itself and from the participant in the form of follow-on questions from myself, and student-initiated questions (Babbie, 2011). The one-on-one interviews allowed for personal interactions between myself and the participants and the opportunity to explore and unpack the subjective meanings of participants’ thoughts and opinions (Creswell, 2012).

Interview questions were formulated from the research questions, from a survey of current literature, from insight gathered from the pilot study and from interviews as they were being conducted (See Appendix E for interview questions).

The first interview took place within the initial 3–5 weeks of students starting their program. My aim was to collect students’ preliminary thoughts and perceptions related to enrolling in an enabling program, and their experiences up to and starting their program. These interviews were also used to collect background information about their prior educational and life experiences and attitudes. I structured questions to capture the students’ initial impressions of the opportunities and challenges that coming to university represented for them without specifically mentioning the idea of risk. This was done so as not to impose any preconceived idea of what risk was or was not on students. However, at the end of the interviews I asked each participant a specific question about risk, that is, whether they thought what they were doing was risky. As shown by Henwood et al. (2008) such a question has the potential to add significantly to our understanding of how individuals frame notions of risk. Students were also asked to complete a form to collect basic background details (such as age, postcode, previous education, and education levels of immediate family) before starting the interview.

I conducted the second interviews with the students at the completion of their first semester of study. This timeframe of interviewing students twice over one semester
took into account the fact that there is no set duration for completing UPP and some students study for only one semester, while others study part-time over a number of semesters or come and go over time to accommodate personal circumstances. Designing a study to collect information over a timeframe longer than one semester would thus have been potentially problematic.

Only 19 of the original 23 participants could be contacted for second interviews, despite multiple attempts. In the second interview students were asked to recount their experiences during the semester and to reflect on their initial expectations and ideas as expressed in the first interview. Once again, at the end of the interviews, students were asked to reflect on the riskiness of their endeavour.

For those students who were not available for follow-up interviews their data was still analysed in the context of their initial experience (outlined in Chapter 5 – Findings 1); however, they were excluded from the discussion about their journey through the semester as no relevant data were available (Chapter 6 – Findings 2), except in relation to a general observation about completion/success.

Interviews were conducted at times suitable to participants, and in private, neutral spaces within the UTAS campus at which they were enrolled (typically a booked meeting or a student collaboration room of some kind). Upon gaining consent from the interviewees, I recorded the interviews with an audio recording device and subsequently transcribed (or had them transcribed) verbatim.

Staff participated in one in-depth semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted at a time and place suitable to participants. Again, mindful that I was the supervising manager of five of the six staff interviewed, I ensured that interviews were voluntary and held in a neutral venue. As with students, after gaining consent from the interviewees, interviews were recorded with an audio recording device and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Staff were also asked a number of semi-structured questions, which were aimed at further exploring the student experience, rather than evaluating the program (Appendix F).

*Data collection and analysis timeline*
Table 1: Research timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilot study</td>
<td>Feb 2014</td>
<td>May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics application</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment of participants</td>
<td>August 2014</td>
<td>March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester 2 2014</td>
<td>August 2014</td>
<td>August 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester 1 2015</td>
<td>March 2015</td>
<td>March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First student interviews transcription</td>
<td>August 2014</td>
<td>April 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff interviews</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>December 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff interviews transcription</td>
<td>October 2014</td>
<td>January 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second student interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester 2 2014</td>
<td>November 2014</td>
<td>December 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester 1 2015</td>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second interviews transcription</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>August 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial interview data analysis</td>
<td>August 2015</td>
<td>March 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVivo coding and ongoing analysis</td>
<td>September 2016*</td>
<td>January 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing of thesis</td>
<td>October 2017</td>
<td>November 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: I took a semester's leave of absence from my study January–June 2017

The participants: students

Twenty-three students participated in initial interviews, with 19 of the 23 participating in post or follow-up interviews. All participants were given a pseudonym. Of the 23 students, ten were from Hobart, nine from Launceston and four from Burnie. There were 14 females and seven males in the study. Twenty-one of the participants were mature-age entry, meaning it was at least two years since they had completed their high school studies. Two participants transitioned directly from year 12 to the program. Students ranged in age from 19 years of age to 63. All students were from...
an English-speaking background and born in Australia. No students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders\(^5\).

The following represents key information captured in relation to students:

**Table 2: Student participant details**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Campus*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Mature age entry?</th>
<th>Year of highest school(^6)</th>
<th>Meets UTAS's general entry criteria?</th>
<th>First in Family</th>
<th>LSES school(^8)</th>
<th>Participated in both interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dylan</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nicky</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bradley</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>N</td>
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\*H = Hobart, L = Launceston, B = Burnie

**Participants: Staff**

As noted, six staff were interviewed, two staff from the Hobart campus, two from the Launceston campus and two from the Burnie campus. All participants were given a pseudonym. Staff were either academic teaching staff or students support staff. The

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\(^5\) As previously noted, UTAS had a separate program for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders students.

\(^6\) High school being years 7 to 12.

\(^7\) Australian Tertiary Admission Rank of 60 or above OR a Certificate IV or above OR equivalent.

\(^8\) Information about parent’s level of education and which primary and high schools a participant attended was used to help establish SES. Schools were cross-referenced with ABS SES geographic data (ABS, 2013).
job/role of each staff member has been intentionally left out to maintain their anonymity.

The following represents key information in relation to staff:

Table 3: Staff details

<table>
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<th>No.</th>
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<th>Approximate length of time in this role</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Hobart</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Launceston</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Launceston</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>Burnie</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>Burnie</td>
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Data analysis

In total there were 48 interviews conducted to collect data for this study. As I was working full-time for most of this period (except for a short break between jobs), transcribing that amount of data was challenging. As such I employed two professional transcribers, one who was based in Australia and one who was based in the USA. The transcribers signed a confidentiality agreement before being employed. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently checked by me for accuracy by reading the transcript while listening to interviews. Corrections were made as required. Once checked and edited, interview transcripts were saved in the qualitative data analysis software, QSR Nvivo version 11, for subsequent coding.

The first phase of coding involved re-reading all the transcripts of the interviews and picking out themes and recurring patterns of data. I used an inductive coding methodology, derived from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), letting themes emerge from the data, rather than forcing data into any pre-determined parameters. Also, in line with grounded theory (Creswell, 2012) this process was done iteratively, with themes being added and/or subtracted, combined and/or separated as each interview was reviewed and a 'bigger picture' started to emerge. From this process ‘open coding’ occurred where data was organised into key categories (Creswell, 2012). This process of constant reflection and re-arranging of themes and
categories helped protect against making data ‘fit’ pre-existing ideas or categories which had been picked up from previous experience or research (Ezzy, 2002).

I represented emerging themes visually and adjusted them using a mind mapping app called SimpleMind (https://simplemind.eu) (see example Appendix G). I created separate maps for initial student interviews, end-of-semester student interviews, and staff interviews. These mind maps and the key themes which they represented then became the basis of the coding categories (nodes) which I set up in Nvivo. At this stage, I then re-read Interviews in Nvivo and assigned the nodes to key text in the transcriptions. During this process I made changes and additions to the nodes as concepts were refined and reduced until I felt that all key themes were identified. Some themes that emerged were unanticipated, and this led to exploring new areas of literature to gain a better understanding of these topics.

Subsequently, I employed a process of axial coding where the principle nodes were examined for a ‘core phenomenon’ (Creswell, 2012) and data re-examined to see how to best arrange it in terms of this core phenomenon. This ultimately became the structure of my two findings chapters, though this was not a singular process. In line with Chamaz’s work (2006) I continued to develop the core phenomenon through the drafting and editing process, and via ongoing reflection and examination of the data and its meaning. My work was also read in its various iterations by my two supervisors, Associate Professor O’Shea and Professor Wright. Collectively they helped me tease out themes and focuses by asking questions, challenging my interpretations and assumptions, and by providing an ‘outsiders’ view to help counteract my ‘insider’ position.

Research credibility

A range of strategies/perspectives were employed to enhance the quality and credibility of the research outcomes from this study based on Angen’s (2000) criteria for interpretive research. These strategies/perspectives were also important in mitigating biases which may have emerged as a result of my managerial position and insider status. Angen argues that the traditional rules of research validation based solely on the interrogation of methodology are not useful in assessing interpretive
research outcomes. Instead, she argues that the research needs to be judged from both ethical and substantive positions. The ethical position requires the researcher to undertake research that ‘allows us to remain connected to our shared humanity and to serve our diversity well’ (p. 388), and to do something that matters, that enhances our understanding of the topic and makes a difference to the world in which we live. Secondly, Angen argues that the researcher must acknowledge various perspectives, understandings and considerations, including engaging in ‘vigilant self-reflection’ and with previous research and opposing ideas, and that these should be well documented to allow others to interrogate them. As such the following strategies and perspectives were adopted in this research:

- Doing research that is meaningful to myself, and is relevant and beneficial to the enabling sector and the students and staff who inhabit that sector;
- Acknowledging that the study is just one version of reality;
- Describing my position as a researcher in this study;
- Conducting a thorough literature review;
- Describing the participants to allow the reader to better assess and judge the interpretations made by the author, and to assess the relevance to their own position;
- Gathering data from more than one data source, that is, from both students and staff;
- Having my work reviewed and critiqued repeatedly as I was writing; and
- Keeping research notes on thoughts and insights, and remaining open to new ideas, possibilities and interpretations as my thinking and understanding evolved.
4.3 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the process by which the data in the study were collected and analysed, and also the underpinning methodological decisions which led to the research design and implementation. It has outlined the reason behind the choices made in relation to this study, and also provided details of how these choices were actualised.

The results of the data collected through the methods outlined are presented in Chapters Five and Six. A chronological approach is adopted across these two chapters to reflect the sense of journey that the student participants went on during their first semester of study.
5.1 Introduction

The following two chapters examine the data collected in this study based on the following research questions:

The overarching question was: how does risk impact students entering higher education via an enabling program? This was unpacked further by the following questions:

a. How is risk experienced and perceived by students in a university enabling program?

b. How do students negotiate risks in their first semester of study?

c. What is the relationship between background, the learning experience and risk?

d. How can an understanding of risk contribute to policy and practice within the enabling and higher education sectors?

This examination is undertaken via two voices: the voice of the students, who through their biographies, decisions and reflections help present a version of their individual realities, and the voice of staff who offer a broader view, based on their experience of many different students across multiple semesters and campuses. Collectively these perspectives help describe the experience of students as they begin their university study via the University Preparation Program (UPP).

The two findings chapters are organised chronologically to reflect the sense of journey that students reported in this study, and to observe processes of change. This first findings chapter examines how students made sense of their university experience at the start of the semester; the following chapter looks at what they said at the end of
the semester. This is augmented by the reflections of staff on the experience of the UPP students more generally, to give further context and meaning.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the student participants, their previous educational experiences and their motivations for returning to study. This provides context to the experiences they describe during their first few weeks of the program. From here the issues and challenges students considered or actually faced are explored, with a sense of riskiness around the experience emerging strongly even in these early stages of study. Students faced multiple hurdles and potential dangers, with at times limited resources beyond their own personal determination to succeed. However, when asked directly about risk, a seemingly contradictory narrative begins to emerge. This narrative centres on opportunity outweighing the risk, and of UPP being a safe place in which risks can be explored and negotiated. The views of the staff participants aligned strongly with the experience of students, though with their longer-term lens they expressed both a greater sense of danger and a greater confidence in UPP as being a place where this danger could be negotiated with relative safety.

5.2 The student participants

As briefly outlined in Chapter Four, participants in this study can be categorised into a number of different groups. All but two participants were mature-aged students, that is, having a gap from the completion of high school (up to year 12) of two or more years; 14 students were first-in-family; 12 students came from LSES backgrounds; and 21 of the 23 participants failed to successful finish year 12 (that is, the final year of high school). In fact many left in year 10 (n=7), or year 11 (n=7). One participant completed qualifications subsequently which met UTAS’s general entry standards. In all, therefore, 20 of the 23 participants did not qualify for direct entry into an undergraduate degree, and thus needed to complete UPP before gaining admittance to the university.
Mature-aged status, and a lack of previous academic success, were the two most unifying characteristics of the participants. The majority of students in this study took non-normative pathways to higher education, a phenomenon becoming increasingly common in the 21st century (Abbott-Chapman, 2000). Being mature-aged and experiencing non-normative educational pathways were characteristics that were highly inter-related. The participants were returning to study later in life, that is, as mature-aged students, principally because they had not previously succeeded in or continued with their education. This lack of previous academic success is a defining and important characteristic of this group, and one that sets them apart from most other university students.

The students attributed their lack of previous academic success to a number of different factors, including not making the required effort at school, not being interested in or liking school, not succeeding at school, health issues and not being encouraged to continue.

Hugh (29), for example, suffered from what he called a ‘dog off a leash syndrome’ in year 11, meaning he ‘didn’t pay too much attention, or apply myself as much as possible’. Claire (50), who grew up on a dairy farm, found that school was never something that engaged her:

I grew up on a huge farm, we have to leave at about six o’clock to seven in the morning on the bus. We didn’t get home until five o’clock at night. I really didn’t go much on school back then.

For Kathleen (61) and Rachel (26), it was the lure of sport which kept them from succeeding academically:

My head was always on the [running] track because I used to have to train for hours a day, so I just wasn’t interested in sitting still. (Kathleen)

The level of support students received to continue with their education was variable. Some students such as Bradley (46), Rachel (26) or Kim (44) had parents who were
very keen for their children to succeed in and continue with their education, but others such as Adam (19) faced ambivalence:

None of my parents had been to university. They didn’t complete high school ... I think dad got to Grade 7, mum got to Grade 9. They never really encouraged me as such. ... If I turned around and said that I didn’t want to go to school, ... they wouldn’t have forced me to, basically.

A number of participants indicated that while they had actually enjoyed learning, experiences at school itself had been unpleasant and discouraged them from continuing. Sandra (56), for example, was teased and bullied because of her weight, and said ‘I didn’t really enjoy it, I couldn’t wait to get out of the gate on the last day of grade 10’.

At some point, however, all these students have put these experiences behind them, and made the decision to try again. Here motivations centred around getting a job or a better job with a higher income and greater opportunity, finding direction and purpose in life, taking up a missed opportunity and exploring their own personal potential. Jo (19), who before enrolling in UPP had been working in a café, indicated that she wanted to, ‘get a degree, so I can get a career. A good job.’ Paramount in Rachel’s (26) mind was the desire to move on from unfulfilling jobs, and to explore her full potential:

I did various sort of jobs, which weren’t very fulfilling. Always in the back of my mind, though, I knew I wanted to do more academically.

Some of the female participants expressed the desire to do something they have wanted to for some time, but because of various family and other commitments had not had the opportunity:

I’ve been through much crap, especially in the last five years, that I’m always doing stuff for other people and I’m never doing it for me. ... It’s something I’ve wanted to do all my life’ ... I saw this now as an opportunity. (Julia, 48)
Armed with significant motivation, these students then began the first part of this journey via the University Preparation Program (UPP).

5.3 Adapting to university life – the issues and challenges

In the initial student interviews, which were conducted between weeks three and five of the semester, typically week four, participants were asked about the issues and challenges they had anticipated and thought about when deciding to start the UPP program, and those they had actually encountered within the first weeks. All but three of the students in the study were coming to university after being away from formal study for more than four years (with 40 years the longest gap). The three students who were transitioning from recent study had either an unsuccessful or disrupted educational experience. Therefore, for all the participants in the study, there was a need to adjust their previous non-university lives to their new university lives and this presented a significant challenge.

Responses to the initial interview questions indicated that the students anticipated studying at university would impact their lives and the lives of those around them, and it was potentially a journey that would be both challenging and difficult. These challenges and issues were primarily associated with adapting their lives to a new environment. They included balancing work and family responsibilities, (re)negotiating their relationships, the need to adjust finances, a nervousness associated with perceptions of inadequacy in the face of academic expectations, and, for some, managing significant physical and/or health issues.

A salient feature all the student participants is that they faced not just one issue or challenge, but multiple issues and challenges. These circumstances added significant complexity to their experience.

Juggling home and family

Like the participants in other research concerning the experience of mature-aged learners transitioning to higher education (see, for example, Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008;
Stone, 2008; Stone & O’Shea, 2013; Laming et al., 2016, a significant challenge identified by the students was juggling the demands of university life with the demands of their home and family. Twelve of the 23 participants highlighted this as an issue, 11 of whom were women. Five of these women had younger children still living at home, including three who were single mothers. The one man who did mention this as an issue was single, while the only man who had children (he had four children, two from a previous partnership who did not live with him and two aged 7 and 9 who did) did not mention this as an issue. While this sample of one does not allow any conclusions, it does align with findings by Stone (2009) that men can be less impacted by family responsibilities than women because of greater levels of support from their partners, and more licence to dedicate uninterrupted time to their study.

Like participants in other studies exploring the experience of mothers returning to university study (Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998; Reay, Ball & David, 2002; Ayers & Guilfoyle, 2008; Stone & O’Shea, 2013), all the mothers in this study, whether partnered or single, spoke of a tension and guilt between their need to spend time with their children, and the need to spend time studying. For the three single mothers, this was particularly strong. Mother of one, Peta (23) felt guilty for ‘spending time away from my child.’ Olivia (36, three children) tried dividing her time for study and family, studying when she was on campus, and spending time with her children when at home. In the end she said she felt ‘limited’ on both accounts. Single parent Lisa (42) typified the particularly difficult position lone parents can find themselves in higher education (Hinton-Smith 2012, 2016). She not only had four children to look after on her own, but also one with serious health issues, making it all the more difficult, ‘My life was not very easy, so I’ve got to work around everyone else as well as to make time for my classes, and try to pass my assessments.’ For her, like the other mothers, it was about ‘juggling everyone’.

However, women with partners were not immune to the stresses, as shown by Eva’s (39) comment below, which highlights both the tension and the sense of guilt produced by the conflicting demands on her time as a student and as a mother:
... then my kids get home from school, I have that time between they get home from school and bed time. I’ve tried to study. I can’t study. They’re young. They want to play. Then it’s always, ‘Mum, you’re always sitting down. You’re always writing, or you’re always doing something. You’re on the computer.’

The implied expectation that Eva expressed is that her gendered roles as a mother, and as a woman, required her to put her own needs (to study) below her children’s needs. Eva made no mention of the role her partner played in these activities or if he had taken on additional roles to help accommodate her study, possibly signalling again the acceptance of these gendered expectations.

Nicky (24) and Claire (50) had other family members with significant health issues to care for. Nicky’s partner had serious epilepsy, and Claire’s father was suffering from dementia and she was one of his primary carers. Claire also worked shifts three days/ nights a week in order to manage financially, meaning the combined impact was significant, and in her words, like Lisa, she was, ‘just juggling everything’. This constant negotiation in turn produced a sense of overwhelming tiredness for some of the participants. As Debra (58) summed up, ‘I’m worn out already. It’s only been a month.’

These stresses were so significant that already, in this early stage of the semester, some students (Debra, Lisa, Claire, Lilly) had begun to question whether they had made the right decision, and even whether or not they should continue.

**Negotiating relationships**

Juggling responsibilities was not just about negotiating parenting or care roles. Ten participants had partners, and while most of these talked about their relationships in positive terms, three of the participants described serious tensions that had arisen as a result of their starting UPP. For Dylan (24), this tension was around finances and his inability to provide in the way he had done previously, a phenomenon identified as particularly relevant to men by both Stone (2009) and Laming et al. (2016). Before starting UPP, Dylan had been working full-time and although he continued to work, his income was now reduced, and he felt ‘guilty’ about pursuing his own goals while not
being able to contribute equally financially as he had previously. The ongoing prospect of a HECS\(^9\) debt was also contentious, and he indicated that this issue had already caused arguments between himself and his partner.

Dylan’s concern about not being able to contribute in his relationship as he had previously was echoed by Kim (44, mother of two), though for her it was more about how she contributed as a mother and as a wife, rather than in terms of finances. In particular, she felt that her husband was struggling to adjust to her not being the stay-at-home wife she had been for the past few years since she had given up work:

My husband is quite ... what’s the word? Is it old fashioned? Old school I suppose. He’s used to his family where the wife stays home. The husband goes to work. He realises that’s not me, but I can see that that’s still in his background.

She admitted that he had only made a couple of direct comments about her study, but she worried that even though he was not saying much he was dissatisfied and thinking about it constantly. It was something that was clearly of concern.

Cullen (1994) in her study of women in a UK access course found that active resistance from husbands was a key reason for withdrawal from the program. Kathleen’s (61) husband struggled to accept his wife’s life as a student in a more overt way: ‘he can’t really understand why at my age I want to do this’. He actively tried to prevent her from studying by controlling money; in particular, restricting money for travel to university, meaning she had to walk eight kilometres each way to get to and home from the campus, and not allowing her funds to buy books and supplies. He also would not allow her to study at home or use their home internet for study purposes. In her words, he was ‘suspicious of everything I do ... it’s a major issue and it’s continuous’. Like the women in O’Shea and Stone’s (2011) study, Katherine ‘worked around’ her husband’s objections in order to continue her study. The age of the study by Cullen (1994) and the fact that this issue continues to emerge in more recent studies, and in

\(^9\) HECS is the former but now generic term used for the Commonwealth Government’s higher education student loan scheme, now officially called Higher Education Loan Program (HELP).
this one, suggests there has not been universal progress in the gendered expectations for women.

Debra (58) similarly struggled with her role as both mother and home-maker and her role as a student, but it was not her husband, or her children (all grown and independent), who created this pressure; it was Debra herself. While her husband urged her to immerse herself in her studies, and not worry too much about him or the rest of the family, Debra, a stay-at-home mother for nearly 40 years, wanted to do all the things she normally did as well as study, but found that it was very difficult to accommodate everything:

I had my day all planned. Getting the house tidy, do some study, and then come to uni. Of course, we’ve got a dog now, a gift from my son, lovely. I had to wash down the dirty sliding doors, and there was a lot of work to do this morning. By the time I finished, I was exhausted. I sat down to do my assignment, and I couldn’t do it. I was just brain dead.

Debra’s description of her day illustrates how she was struggling to align her stay-at-home self with her student-self. In these initial stages at least, Debra’s old self was dominant; she undertook all her household tasks first, then sat down to study, only to find that she had no energy. Her description indicates an awareness of the different selves she was trying to manage, but also that, at this stage, they remained in conflict.

For other students, there was more progress in the process of negotiating different lives and selves, and a redefinition of self began to emerge. Nicky (24), for example, in the following quote articulates a process of breaking away from old ties and friendships as she talks about her existing (i.e. pre-university) friends:

... they are all bogans\(^{10}\), they don’t want to do anything. ... I don’t talk to them much anymore about anything really because they don’t like the fact that I am going to university.

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\(^{10}\) Australian slang for an uncouth or unsophisticated person, regarded as being of low social status.
Her use of the derogatory slang term ‘bogans’ suggests a level of disdain on her part for the position of her friends, and a sense that she herself was moving on from that place, while her friends remained stagnant and uninterested in change. Clearly this was causing discomfort for both groups, with Nicky actively beginning to avoid her previous friends.

Financial pressure

In addition to managing the tensions of family responsibilities and the creation of new and emerging identities, the participants expressed considerable stress around the financial implications of returning to study, a phenomenon highlighted in the literature as particularly pertinent for many mature-aged and LSES students (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Tones et al., 2009; Stone & O’Shea, 2013). Nine students indicated that they had made some sort of significant financial adjustment in order to come to university or that they were concerned about how they would cope financially through the semester and beyond.

Some students gave up or reduced their work hours and as a result needed to adjust to their lower incomes and make lifestyle changes as already seen by Dylan (24). For Hugh (29) who initially gave up work altogether, it was ‘a bit of a shock’ as he went from ‘a very high paying wage to no wage at all and just living off the government allowance’. Julia (48, single parent) also spoke about the ‘shock’ of having to adjust financially, to no longer working as she had previously. For her, the stress was considerable and was not only about adjusting income to primary needs, but also the guilt in relation to providing for her ten-year-old son: ‘you’ve got to eat. It’s not right that Kevin [son] should not be able to play soccer, or swim, or do the things he wants to do.’

Four of the students managed their new financial situation by changing their housing arrangements. Two of these students embarked on non-normative transitions (Furstenberg, 2005), giving up the independence of adulthood and returning to their parents’ home for additional support. Olivia (36), single parent of three children, found
she had little choice but to move back in with her parents, which was not without its challenges:

I had to work out financially for childcare, which I couldn’t do at the beginning, so I moved back in with my parents ... I have to travel though. The cost of travelling, travelling with kids, childcare with that ... how is that going to work?

Jack (29, single) made a similar move. Having been away from his parents’ home for many years, earning his own income and being independent, he was concerned about how to balance the need for his ‘own space’ and maintaining his identity as ‘an adult’, with the fact that ‘I also needed mum and dad to get me through at least this first year.’ At the time of the first interview, he and his father were renovating the garage below the house to create a separate space for him to live.

However, not everyone had these options. Lisa (42), single parent of four, was in a particularly stressful situation at the start of the semester as she was in emergency housing, though this had been resolved by the time of the first interview.

**Being a cultural outsider**

In addition to managing changing relationships, roles and financial and housing stress, students in this study expressed considerable nervousness and uncertainty about entering a world where everything was new and expectations unclear (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008). They questioned whether their skills, former lives and experiences would be sufficient. As Olivia (36) pointed out, she went in ‘not knowing what to expect’. Dylan (24) thought he ‘might be behind the curve ... with basic things like math and the quality of my education’. Jo (19) expressed concern that she didn’t know ‘the basics and stuff’ and that she didn’t have ‘that basic knowledge that most students do have.’

A lack of familiarity with the way in which time and life needed to be managed in order to meet the demands of university study was identified by a number of students as a serious challenge. Again, students needed to adopt ways of behaving that their
backgrounds had not necessarily prepared them for. For Lisa (42), these were skills that she was just not used to applying:

... it’s been so long since I’ve actually studied. ... Now I find it hard because I’m just sitting there writing, or listening, or reading. It’s not something I’m used to.

These anxieties can in part be understood as a perception they did not have the cultural or academic capital required to succeed. As previously noted in Chapter Three, Bourdieu (1977), in his theorisation of cultural capital, used higher education as a critical example. He saw higher education as driven by a dominant, mostly ‘upper class’ culture which allowed privileged access to some, and significantly disadvantaged others. Thomas and Quinn (2006) described how cultural capital, built up through family and previous education and study, could equip students with a knowledge of higher education ‘norms and practices’ and an ‘insider’s knowledge’ of how the system works (p. 68). This includes a knowledge of the right tools and skills that they needed to succeed, as well as an understanding of what is required and how the experience can be managed. Concepts of independent learning, managing time, proactively asking for help are all examples of norms and practices that can underpin higher education success.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue that for Bourdieu ‘ability’ and ‘technical skills’ were intrinsically entwined with the concept of cultural capital, and that mastery of skills both reflects and solidifies one’s status in the hierarchy. In the higher education context, this would include the mastery of a range of academic literacies, including reading, writing, numeracy, research, IT and study skills, all fundamental tools which enable students to successfully engage in the ‘work’ of academia, that is, academic capital.

When asked what resources students thought they brought to the start of their university journeys, they were able to articulate a range of personal strengths such as determination, self-discipline and life experience which might help them succeed, but they also expressed anxiety about not having the requisite skills, or not fitting in to the university environment. This put students at risk of becoming what Lehmann (2009, p. 632) calls ‘cultural outsiders’. That is, students who experience difficulty in
understanding and interacting with their peers and adjusting to university expectations and life, as well as difficulty in being unable to manage the academic rigors of university life.

In all, 17 of the 23 students in this study expressed uncertainty about their level of preparedness for university and their ability to fit in. While other studies have pointed to how these feelings are broadly experienced by students during their initial encounter with higher education (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Kasworm, 2010; Reeve et al., 2013) the issues and challenges created by this lack of confidence have the potential to take on particular significance for this group (Cullity, 2006; Willans, 2010; Atherton, 2015). Unlike those students who have gained entrance to university by meeting a prescribed entrance requirement or score, students in this study had no such benchmark with which to measure their ability to succeed or to fit in. Only one of the participants (Debra) had successfully matriculated during her high school years and that was over 40 years earlier. Not only were they unsure of how they would measure up, but arguably were also entering university with a very different sense of identity to students who might qualify through traditional means (that is, by meeting defined undergraduate entrance standards). Their identity as a student was generally that of an unsuccessful student, a failed student or an old, out-of-touch student, not as someone who belonged and would be accepted as a result of their educational progress to date. For all the students in this study, regardless of other background characteristics such as mature aged, LSES or first-in-family, attempting UPP represented entering a place of considerable uncertainty and was likely to represent a risk to their self-confidence, their emerging and fragile identity as a student, and more generally to their overall sense of self.

The fear associated with this uncertainty was captured by Nicky (24) when she said, ‘I was, excuse the language, I was shit scared. I thought oh, no, what am I doing? ... You idiot, you can’t do this.’ Noah (36) also reported feeling ‘terrified’ on his first day, while Olivia (36) sat nervously in her car for a long time on her first day, before being able to get the courage to get out and walk into the campus.
Managing health issues

Managing physical or mental health issues constituted a major challenge for several students in this study. While health was identified as the reason seven out of 14 students withdrew from an access course in the UK (Cullen, 1994), and the prevalence of mental health issues amongst university students in general has been identified (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein & Hefner, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Morris, 2010), the prevalence in enabling programs is only just being explored. Crawford and Johns (2018) in their study of staff responses to the high level of mental health issues among students in the UPP program at UTAS (i.e. the same site as this study) found that staff dealt with mental health issues on a very frequent basis. Nine out of 23 participants in this study indicated that they had come into the program with serious physical or mental health conditions and a further two experienced unexpected illnesses during the semester. This was an issue that occurred across the participants, regardless of background. Willans and Seary (2018) similarly found mental health issues were a factor in attrition from the STEPS enabling program in Queensland.

Health issues presented day-to-day obstacles, such as impeded mobility impacting on a student’s ability to navigate the physical environment. It also presented more overarching challenges, such as fatigue and cognitive impairment. Lilly (19), for example, experienced major challenges as a result of an ongoing chronic illness:

I’m finding it very hard for me at the moment to cope with study ... It’s the physical attendance and the writing and things that is difficult for me. (Lilly, 19)

Nicky (24) found that her chronic illness impacted on her ability to study as concentrating for long period was difficult, and at times she felt like she would fall asleep in class. For Allie (19), pain and fatigue meant she was often not able to get from one part of the university to another in time for lectures (it appeared at this stage, at least, Allie had not explored options for getting assistance with these issues).

Four students in the study, Julia (48), Rachel (26), Noah (36) and Hugh (29), were actively dealing with mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, which again impacted on their ability to manage their study. Julia, for example, felt that
because of her depression, there were ‘days where things will come in, but they fall straight out.’

Managing illnesses had other consequences as well. Julia’s decision to give up work was based on her assessment that she could not manage both work and study. However, this decision, as previously noted, added additional financial pressure, highlighting the complex way personal circumstances impacted students as they embarked on their university journey.

**Personal doubts and insecurities**

The final major issue/challenge that the participant interviews revealed was a range of personal insecurities and anxieties associated with trying something new and unknown. Sandra (56), Bradley (48), Eva (39) and Max (32) were all concerned about their age and fitting in. As Max described, he could ‘put on a brave face’, but in reality he was ‘very nervous’ about starting something new and being the ‘old guy’.

Hugh (29) stated that his poor self-confidence represented a ‘big challenge’ on the path to success, while Rachel (29) was concerned her tendency to be negative, and for ‘everything to make me feel that it’s glass half empty’ could be a serious impediment. For a number of students, past academic history seriously impacted their current insecurities:

> A feeling, I supposed of inadequacy as well. ... That’s probably the biggest thing. Just maybe the idea that I wasn’t educated enough to do it. (Dylan, 24)

Lilly (19), who had missed a lot of school due to illness, was not so much concerned about the academic aspect of the program, but about having to interact socially with others:

> .... my personal confidence was an issue. I was very enthusiastic and excited about starting, but I was also quite nervous because I’d become quite socially stunted being isolated due to being housebound.
Given the students were already at risk of being cultural outsiders in the university space because of gaps in higher education cultural and academic capital, such insecurities and self-doubt had the potential to be magnified and to seriously impact the experience of these learners. These insecurities and self-doubts had, in fact, the potential to cause harm or uncertainty, and as such were potentially risky (as defined by Lupton, 1999). Brine and Waller (2004) found that a fear of failure was the ‘most immediate and acknowledged risk’ (p. 12) identified by students in their study.

5.4 Emerging notions of risk

At this early stage of their journey none of the participants spoke of actual harm, though they did acknowledge the possibility of it. By outlining the issues and challenges they had considered and experienced in starting their course, participants clearly understood that they were at risk of the negative consequences. These included financial loss or strain; relationships, confidence, identity and health being compromised, changed or negatively impacted; and the prospect of not coping, failing or dropping out, reinforcing a lack of confidence and potential future alienation from education.

The potential for harm for students entering the higher education sector is reflected in the literature, which shows that students with complex personal circumstances and with previously low educational attainment are at a much higher risk of attrition than students without these risk factors. McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) found that a lack of previous academic performance, poor self-confidence and belief, and financial issues could significantly impact performance at university. Rienks and Taylor’s (2009) study of administrative risk markers in undergraduate students at the University of Tasmania showed that students with ‘educational disadvantage’ (which included no year 11 or 12 or prior tertiary study, or students given an alternative offer) had an attrition rate of between 48% and 53%, compared to around 24.7% for students with no risk markers.
The complex personal circumstances of students typically enrolling in enabling programs were found to be a significant contribution to attrition in enabling programs (Hodges et al. 2013). This finding was replicated more broadly to the higher education sector, with a 2017 higher education standards panel investigating retention in higher education institutions (Australian Government, 2017a). The panel found that attrition was often caused by ‘personal, including physical or mental health issues, financial pressures and other reasons often beyond institutional control’ (p. 6).

Thus, any one of the issues facing students in this study put them at risk. However, their stories demonstrate that most of the participants were negotiating not just one but multiple challenges or issues. Lisa (42), for example, was in emergency housing at the start of the semester, after what appeared to be personal issues. Lisa was from a LSES background and left school in year 10, subsequently completing only a Certificate 1 TAFE course. In addition, Lisa was first-in-family to attend university and was a single parent with four children, one of whom had serious health issues and was often unable to attend school. She also managed a serious health condition. Despite being highly motivated to change her life circumstances both for herself and children, Lisa was, not surprisingly, at the time of the first interview feeling extremely overwhelmed by the university environment. Lisa described herself as feeling unprepared and out of place and was fearful and uncertain about surviving the semester.

Claire (50) had left school at year 9 and was also first-in-family to attend university. Claire worked shift work three days/nights a week in an aged care facility, as well as looking after her father with dementia. As with Lisa, Claire’s lack of higher education cultural and academic capital affected her confidence, her need to work and manage other responsibilities impacted on her time and energy, and her financial situation was an ongoing source of stress.

Rienks and Taylor (2009) found that not only did students with a poor academic past typically have more risk factors, but that the greater the number of risk factors a

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11 Australia’s vocational training framework, as described in the Australian Qualification Framework, starts at Certificate 1 level. A Certificate 1 provides entry level skills and knowledge for work or community participation, and for ongoing training and education (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2018).
student had, the greater the rate of attrition. Edwards and McMillan (2015) similarly noted that learners who belonged to more than one disadvantaged group also had a higher risk of leaving their studies before completing. Risk is thus compounded when students face multiple issues. Not surprisingly, therefore, words and phrases indicating uncertainty or signalling an anticipation of potential harm were used frequently by students in these initial interviews. For example, being ‘shit scared’ or ‘terrified’. ‘Shock’ too, with its suggestion of great surprise and potential harm, was mentioned by four students, including Claire, who spoke of it on more than one occasion:

> It was a really big shock to my system. I really didn’t realize ... I didn’t have any idea as to how much time the University took up study-wise. I didn’t realise any of this.

The term ‘juggling’ was also used repeatedly, with its sense of pressure to keep everything in play, and the possibility of things being dropped or crashing. Hugh (29) mused that it could all ‘end in disaster’.

However, despite the clear existence of risk and the fact that students clearly articulated a sense of uncertainty and the possibility for harm, an interesting paradox emerged when students were asked directly if they thought what they were doing was ‘risky’. Faced with a direct question about risk, only four students described taking on study in UPP as a risk. For Nicky (24) and Lilly (19) it was the risk of exacerbating existing health issues. For Lisa (42) it was the question of whether she was just adding to her already considerable burden. She considered what she was doing a risk, ‘because ... I’m not sure whether I’m just adding onto what I’ve already got to deal with’. Noah (36), who struggled with mental health issues, felt he could be putting himself at risk emotionally:

> Just because the way my psyche seems to work when things don’t work for me. I’m very critical of myself, so that’s a bit of a concern.

Five other students also acknowledged the risk in what they were doing, but more in general terms, that is, in terms of the bigger decision of going to university and completing a degree, rather than enrolling in UPP per se. For example, Max, in his
early 30s, noted that returning to study represented a detour from both what he had expected he would be doing at this age, and what he saw as a more typical life trajectory of work, housing and family. He reflected that this detour represented a risk by putting a pause to that trajectory – ‘it will silence it now’ – and also thought there was considerable risk in being out of the workforce for an extended period.

Overall, despite evidence of risk and negative outcomes, only a small number of students thought that the challenges they faced represented actual risk. Of these only Lilly and Max were adamant about the fact that they were taking a risk, both replying to the question about risk with the word ‘absolutely!’ (Lilly in reference to UPP, Max in reference to university more generally). For the others, the language was more hesitant; for example, Noah’s response, started with ‘Maybe a little bit …’ and finished with, ‘It’s a bit of a concern’, while Nicky’s, ‘Just a …’ also downplayed the impact.

Unlike some of the previous discussions where words of fear and danger could be found, very little sense of danger emerged from students’ general assessment of risk when asked directly. There may be several explanations for this. One is that, as they were just at the start of their journey, they were perhaps reluctant to think about their decision in terms of risk. Similarly, having invested heavily in this significant change in their lives, there was potential for optimism bias, a tendency to underestimate the possibility of bad things happening (Sharot, 2011). Or, it may be a reflection of the more dominant discourse on education in Australia, that of opportunity. Or it may have been a combination of all of the above.

**A counter-discourse to risk: Opportunity**

By far the greater response by students to the question of risk was one of denial, or a weighing up of risk against opportunity. Debra (58), for example, rejected the notion of risk outright. ‘No. I’m not taking a risk. I don’t see it as a risk. I just see it as an opportunity, having a go at something. It’s not a risk, definitely not a risk.’

Others acknowledged the risk, but discounted it, despite what might seem to an outsider to be quite detrimental outcomes. Hugh (29), in his response to the question
of riskiness, for example, talked of the potential for quite serious harm, but then
dismissed it:

I wouldn’t say it’s a risk because even if I dismally fail at this, then I just have to
brush off the dirt and pick something else, start again, or try again. Potentially I
could be setting myself up for a bit of a downfall psychologically if I do really
make a mess of things. Then I’ll need to find another way to re-establish self-
confidence and that sort of thing, but really ... no, I don’t think it’s anything
major.

Similarly, Kathleen (61), who, on the one hand, indicated that her study had the
potential to seriously impact her relationship with her husband, in the very next
sentence declared, ‘The only risk I can see is perhaps my relationship with my
husband. That is the only risk I can see. I think this is a win-win situation for me. No
education is ever wasted.’

Other students flipped the question and spoke instead about the risk of not
doing UPP. Julia (48) saw herself as trapped and looked towards UPP and higher education as a
way of negotiating a meaningful life ahead:

Once upon a time I definitely would have said yes, but no I don’t see it as taking
a risk. I’d already decided that there was more to life than what I was doing. I
needed a change.

This is echoed by Rachel (26), who saw risk primarily in doing nothing:

Not probably for me, because having recently hit rock bottom, I sort of I ...
don’t know ... the greater risk is doing nothing, because then I’m at risk of being
at that low point indefinitely and ... I’m not really seeing it as a risk, I’m seeing it
as one huge positive step forward.

As postulated by Douglas (1992), decision making was not purely a rational process; it
was inherently connected to the broader influences around them. Similarly, Henwood
et al.’s (2008) study of the perception of risk in relation to intimate relationships found
there was an overall rejection of a purely rational approach to thinking about risk. This
seems to be the case here also. Most of the participants in this study rejected the notion of risk, and instead chose to frame their thinking in a more opportunistic light.

5.5 UPP – a ‘risk negotiation’ space

The way students have thought about risk can be further understood by looking at the reasons students articulated for enrolling in UPP. As previously outlined, from the University’s perspective one of the primary functions of UPP is to help students, who do not currently qualify for admission into an undergraduate degree, to gain entry. However, only one of the participants gave this as their primary reason for enrolling in UPP. Rather, the participants indicated that they were using UPP proactively to negotiate the many challenges and issues, both personal and academic, that they had thought about when deciding to enter the higher education system. This makes it clear that the students understood there was risk (because they were actively trying to manage it), even though they were generally reluctant to name it as such.

Only three of the 23 participants of this study met the entrance criteria for general entry and could have gained admission to a general degree had they applied. The remaining 20 participants did not meet general entry requirements. Of these 20 students only one (Emma) identified gaining admission as the primary reason for undertaking UPP. The remaining 19 students, and the three students who had already qualified for admission, all articulated a range of other reasons for enrolling. Twelve students indicated that they were using UPP to prepare academically for degree-level study. Eva (39) indicated she was, in fact ‘very scared about’ having to write an essay, and this, plus a desire to learn ‘what’s expected at university’, were the main reasons why she enrolled. Claire (50) anticipated that without these types of academic skills she could encounter difficulties:

I don’t want to fail. That’s the reason why I’ve enrolled … to get those skills behind me and to make it a little bit easier when it comes to the essay writing.
Claire was thus using UPP as a way of acquiring the skills she felt would protect her from failing in degree-level study, in other words, to manage a future risk she had identified.

There was also an understanding from students that they might need a broader skill-set than any they already possessed, which, as argued previously, can be grouped under the notion of higher education cultural and academic capital. These capitals can include both academic literacies, as well as attitudes, habits, behaviours and expectations. Olivia (36) summarised this idea of needing a broad skillset to undertake university when she said that she had enrolled in UPP to ‘learn how to succeed’.

Beyond these overt roles of UPP, the participants described using the program to assess their own capacity, both intellectually and more generally, to manage university study and life and to negotiate their futures. As discussed previously, most of the students entering UPP had not been through any process by which they could measure their likelihood of success at this level, thus making this ‘capacity testing’ role of UPP all the more important. For first-in-family students such as Sandra (56), who left school in year 10, UPP allowed her to assess ‘if I can handle it, handle the assignments … understand the assignments in the first place.’

Even for non-first-in-family students, the chance to use UPP as a testing ground was important. Hugh (29), who was contemplating his future, thought assessing his capacity in UPP would provide him with a better understanding of his options:

   I just really thought I was wasting my life and my potential as a mind, I suppose. I went into a very dark place as a result of being so stuck. Out of nowhere just a spark of light, this inspiration came and suggested that maybe I apply myself … show myself what I can do by coming here.

Other students were assessing more than their academic ability or capacity; they wanted to test how they could manage specific challenges, particularly health issues. Lilly (19), for example, came to UPP after suffering a significant illness during her high school years, becoming socially isolated as a result. She had already met entrance criteria as a result of a Diploma-level course she had done online, so, for her, UPP
represented the opportunity to see if her health would be robust enough for her to attempt a degree, and whether she was able to reconnect socially as well:

... but I actually wanted to do the Preparation Program, not because it’s necessary in an academic standpoint, but because it’s necessary for me socially and physically to get back out there ... this has been an opportunity for me to slowly and gradually expand what I’m doing with myself and test my abilities and see if I can do part-time study.

For Julie (48), UPP represented the opportunity to see if she could manage her mental illness sufficiently to undertake study. In particular, she wanted to be sure she would be able to transition to a degree without negatively impacting her two children:

I’m coming to it though because ... I want to see how I go with my depression, how well I can cope, start learning about what’s expected of me, and start getting myself in that mindset. If I think I’m comfortable at the end of the UPP, and I can cope without it inflicting on the two people that live with me ... then I’ll give it a go.

Single parents Lisa (42) and Olivia (36) both saw UPP as a supported space to assess their ability to manage their many responsibilities; as Lisa put it, ‘to see if it all fits.’

Another important element of the capacity-testing role of UPP was in helping students come to terms with issues of self-confidence and doubt. As explained by Rachel (26), doing UPP provided her with the chance to see how she measured up to other students, to ensure that ‘I'm not insane, I'm not the only one, I'm not the oldest.’ She saw this as part of the process of getting some ‘control of the demons of self-doubt’ and also ‘learning that it is possible to belong and to fit in.’

In addition to being a place to prepare academically, and to test one’s ability on a range of fronts including health, responsibilities and self-doubt, UPP was also utilised by students in this study to explore options and possibilities, both for future university study and for their future per se. Several of the participants came into UPP uncertain, not only of what they might study at degree level, but whether they would study at all.
For these participants, UPP represented a place where they could explore university without making too great a commitment, either financially (by not accumulating HECS debts) or personally. For example, Sandra (56), as well as using UPP to test her abilities, was using the space to explore her options and see if university really was something she would pursue:

.... and see what ... yeah, see how I progress through the semester, and investigate what programs are available in the way I want to go.

The negotiation of a difficult transition, initially from employment to unemployment, and now unemployment to employment, was what drove Bradley (48) to consider UPP. He saw a degree as something permanent, for which one needed a clear long-term plan and path, but at this stage he was unsure about his options and purpose. He saw UPP as a starting point: ‘I’ll go to uni. I’ll do UPP’. UPP represented a place where he could take time to see if there was something that interested him at university and that had the potential to help him get employment, thus being worth his while.

For others, the transition was of a more personal nature. Allie (19), one of the youngest participants, was struggling to come to terms with a problem faced by many young people, that is, ‘what I could actually do with my life’. On the other end of the spectrum, Debra (58) was focusing on how to make meaning of her life post-motherhood, and wondering whether the time and effort involved in getting a degree would be ultimately worth it:

I’ve got this mortality clock ticking, thinking [about] trying to find employment when I’m 62. I mean, to me ... I now have to weigh up whether it’s worth putting in four years’ worth of work for what the outcome will be. That’s my dilemma. UPP is going to help me solve that dilemma one way or the other.

For the participants in the study, at this point in their higher education journey, UPP becomes a safe space where they felt they could negotiate the inherent risks of undertaking university-level study. The ability of participants to articulate both the issues and challenges they faced, and the way UPP could be used to manage these,
demonstrates their considerable insight into the potential pitfalls of university, and how proactive they were in addressing them.

5.6 Capacity and enablers

The significant issues and challenges faced by students, and the risks inherent in these, could lead to an assumption that students had little ability or capacity to exercise agency, that is, the ability to act independently and make decisions (Bandura, 2008) in this initial stage of their higher education journey. However, the intentional and proactive use of UPP as a risk negotiation space by the participants as shown suggests otherwise. The students were also able to articulate a range of other personal resources which they brought with them and which they thought would help them succeed. In this way, UPP became a place where self-doubt and personal agency, concepts that are more commonly seen as contradictory (Duggins, 2011), co-existed.

Students were unsure if or how they would manage higher education, but in the ‘try-it-out’ space provided by UPP, they described how they could use their own resources to make an attempt. These resources were their own personal characteristics, their past experiences and their personal supports.

Of the 23 participants in this study, 20 identified their own determination, persistence and/or desire to succeed as a resource they would rely on to succeed. Jo (19), for example, explained how she had been helped in the past by her persistence: ‘I’ve never missed a day of work. I’ve never called in sick. I do tend to not slack. If I know I’m supposed to be somewhere I’ll be there’. Bradley (48) described himself as ‘determined’, someone who could carry on despite setbacks: ‘I just get up and I fall down. I get up and I fall down.’

Life experiences were also identified as a key resource for succeeding in UPP. For those who had been in the workforce before, the structure and work habits of that environment were resources they felt would be useful as they transition to higher education. Jack (29), for example, described himself as a successful businessperson and a hard worker: ‘I know I’m not lazy. I’ve some decent life experiences ... it’s
[confidence from previous life experiences] a bit of self-empowerment’. The experience of raising a family, or travelling, were also seen as providing organisational and coping mechanisms. As Olivia describes, ‘At home with the kids, everything’s just ... it’s military, literally military camp at the moment’. For others, managing and coping with negative childhood experiences had required the capacity to adapt to difficult situations. Noah (36) felt that dealing with domestic violence and the divorce of his parents had given him the ‘ability to adapt very well’ to change and new things.

By relying on these personal attributes, students, who perhaps lacked elements of cultural or academic capital, instead were using a different kind of capital to negotiate a path towards higher education. This capital has been described by Côté (2005, p. 225) as identity capital, ‘attributes associated with sets of psychosocial skills, largely cognitive in nature, that appear to be necessary for people to intelligently strategize and make decisions affecting their life courses (i.e., to individualize), especially in the absence of cultural guidance and societal norms’.

In addition, they also made use of existing social capital, that is, relationships of trust and shared values between people or groups to enable them to work together (Bourdieu, 1986). While personal relationships were identified as a substantial challenge for some students (n=11) in this study, more of the students (n=12) indicated significant support from those around them and acknowledged that this was and would be important in helping them to negotiate this new period in their lives. For example, motivational pep talks from friends and family, even in these very early weeks, played a crucial role at moments of significant stress for some students, urging them to ‘keep doing it’ or ‘take one more step’. Debra’s husband for instance was a constant source of encouragement:

> My husband, every time I say, oh, I can’t do this. I’m going to drop out. Like today ... I just said, ‘I think this is all just too much.’ He just got really mad and said, ‘No. You’ve got to keep doing it.’

Lisa (42), the single parent of four who seemed to have so many challenges to manage, had an extremely supportive 18-year-old daughter, who, like Debra’s husband above,
played a significant role in ensuring her mother persisted through these initial difficult times.

The support of friends was also important, as described by Rachel (26):

Yeah, most of my friends ... they've probably been my most ... my biggest support ... telling me that I could do it and that they felt by what they've experienced too that I would be able to cope with it.

While this kind of support was extremely important, in real terms only five students had relatives or friends who had previously been to university, meaning that at this stage moral support was the major contribution, not expertise on how to negotiate the university environment.

At this early stage of their university journey students largely individualised the responsibility for succeeding, relying on existing identity and social capital/support. In this way they displayed considerable personal agency. This aligns strongly with Beck’s (1992) notion of reflexivity where individuals are increasingly required to be more active players in, and to take more responsibility for, the success of their own lives. This mirrors a finding by Chipperfield (2013) in a UK foundation course where students similarly individualised responsibility for success. UPP was seen as a safe space and a tool that they could use to help manage risk, but they still ultimately felt responsible for their own success.

5.7 Adapting to university life – staff perspectives

The UPP staff, like the students, were initially asked to reflect on the kind of issues and challenges they had observed students facing as they entered the program.12 In doing so they identified most of the issues/challenges articulated by students, and also recognised that these issues/challenges were significant and complex. They commented that it was common for UPP students to struggle with family

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12 The notion of risk was not initially mentioned in staff interviews, though the staff did have an overarching understanding that this was the focus of the study and were thus more likely to frame their answers in terms of risk.
commitments and responsibilities, finances, confidence, health, challenges to their identity and a lack of higher education cultural and academic capital. In addition, the staff made a strong link between the difficulties students experienced at UPP and their backgrounds, particularly that of being first-in-family, from a refugee background and/or LSES, which were seen to be common features of the UPP cohort. Gail felt that the program by its very nature attracted some of the ‘most vulnerable groups of people’. She noted the first-in-family/LSES background could mean that some of her students not only lacked active support, but had to negotiate active opposition:

... they have great impediments – families seem to be engaging in a lot of negative talk, leading to put-downs, emotional abuse in that regard – saying things like you can't do this, who do you think you are, you're not smart enough to go to university.

The staff, with their longer-term view and their experience watching students move through the program as a whole, and into degrees, also pointed out that for students from these backgrounds, UPP could represent a space and time of significant change or transformation. As described by Mezirow (1991), transformation refers to a time where students become disoriented because of a disconnect between what they have known and what they learn as they undertake their studies. As a result, students begin to explore new roles and adopt new perspectives. However, while Mezirow described this process mainly in positive terms, whereby individuals find a way of reintegrating themselves into their existing lives, others have identified that it also has the potential for considerable disruptions (Willans, 2010) or for negative consequences (Morrice, 2012; Lehmann, 2014). Research also points to the way the transformative nature of the higher education experience has the potential to disrupt relationships, particularly for married women and for those from LSES backgrounds (Reay, 2001; Stone & O’Shea, 2013). Reay (2001) and Stone and O’Shea (2013) explain that the process of change can dislocate such students from previous relationships and begin a process of questioning and re-assessment of roles, relationships and futures. This disruption was noted in this study as Bill observed, ‘people literally go through a personal transformation. So that transformation is threatening, often to their principal relationship.’ He also felt it represented a ‘huge risk, huge risk’ to students’ wellbeing.
It is not just women, or key relationships, which can be challenged as a student transforms. Transformation can also lead to a wider dislocation from friends, families and communities, especially as students start to discover new ideas and new ways of thinking (Willans, 2010). Some of the staff described how, when students were exposed to critical thinking and new ideas, it could on the one hand be exciting, but it also had the capacity, as Ellen saw it, to ‘land them in limbo land within their own family’. For Gail this also exposed the students to vulnerability and change, both things that could be ‘quite terrifying even.’ Bill noted that at times students struggled with both the positive and/or negative effects of transformation and change:

... there’s fear of success and fear of failure. I think they’re two different things, though they seem to be similar in terms of outcome.

Staff highlighted the long-term consequences of failure (that is, not finishing or succeeding in a semester) in their interviews. James found that students from refugee backgrounds in particular were often pushed into university before they were ready, and that this could have long-term consequences:

... students who have an unsuccessful transition to university, or fail the first year or first semester, they might disengage from uni forever.

Similarly, for those already doubting their ability in this untested environment, failing could impact self-esteem and future decision making. In particular, for students whose education to date has not been a story of success or engagement, failing had the potential to reinforce existing self-doubt and ideas about education. As Naomi put it, it became just ‘another failure’ that could ‘impact on their confidence to do other things’. For Annie, this potential for failure represented ‘a huge risk for a lot of people’.

The staff portrayed the issues UPP students faced as complex, difficult and extremely challenging. Naomi regarded the risk as being very substantial: ‘essentially they could end up losing everything by doing this [program], which I think is a major risk.’ Words denoting the potential for significant harm, such as ‘vulnerable’, ‘terrifying’, ‘failing’ and ‘risk’, peppered the interviews.
However, despite this, when asked directly the staff were also hesitant to characterise UPP solely in terms of risk. Their responses suggested that for them risk was assessed relative to other potential harm and opportunity. In particular, the staff pointed out that despite potential risks, UPP provided access to higher education that students might not otherwise have, and that higher education had the potential to provide students with benefits such as better jobs, better careers and a general sense of self-fulfilment. For Bill, it was about providing opportunity and opening up people’s lives:

Whereas before there was genuinely limited opportunities, suddenly the gate is open, and I think that’s profound. ... I see people come in who have no idea whether they can achieve in this environment or not, and when they do realise it, suddenly I see them go on to actually achieve their ambition.

The staff also saw UPP as a place to negotiate and manage risk. It was a safe place to learn the skills the students needed, test their capacity, see if it could work out for them, things they might otherwise not have a chance to do at all, or possibly only do in an environment (such as a degree) where it would be more difficult. In this sense, UPP was seen as opening up opportunity:

How risky – I think no more than studying at university in general. In fact, I think it’s a lot less. ... I would actually say we minimise them to a fairly good degree. (Gail)

According to Annie, UPP was very much a space to examine the level of risk university truly represented:

... it’s kind of like a try before you buy deal here. I mean, obviously ... you don’t have to pay for HECS, and that’s a big bonus for a lot of people. ... I think if they do this program, they find out a lot more about the uni itself. They can justify whether those risks are true or not for themselves. They also find out about themselves and how they study. I think when they enter, they don’t know. They do learn it through an enabling program.
5.8 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that the UPP students in this study faced a number of issues and challenges as they transitioned into higher education. These issues and challenges had the potential for harm and uncertainty and, from a theoretical perspective, represented significant risk for the students. They were in danger of dropping out, failing, and suffering personal and financial setbacks. This risk was compounded because most of the participants were negotiating multiple circumstances that put them at harm.

The issues/challenges the students identified have largely been previously described in the literature in association with background, including being mature-aged, LSES, first-in-family, rural and remote. The struggles of adapting one’s life to a new environment including the balancing of work and family responsibilities, the changing nature of relationships, the need to adjust finances, and nervousness of a new environment, are common features of the mature-aged student experience (see, for example, Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1996; Kantanis, 2002; Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Aird et al., 2010; James, Kraus & Jennings, 2010; De Silva, Robinson & Watts, 2011; O’Shea & Stone, 2011; Stone, 2008; Willans, 2010; Willans & Seary, 2011; Stone and O’Shea, 2013). Fears about inadequate skill or understanding of the university environment, about the capacity to succeed at this level and an inability to manage the time and organisation requirements of university have likewise been described in the literature in relation to students who are the first in their family to attend university (first-in-family students) or who come from a LSES background, particularly in terms of a lack of cultural capital (see, for example, Reay, 2001, 2002; Bok, 2010; Leese, 2010; O’Shea, 2011; Luzeckyj et al., 2011; Devlin, Nelson, Kift, Smith & MacKay, 2012; Thomas 2014). The prevalence of serious physical and mental health issues, an issue that affected students across the cohort, regardless of their age, gender or background, was also evident in this study. This is an area beginning to emerge in the enabling/pathway program literature (Habel et al., 2016; Willans & Seary, 2018; Crawford & Johns, 2018).

While background was important, the data in this study also show that that issues and challenges were not unique to these backgrounds. There existed other, overarching
features, that of being mature-aged and having a previously disrupted or unsuccessful educational journey which meant that, for these students, issues/challenges/risks existed regardless of background.

Stress pervaded many of the narratives in these early weeks. Students were juggling time, responsibilities, finances, roles and changing definitions of themselves. There is a sense of pressure of having to keep everything in play, and also the possibility of disaster, of one or more of the items being dropped, as well as an acknowledgement of the toll this could take. For some this stress led to a feeling of being somewhat overwhelmed as they attempted to negotiate a range of new ways to interact not just with their new lives and selves, but also with their old lives and selves.

The students understood that the experience had the potential for negative outcomes, and the overwhelming majority of them saw UPP as playing an important role in negotiating these risks. While students may not have brought with them an abundance of the kinds of cultural and academic capital they might need to succeed in a university setting, they nonetheless described significant identity capital (Côté, 2005). The students described themselves as possessing personal characteristics, past experiences and social support that would help them in their efforts to successfully negotiate their first semester of study. UPP, therefore, appeared to provide a space where students felt they could exercise agency, despite the fact they largely lacked knowledge and confidence. For both students and staff, UPP might be seen as the shallow end of the pool; a place to splash around and experience the water, to try it out, see how it feels, see how you operate within it, but with the comfort of still having your feet firmly on the ground.

Despite evidence of significant risk, most students were ultimately reluctant to characterise the experience of entering university via UPP as ‘risky’. Staff too, who saw risk even more starkly than students, were also reluctant to characterise the experience just in terms of risk. In line with Mary Douglas’s conception of risk (1992) as largely a by-product of society norms and expectations, risk was perceived through the greater societal lens of opportunity. For both groups, the potential benefits of a university-level education and the fact that UPP represented a relatively ‘safe’ place to
adjust to the academic environment and to gain the skills, knowledge and experience required, mitigated the overall riskiness of the experience.

In this chapter the notions of risk have been explored in terms of the students’ introductory experiences, and via the staff’s more global view. The next chapter continues this exploration, describing how students progressed through their semester, examining whether their expectations were met or not, and looking at the role UPP played in negotiating the issues, challenges and risks identified at the start of the semester.
Chapter 6: Reflections post-semester (Findings 2)

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter students were at the start of their university journey. In this first set of interviews participants articulated an understanding of many of the issues and challenges they faced as they began their studies. Students also described their intention to proactively manage these using both their own resources, and those provided by UPP. While these issues and challenges represented considerable risk, that is, potential for harm and/or uncertainty (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011), the narrative of ‘education as opportunity’, and the safe place represented by UPP, meant that overall neither the students nor the staff conceptualised experiences solely in these terms.

This chapter outlines the findings from interviews conducted with the students at the completion of their first semester and examines the degree to which the students’ initial expectations and ideas were reflected in their actual experiences. The chapter focuses on the strategies students employed to manage those initial issues and challenges, and the degree to which the risks inherent in them were negotiated. Reflections from staff provide a further layer of understanding to this experience, particularly in relation to how students they have observed over multiple semesters typically fare as they progress through a semester, and the extent to which participation in UPP can assist students (or not) to manage the risks they face.

End-of-semester results showed that the students in this study performed remarkably well. Typical UPP and enabling program attrition rates sit at around 50–60% (Jarvis, 2015), that is, 50–60% of students who start a semester fail to finish it, either dropping out formally or disengaging and disappearing. In contrast, in this study all but one student who participated in the initial interviews remained enrolled and engaged in UPP, at least partially, to the end of the semester. The one student who withdrew from all their units (Kathleen, 61) did so due to illness and she indicated she intended to return when her health allowed. However, only 19 of the initial 23
participants could be contacted for follow-up interviews. Of these 19 students, 17 had passed all the units they were enrolled in. One student failed one unit and, as mentioned, one withdrew due to illness. Of the four students who could not be contacted, one passed one of three units they were enrolled in, another passed two of the three units they were enrolled in, and the remaining two students passed all three units. This means that the majority of students who remained enrolled were either fully or partially successful in their studies (success being achieving a pass or higher at the end of the semester).

Through the exploration of post-semester interviews and input from staff, it became apparent that the process of engaging with UPP did provide these students with the space to adjust to university life, to manage inherent risks, and to address gaps in their cultural and academic capital. A space that was both liminal (in between the world of non-students and a full undergraduate student, and safe). It was also apparent that students were proactive and purposeful agents in taking advantage of this space. The data revealed that risk management within the program itself was similarly overt and purposeful, and that these outcomes were not just incidental. However, staff data also showed that despite this proactive management, and the success of the students in this study, there remained limitations to the extent the space and support provided by the UPP program could protect students entirely from the risks they faced when entering university.

6.2 Adapting to university life

As was outlined in the previous chapter, the students identified a number of issues and challenges facing them as they started their studies. These included: juggling home and family life and responsibilities; negotiating relationships with partners, children, family and friends; increased financial pressure; feeling like an outsider in the university environment; lacking the necessary skills/knowledge/understanding to succeed; managing health issues; and managing their own personal demons such as

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13 Peta, Allie, Jo and Rachel could not be contacted.
14 Or higher – the exact results are not known.
anxiety and a lack of confidence. This section looks at how these challenges and issues affected students during their first semester.

For a small number of students, some of the issues and challenges they identified did have a significant impact on their lives. For example, Dylan (24) was worried at the start of the semester that the financial pressure of his returning to study was having a negative impact on his relationship with his partner. Despite making adjustments to his lifestyle by reducing his spending, and ‘taking things down a notch,’ he reported in the post-semester interview that his relationship did not last the semester. Similarly, Kim (44), who also had concerns about the effect of study on her relationship with her husband, found that the semester was ‘really hard on our marriage.’

However, for the majority of students in the study it was clear that one way or another they had managed the issues and challenges that they had initially identified and that participating in UPP was instrumental in two ways. Firstly, undertaking UPP provided a time and space in which students could learn to accommodate or make necessary adjustments to their circumstances to fit study into their lives. It acted as a liminal space in which lives could be adjusted before embarking on the full university experience. This was particularly relevant to external pressures such as home, family, relationships, health and finances. Secondly, engaging in UPP actively helped students learn, change and adapt so that the risks inherent in university-level study itself, that is, issues such as a lack of skills, understanding and confidence, were to an extent mitigated.

Managing home, family, finances and health

Many of the participants indicated initially that they enrolled in UPP to see how they could manage their personal circumstances including the stress and commitment of study. One of the principal concerns, particularly for the women, was how they could juggle the demands of home and study and the gendered expectations which both they and others around them carried. The sense of pressure and guilt which was evident so strongly in the initial interviews was largely absent in post-semester interviews, suggesting that the participants had either accepted or accommodated the
tensions studying created in their lives. For Olivia (36, single mother of three) the semester revealed that her children were quite capable of adapting to their mother’s new circumstances. She commented that they coped ‘much better than I thought they would’. At the beginning of the semester, Olivia was also somewhat conflicted about having to return home and live once again with her parents. However, she found that the help provided by her parents was in the end invaluable, particularly when she became ill during the semester. Her time in UPP therefore allowed both herself and her children the space to adjust to new circumstances and for her to come to terms with her initial misgivings and uncertainties both around how her children would adjust, and about living at home with her parents. In general, Olivia spoke with a greater sense of confidence about how she would be able to manage the external pressures in her life in order to continue with her university aspirations, saying, ‘I feel a lot more comfortable ... and I sort of know what to expect’.

However, for Claire (50), who was working and looking after her father with dementia, her experience in UPP was somewhat different. Rather than showing Claire how she could adapt and cope with university study, her experience demonstrated that in her situation continuing with university was likely to be very difficult, and not something she could proceed with at this point of time. Although she successfully completed the semester, she found adjusting to university life ‘really hard’, and that it was difficult to deal with all her responsibilities at home and at university, to the extent that she wasn’t sure ‘if it's really for me’. While the outcomes for Olivia and Claire were different, both used the experience to try university out and see whether they could adapt and continue.

As noted in the previous chapter, most students had a limited understanding of how university would actually impact them; they understood it would, but exactly how was still unclear. A number of students were able to use their time in UPP to gain a better understanding of the impact and then make necessary adjustments to their life circumstances. These adjustments were principally about getting the study/work/life balance right both in terms of personal and financial resources. Lisa (42), a single mother with four children, found that her many responsibilities could only be managed by reducing her study load. Max (31) and Hugh (29) moved into cheaper
accommodation during the semester to make their financial situation easier. Hugh also found a job to help out financially and was proactive in seeking psychological help to manage his anxiety and depression, which he could see were exacerbated by the stress of study. Lilly (19), who suffered from a chronic illness, also reduced her study load during the semester to a level that was manageable, commenting that she had ‘pretty much got it [managing study] down to the amount of hours awake that I can really do something.’

In learning during this first semester that some issues could be accommodated and that others could be managed through making adjustments to their life and/or study, there was a general sense amongst the students that they were in greater control of the risks, better prepared and thus more likely to succeed in a full undergraduate-level course if and when they enrolled.

**Being a cultural outsider**

As noted in Chapter Five, at the beginning of the semester there was a sense amongst the students of being ‘cultural outsiders’ in the university context (Lehmann, 2009). This position seemed to be a product of a lack confidence in their knowledge, skills and abilities and their uncertainty about whether or not their former lives and experiences had prepared them adequately for this new place. There was a perception both from students and staff that incoming students generally lacked all the cultural and academic capital necessary to succeed at university, which put them at significant risk of failing or dropping out as well as a range of other harms, such as psychological distress. In response to this situation, the students indicated that they were using UPP to fill in gaps in their educational background, knowledge and skills (that is, their cultural and academic capital), as well as an opportunity to understand how the university system worked in general.

The post-semester interviews confirmed that UPP played a significant role in filling in these gaps in cultural/academic capital, in acclimatising students to university life and generating a sense of confidence and preparedness for degree-level study. For
example, whereas Hugh (29) had talked about feeling ‘terrified’ in the initial interview, at the end he was feeling ‘a lot more confident of giving it a go.’

The role participation in UPP played in improving student’s academic skills and knowledge is not surprising given this is one of the clear aims of the program. In post-semester interviews, essay writing retained its almost mythical place as a skill both fundamental and unique to the university environment, but now one that their studies had helped them unlock:

Before I came and did UPP I had no idea about how to write an essay, I had no idea about referencing, I’d never referenced anything in my life. ... I probably wouldn’t have completed the first semester [at the University]. It would have gone way over my head given the first assignment, and told to write an essay I would have panicked I reckon. I had no idea about any of it and now I’ve got that and that’s helping me. (Olivia, 36)

In Olivia’s view, a lack of essay writing skills would have prevented her from completing a semester in a degree. There was an acknowledgement by other students that during the semester they not only learnt about how to write essays, but that there were a range of other skills to be acquired, as explained by Eva (39):

Learning how to do structural things and then have it put to paragraphs and that sort of thing. That’s been really good, and study skills is the other one I’m doing. Learning what’s expected at university. I think that is what I needed.

Kim (44), for example, found that ‘the whole course was all about ... how to teach yourself’.

Kim’s comment, and the comments of others, also indicated that students had not previously been fully aware of what was involved when studying at university level, whether that be in terms of the kind of skills required or in terms of understanding the unique culture of university. As Jack (29) explained, while he knew university would be ‘a lot of work’, undertaking UPP had successfully exposed him to ‘the culture of the institution, I wasn’t really prepared for any of that stuff.’
These additional skills and knowledge, such as being an independent learner, or developing an understanding of the underlying culture, are part of the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Which, in terms of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (1986), represents knowledge specific to the ‘field’ of higher education. This included not only ways of learning, but also information about some of the broader expectations of university, such as notions of academic integrity, working collaboratively, working to timelines and the importance of assessment (Crawford, 2014). Previous knowledge of this ‘hidden curriculum’ either by past educational preparation, or via acquiring cultural capital from family and friends, can assist students to negotiate the higher education environment. Yee (2016) in her study of US college students, for example, found students from middle class backgrounds had a greater variety of strategies which they could adapt and apply to their university experience than their first-in family and typically lower SES peers, and that these strategies were generally more valued by the university and staff, thus putting them at an advantage. While the students in this study were not without capital and resources, they were not necessarily those which were applicable to the field of higher education in which they were now operating.

Thus, the experience of UPP did not just help students prepare academically, it also prepared them to operate more broadly in the university environment. In general, students felt they had both the higher education and academic capitals necessary to operate successfully. Lisa (42) summed this up saying:

... now I know what is expected, and how university life works.

**Personal doubts and insecurities**

Studies by both Murphy and Roopchand (2003) and Ayres and Guilfoyle (2008) suggest that academic success is enhanced by students gaining greater confidence. As discussed in Chapter Five, many of the students in this study initially felt very unsure of their place in the university environment given their previous lack of academic success. They expressed fear, uncertainty and a lack of confidence about their ability to succeed at university. They also felt these personal doubts could in themselves
disrupt their success. In the post-semester interviews, there was a marked change in tone amongst those who had remained enrolled in UPP. The students described how new-found knowledge of academic requirements, along with the broader opportunity to explore academic culture, and, for most, the successful completion of a semester, increased their confidence and their sense of familiarity and ease in this new environment. As Hugh (29) commented, this time in UPP had shown ‘that I can rise to the challenge,’ and that he obtained ‘the confidence to step into a degree now.’

Not only was there a greater sense of certainty amongst the students that they had the capacity to continue with their university journeys, several students performed above their expectations, either by actually staying to the end of the semester and passing their units, or by getting much higher grades than they had anticipated. Nicky (24), for example, who at the start of her studies had confessed that she felt ‘shit scared’ and that perhaps she was not ‘smart enough’, found out that she was indeed smart enough. Others, such as Dylan (24), found that he had the capacity to succeed academically, opening horizons for him beyond working ‘with my hands’.

**Shifting identities**

Increased levels of confidence often translated into students expressing a greater level of comfort with the notion of being at university, and of being a university student more broadly. As Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray and Southgate (2016) found in their study of ‘capability’, confidence is a key construct of capability and an important ingredient in academic success. The impact of confidence in enabling-program students is not limited to this study but has been reflected in other research in the field of enabling education (Stone, 2009; Crawford, 2014). Student reflections indicated that UPP again provided a liminal space, a place between two worlds where these learners could try out new identities, as space where they could start their journey towards being a fully-fledged university student. As Hugh (29) explained:

I experienced all those highs and lows of just having a workload, and being, I don't know, I guess a student. It was interesting, too, to see all of that. I really felt like ... a student.
Max (31) echoed this sentiment: ‘It was just really good to be here and really feeling like, yes, I’m a uni student.’ Their time in UPP allowed them to gradually understand what being ‘a uni student’ meant and having successfully completed their first semester they were now able to claim the title legitimately, even if, as Hugh’s use of the phrase ‘I guess’ suggests, still a little hesitantly. This claim to title also reflected a developing sense of belonging and comfort in the university, further enhanced by the success of most students in the semester (Burke et al., 2016). Talk and emotions which initially reflected their status as an outsider were no longer evident.

This identity renegotiation was not just about what the students became. As Debra’s (58) experience showed, it could also be about who they no longer were. At the start of the program Debra was very conflicted between her long-time role as a home-maker and her emerging role as a university student. Throughout the first half of the semester she oscillated between staying at university and withdrawing. However, in her post-semester interview she acknowledged that her time in UPP had ‘kind of given me a purpose because I felt that for the last few years, my life has lost its purpose and meaning, with my children gone.’

Debra’s renegotiation of purpose and associated identity is highlighted further in her description of her UPP experience:

That’s what I really liked about it [UPP] because I felt that for the first time, I could just be me. I wasn't wife, mum, grandma; I could just be me.

In UPP she found a space to overcome the limitations of identities associated primarily with her relationship with her family; identities which had become less meaningful for her since her family had grown up. UPP provided the opportunity to create new versions of herself, a process not uncommon for older women entering higher education (Scott et al., 1998). Debra’s final transformation is magically captured in the story of her last day of her first semester:

…. when we finally finished, when I finally handed in that last essay, I was so tired and so my friend and I went to the uni bar. It was happy hour. My husband rang me and said, ‘Where are you?’ I said, ‘I'm just having a little drink
in the bar.’ Then my son said, ‘Where’s mum?’ He said, ‘She’s having a drink at the uni bar at happy hour.’ He [son] said, ‘That’s so wrong!’

While her husband and son’s comments were light-hearted, and Debra relayed the story with a sense of pride, it nonetheless underpinned not just Debra’s transformation in her own eyes, but the way in which her life was now deviating from her previous life expectations of her as a mother, wife and woman. Mothers and wives did not go out drinking at the uni bar, this was something university students did. Her son’s comments portray these as separate, and to an extent, contradictory identities, with the fact that Debra tells this story as a way of demonstrating how her life had changed reiterating this. Debra’s journey further provides an example of the transformative capacity of enabling programs (Mezirow, 1991).

The adoption of new identities also suggests that students are adapting to their habitus to the higher education environment (Bourdieu, 1977). As previously outlined in Chapter Three, for Bourdieu, habitus is the embodiment of dispositions that come from a person’s social background, childhood experiences, and individual encounters with the outside world (DiMaggio, 1979). Habitus is an interpretive and perceptual lens through which the social world is perceived, and can be reflected in attributes such as speech, attitudes, behaviours and ways of interacting in certain environments or fields (Edgerton, Roberts & Peter, 2013). Students who do not have access to the relevant cultural capital would find it difficult to develop the habitus required for that field. In both experiencing and adopting the ways of ‘a student’ the participants in this study were becoming acclimatised to the broader way in which the university operated and adjusting their own habitus to the higher education field. They did this by learning the rules and regulations, both overt and hidden, acquiring the skills, gaining familiarity with the environment, and adopting new identities. All this aided a transition from outsider to insider, an important ingredient for success (Thomas, 2002).

In summary, while some students indicated that university had much more of an impact than they had anticipated, there was overall a sense that UPP provided, as Eva (39) said, ‘a good practice run’. Here the participants were able to gain the knowledge,
skills, confidence and identities necessary for success at university which they had collectively been extremely nervous about at the start of the semester. In terms of Bourdieu, they acquired the necessary cultural and academic capital for the higher education field which they were entering and began to adapt to the habitus of higher education, leading to a shifting sense of identity and belonging.

6.3 UPP as a safe space

In the initial interviews early in the semester, students had indicated that they were using their time in UPP as a way of managing/addressing their personal issues and challenges. UPP was seen as a ‘safe space’ to do this. This expectation was confirmed in the post-semester interviews. When asked again if they thought, in hindsight, what they had done was risky, most students replied in the negative, conceptualising the experience as a relatively safe way to negotiate and manage risks that they felt were inherent in being unprepared for university.

The idea of a safe space, where the stakes were seen as lower than in full degree-level study, was expressed by students in different ways. For some it was about having the opportunity to learn what needed to be learnt in a time and space that did not subject them to the high-stakes or expectations of a degree. Nicky (24), for example, noted that UPP was ‘like uni’ and that they tried ‘to make it as close as possible to a degree, as they could, without having the whole demand’.

For others it was about trying out university in a financially low-risk space. Eva (39), a mother of three young girls, felt that the experience had provided her with the capacity to judge how she could manage her many responsibilities, describing it as a ‘good practice run’ without ‘the financial pressure of starting a degree’.

For those students managing health issues or with multiple stresses and pressures in their lives, their time in UPP provided them with the time to assess how they would manage and cope without the risk of doing this in a degree or in a space where failing might have greater consequences. Claire (50), who in the end thought it unlikely she would continue with her studies, nonetheless acknowledged that UPP allowed her the
space to work out what she needed to do to succeed and how she could practically manage degree-level study, right down to things such as ‘the amount of hours of studying time’ required to succeed.

In their post-semester interviews students not only talked about how doing UPP had helped them negotiate their foray into this new world, they also described the role of the program in giving them the space and time to explore their full potential and options. For Olivia (36), this opportunity was about accessing higher education in general, commenting, ‘I wouldn’t have gone to uni if it wasn’t there.’ For Sandra (56), succeeding in UPP opened the door to a future in higher education:

If it had gone badly, I wouldn't have come back ... but it went really, really, really well. I really loved it.

For Dylan (24), as previously described, it was about showing him he had many more options than he had originally thought. In these assessments, there was a sense of gratitude for the space UPP provided students to gradually experience and transition to undergraduate study. In doing so the participants were able to experience the inherent opportunity that higher education promised, while minimising the risks.

6.4 Capacity and enablers

In their initial interviews, students also described the resources they thought they had at their disposal as they started their program. In post-semester interviews it was possible to observe a major shift in how the students described their capacities and the enablers that they regarded as underpinning success in both UPP and at university in general. In the interviews at the beginning of the semester, students tended to attribute success almost entirely to their own resources, that is, their ability to make use of the opportunity UPP provided and existing support mechanisms and identity capital. Their success was regarded as contingent on the degree to which they themselves took responsibility for the risks they were facing.
While this narrative remained strong in post-semester interviews, a second, complementary narrative also surfaced. This narrative acknowledged the role of new forms of support found within UPP. This support came from their peers, from structures and practices within the program itself, and from staff. The advent of these new forms of support shifted the responsibility for risk management and success to a broader platform.

**Existing support and identity capital**

The student’s own personal qualities and identity capital (Côté, 2005), that is, the psychological skills and attributes that a person uses to negotiate situations and decisions, retained a very strong place in the students’ stories of success, particularly the qualities of persistence and determination. Adam (19) ‘pushed himself,’ Nicky (24) ‘never gave up,’ Bradley (48) ‘put the work in.’ In addition, Dylan (24) had ‘persistence’, Claire (50), Olivia (36) and Emma (24) had ‘determination’, and Lilly (19) was ‘stubborn’. Of the students who made it successfully to the end of the semester and participated in post-semester interviews, 15 spoke about how their own approach to their studies contributed to their success. Reay, Ball and David (2002) describe similar stories of determination, commitment and the ‘triumph of wills’ (p. 17) in their study of UK access students, as does Stone (2009) in her study of Australian students. These attributes are seen in these studies as admirable qualities. To an extent, they are seen as a necessary attribute for students trying to succeed in a system for which they are ill-prepared, and which changes little to accommodate their needs. That is, students need to have considerable personal resolve and resilience to rise above the barriers and hurdles that university study presents.

**New forms of social capital and support**

In the post-semester student interviews, new enablers and capacities also became evident, including the development of significant social capital, including the ability to understand its value and to make use of it. Research has shown that the development of social capital can play a significant part in student success (Thomas, 2002; Smith,
2007; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Through social networks students can access important information to help them in their studies and for negotiating university systems and processes. Social networks can also create associations of mutual benefit and assist with learning appropriate ways of interacting (Kao, 2004). Such networks in turn add to students’ social and cultural capital and assisted with adjusting habitus. Relevant social capital was initially scarce for the student participants int his study, with only five of the original 23 students indicating they had relatives or friends who were able to provide active support for university-study related issues. Instead, at the early stage of their university journey, most students were reliant on less specific personal and moral support from well-meaning family and friends.

However, by the end of the semester there was a significant shift in the type and amount of social capital students had at their disposal. While support from family and friends remained strong and important, students had also created new friendships, networks and support mechanisms which proved to be a valuable resource for them both personally and for their studies. This support came from their peers, the program and staff.

Max (31), for example, indicated in his initial interview that he had strong support from his partner and family. However, at the end of the semester he also recognised that forming a small peer group very early on in his studies was pivotal to providing both academic and personal support:

[I had] Lots of support, not just from the school but those around me ... my peers, my friends. Immediately, like in the first week I made a couple of close friends and we were in pretty much the same units. ... we were a bit older, kindred souls, and yeah that was really good, really helpful.

His use of the term ‘kindred souls’ infers both a strong sense of connection, and of mutual understanding. Tinto (2003), who found that students who withdrew from university in their first year were less likely to have formed a significant relationship with another person, highlighted the fact that having at least one friend or peer at university had the capacity to impact retention. Max too indicated that these
friendships were important to his progress during the semester, even more important than more formal aspects of the program:

The support network was very useful. I used that a lot more to nut out problems than actually going to my tutors and lecturers.

The students were not just creating social capital for their existing situation; some were also proactively creating capital that could be of benefit for their future as well, indicating a strong understanding of, and appreciation for, the benefits of such associations. Nicky (24), who in the initial interview spoke about losing touch with her existing friends (who she referred to as ‘bogans’) because they did not understand her university life, proactively made new friends amongst her peers who understood what she was going through, deliberately choosing those that ‘are going to continue on to university.’ Her move was strategic to ensure that she already had in place ‘support ... in the next year.’

In addition to individual and somewhat informal connections, some students formed dedicated study groups. Bradley (48) participated in a weekly meeting with his peers which he called his ‘support team’. This group provided mutual emotional support as well as academic support: ‘we managed to bounce off questions and basically be an ear for everybody.’ The strong way in which the enabling-program students bonded together to share and support each other in order to jointly negotiate this transition period confirms similar findings by other researchers (Ramsay, 2004; Seary, Flanders & Palu, 2008; Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Crawford, 2014; Farenga, 2018) and could be considered as a notable feature of this cohort. These intentional groupings once again reflected the proactive approach taken by these students in both identifying and making use of resources that would support their ongoing success. It reflected a desire to take advantage of all available mechanisms to help negotiate the risks inherent in transition to university.

Through these associations, friendships and study groups a new type of support emerged which supplemented the practical and emotional support typically received from family and friends, that of informational support. Informational support provided knowledge about academic study, as well as about how to navigate the university
environment and processes, and to unpack some of the hidden and unhidden rules/expectations of the university environment. Such knowledge also helped students to collectively fill in significant gaps in their higher education cultural capital (Stone, 2009).

In post-semester interviews, students identified the program itself as an important form of support. This was a mix of both emotional and informational support. A particular feature of the UPP program is the structured provision of dedicated support and study time via a unit called ‘Supported Studies’. This was a weekly time provided on each campus which students could attend voluntarily. With no set curriculum, the Supported Studies space allowed students to get assistance from staff on any aspect of their study that they wanted or needed. Given their general lack of academic understanding and resources, and an unfamiliarity with the expectations and standards of university assessments, this provided a valuable opportunity for students to ‘check-in’ before submitting formal assessments, a chance most likely not so readily available in degree-level study. For Olivia (36), the ability to find out if she was heading in the right direction in Supported Studies was crucial:

... I think without that I would have looked at some of the assignments and thought, ‘I have no idea what I am doing here’. Being able to go to that and say, ‘Am I on the right track?’ and for her to say, ‘Yes, you are on the right way’ or ‘No you’re not, you need to look at it this way’, that was a massive help.

It also provided a regular space for staff to check-in with students and to keep a ‘pastoral care eye’ on them, again not a feature commonly found in degree-level study to the same extent. Some students identified the Supported Studies sessions as a key element of their success:

I took advantage of Supported Studies, and I went to nearly every one. And I found that the students who did go to Supported Studies, we all did pretty well. (Jack, 29)

A third new source of support identified by students was the support provided by UPP staff personally. In the case of Bradley (48) this applied to staff in general: ‘I mean the
teachers are fantastic and the tutors are good; they'll give you support.’ There was a sense that support was both plentiful and accessible. Jack (29) noted:

... everyone was very supportive, the lecturers couldn’t say enough how often you can approach them, ask them for their time to seek clarification in the supported studies section.

This accessibility and openness in turn made students such as Noah (36), who suffered from mental health issues, feel it was safe enough to talk to staff about his situation:

And the staff at the University were really supportive, so whenever I did have any issues or anything like that I could talk to them about what was happening.

Crawford and Johns (2018) reaffirm the importance of the development of trust relationships between students and staff in enabling programs, highlighting the way trust supports students to go to staff with issues and seek help when they are experiencing difficulties.

Emerging strongly from the analysis of the interviews at the end of the semester is the students’ understanding of the benefits these types of associations and supports could bring them. The developing use and appreciation of these strategies indicated that the students were able to adopt new ways of operating in the environment and then use these new ways to actively support their success and manage their risks. This use represents a shifting of responsibility in the management of risk. While initially this task was conceptualised as almost purely up to themselves and their ability to make use of UPP, the students now understood that this could be a shared activity. They understood that there were resources, both institutional and people, outside of themselves and existing networks which they could take advantage of. In recognising this, Beck’s (1992) idea that in this society (a risk society) the burden of risk sits almost entirely with the individual is challenged. There are, in fact, ways of working collaboratively where the individual can share and negotiate risk with others.
Flexibility

The flexibility of both staff and the program was identified by the students as another key enabler of success in post-semester interviews. As all the students in this study had little or limited understanding of or experience with the expectations of university study before starting the program, knowing how to accommodate and manage these in advance was likely to be challenging. Flexibility embedded in both how the program operated, and the attitudes of staff, allowed students the time to make necessary adjustments to their lives, and to learn ways to manage new issues as they emerged. Yorke and Thomas (2003) found that a flexible approach in delivery and support was crucial in accommodating students from diverse backgrounds who may not have had the same level of cultural/social capital as others.

Providing learning materials online as well as face-to-face was an example of program flexibility which for some students proved very useful for managing either ongoing, or short-term issues. Being able to access material online was very important to Lilly (19), for example, in helping her manage the impact of her long-term illness:

> I really do think that having MyLO [UTAS’s Learning Management System] with all of the information available was really helpful for me. Sometimes in a lecture, if I wasn't feeling particularly cognitively capable to take it all in, then I could go home, and I could look at the lectures again. ... and listen to [it] a couple of times and think this is the emphasis of what I’m needing to do for a certain task.

Seary et al. (2016) in their review of the STEPS enabling program at Central Queensland University similarly found that flexible study modes were highly valued by enabling-program students and that they assisted them to adjust and manage their study and lives.

The flexibility of staff was also very important and provided the space and time some students needed to make the adjustments required for study. For Lisa (42), who had a child with a significant health issue and who at times found managing her many responsibilities very difficult, the ability of the staff to be flexible was crucial. This
included allowing her child, on occasions, to come to class with her and giving her considerable leeway in completing assignments. Towards the end of the semester Lisa was feeling the impact of her many stresses and the willingness of staff to significantly extend deadlines meant instead of quitting, as Lisa had thought of doing, she ‘pushed through ... and finished.’ Olivia (36), Claire (50), Hugh (29), Emma (24) and other students also spoke about the way the flexible approach of the staff assisted them to negotiate issues during the semester. This included issues that were both underlying and needed management to succeed in the long term, such as Hugh’s mental health challenges, or issues that were one-off, such as the death of Emma’s grandfather.

In summary, while personal agency and identity capital remained important elements in students’ perceptions of success, at the end of the semester students recognised that it was not just their own determination, motivation or personal support mechanisms which helped them succeed. Social capital as provided by their peers, the program and staff were now also an important enabler of success. In addition, the ability of the program to be flexible and accommodate individual circumstances as students adjusted to this new environment proved to be significant. In this way, participation in UPP allowed the journey to success to become a shared one, where the student’s own capacity joined together with supports and strategies from the program itself and staff, to help students manage the risks involved in their foray into the higher education landscape.

6.5 Adapting to university life – staff perspectives

Undoubtedly, the experiences of the successful students described above portrays a picture of UPP as a place where risk can be managed in a relatively safe and supportive environment. The comments of staff, who participated in only one interview in the middle of the semester and who provided general feedback on students they had observed over several semesters, provide a wider lens with which to juxtapose the students’ experiences. In particular, they provide evidence of how risk, which in the previous chapter was expressed as the potential for harm and uncertainty (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011), actually played out for many students in UPP. Staff also provide
insight into the impact of UPP in this ‘playing out’ and the way participation in the program did or did not facilitate student success.

In general, staff expressed a high level of confidence in the ability of UPP to prepare students for their degrees in the ways the student participants identified. They recognised that UPP provided students with a space to understand how university might fit into their lives, work out if and how they might manage their many responsibilities, and to adjust and negotiate what was possible, what the cost/benefit ratios were, and where their priorities sat. Staff also characterised UPP as a mechanism for filling in students’ gaps in academic, cultural and social capital, acclimatising students to the culture of the university in general and allowing them to gain confidence and a sense of belonging. In this way, the program actively addressed structural barriers that had the potential to deny or derail students from entering the higher education system (Merrill, 2015).

However, in contrast to the student participants, whose experiences were mainly positive, staff were also witness to circumstances where students did not reap these benefits from the program; where, in fact, the risks facing students at the start of a semester could not be negotiated and negative outcomes were realised. Typically, staff perceived these as issues and challenges that could not be fixed with time and support or with the increased cultural, academic or social capital which the program could provide; that is, as external issues which more usually came down to day-to-day logistics, relationship tensions and other unsurmountable stresses and strains.

Logistical realities such as financial strain and transport featured significantly in staff explanations as to why students did not continue with UPP. Needing to work, experiencing housing difficulties, including, at times, homelessness, and accessing and affording transport were issues that for some students were too great to negotiate.

I’ve had students who sometimes have walked a long way because they can’t get here, they can’t afford the bus fare or something like that. (Gail)

In Gail’s experience at times these types of issues became insurmountable and could cause students to drop-out.
Personal relationships, particularly unsupportive partners (all male in the instances relayed by staff), also impacted student retention and caused some students to stop attending. Gail, for example, spoke about a student half-way through her program whose husband ‘forbade’ her to continue because she was getting ‘too big for her britches’.

Where some women were able to work through the opposition of their partners others could not. The reality that male partners had the ability to decide what their female partners could or could not do speaks to ongoing gendered issues of inequality and power, and the ways in which this inequality impacts the opportunity of women attempting to progress their lives through higher education. These broader social issues were ones UPP could not necessarily impact.

For Annie, the impact of anxiety and a fear of failure loomed as frequent reasons for students leaving the program. She described how some students adapted and used the resources provided and others did not. Annie and other staff also noted how a fear of failure was sometimes dealt with by students withdrawing before that failure materialised:

... for a lot of students, we see anxiety problems. Maybe they start the semester very well. They’re very positive. They come to orientation. They get some information, but then they disappear. Until we kind of give them a call or ask them for an interview, they go oh, I’m not really sure, and I’m afraid I’m going to fail. If I don’t finish it off, then I’m not going to fail.

In these cases, the effect of their previous educational journeys has not been surmounted by the knowledge and support offered by UPP.

Being unable to manage the transformative nature of entering university, as theorised by Mezirow (1991), especially for students from LSES and first-in-family backgrounds, was also brought up as a significant stumbling point for some students, creating a tension that could be related both to gender and to social identity (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Annie felt many students came to a decision point when these tensions became apparent:
They hit this point where they feel that they’re getting more and more academic. There’s a bigger and bigger gap between their friends and their family. They don’t know how to handle that relationship. Do they take that step and keep going with their studying, or do they pull back and try and mend a relationship? That’s case by case.

Gail noted the experience of some students as they began to feel a sense of isolation from their family and friends:

A lot of them have said [to me] friends are using terms like, ‘you think you’re better than us cause you’re at university now or something’. ... I was actually awestruck about the number of them that had said where they had family and friends who should be a supporting them or assist[ing] them on their journey through academia. Actually, it’s the opposite. They have great impediments – families seem to be engaging in a lot of negative talk, leading to put-downs, emotional abuse in that regard – saying things like, ‘you can’t do this’, ‘who do you think you are?’, ‘you’re not smart enough to go to university’, which I’ve seen before in other similar programs.

The negative talk from family and friends underscores the significant cultural divide in Australia between those who attend university and those who do not. University was not seen universally as ‘opportunity’, with four of the six staff interviewed commenting on the fact that some students faced serious opposition from both family and friends. For many of the people around those aspiring to a university education, university represented something they did not understand or appreciate, and something that they believed would change, and possibly take away, the person they knew. Gail’s quote above also says much about the way a university education was seen to be placing someone ‘above’ their friends and family, a negative outcome of the greater narrative about the value of education, which, in valuing those who have it, undermines and devalues those who do not. UPP was not able to bridge these gaps or solve these issues and not surprisingly, as Bill commented, many students ‘falter[ed] at this stage.’
The data from staff demonstrated how UPP had the capacity to significantly assist students to manage many of the risks inherent in entering university for this group, but the experience was not necessarily successful for all students. Barriers to participation remained, whether they were logistical realities, confidence issues, or a lack of support or opposition from friends, family and partners. UPP in its current format was not always able to assist students to overcome these barriers or manage these risks.

6.6 Capacity and enablers – staff

As seen above and in the previous chapter, staff had both a respect for the potential of UPP, but also a keen appreciation of what could undermine student success. This latter appreciation is strongly evident in staff responses to what particular features of the program assisted students to manage the challenges and issues they faced. Staff indicated that the program had a philosophy which, while appreciating the personal determination and resources students brought with them, also actively acknowledged and negotiated risk. In this active acknowledgement, the provision and development of strategies to manage risk were seen not only as crucial, but an overt aspect of program design. The management of risk was also seen as a feature not common in university undergraduate provision; something that was a special feature of this space. In incorporating attention to risk in the program design, staff acknowledged that risk was a significant factor impacting students’ success. They also acknowledge that success and/or failure in the program was a joint responsibility to be negotiated by both the staff/program and by students.

The ‘risk mitigation’ elements of the program which staff identified as particularly crucial included: the naming of risk overtly and assisting students to address their risks; providing holistic support; monitoring and supporting students ‘at risk’; and accessing a range of services and supports from the wider university environment. Each of these four elements are explored more in the following sections.
**Naming and addressing risk**

The overt identification of risks and the proactive discussions with students about how these could be managed was seen as a way of empowering students to understand and take control of their personal situation. As Ellen stated, ‘There’s no point letting them think it’s going to be a piece of cake’. The process of naming risk began at the first point of engagement in the program for most students, that is, in the pre-program Information Sessions (‘info sessions’). Ellen described how right from the start she encouraged students to be realistic about what they were taking on:

> ... having the info sessions has helped a lot because you can plant the seed about getting them to think about the time that's required. How you’re going to manage this much study if you’re coaching the local basketball team, or if you’ve got three children and no help with day-care.

This was reinforced at orientation:

> Part of what we’re talking about there is looking at some of those risks and how they can minimise them, being realistic. We do that again in orientation. ... Let's be realistic about what you can do, and what's going to be difficult, and how you can approach that. (Naomi)

In addition to naming and talking about challenges or risks in group settings, one-on-one appointments were also held with students who had particular risk markers (such as very poor previous educational outcomes, evidence of low literacy skills, a person with serious health problems or multiple responsibilities) to provide further guidance and advice where necessary. There was, overall, a multi-pronged approach, which Naomi felt provided a range of opportunities to talk about risks:

> ... they meet with us in some capacity, they come to an information session, they attend the orientation. I think that the risks are relatively low. I do think we do a lot of work to help with that.
In the time students spent in UPP, therefore, they were given significant opportunity to identify issues and challenges in front of them and negotiate ways of managing them.

Providing holistic support

The students highlighted how important support was to their success. Coffman and Gilligan (2002) found that support was an important element underpinning satisfaction in university students in the US, and Stone (2009, p. 130) found that care and support offered by staff were ‘extremely important factors in their persistence and successful progression through their studies’. Jones et al. (2016) also highlight the provision of timely and effective learning support as a key element of effective transition pedagogy for enabling-program students. In a study involving UPP staff, Crawford and Johns (2018) found that all teaching staff saw support as an integral part of their role, regardless of their position (i.e. permanent/casual, lecturer/tutor). This support was characterised as personalised, holistic and ongoing. Staff interview data in this study also highlighted the importance staff placed on providing a high level of support to students and the different ways in which support was provided within the UPP program. For example, James described how he characterised UPP as a unique space within the university environment in terms of the support it provided:

... it's probably the most supportive environment that they'll be in to get to a degree. We try to sort of stress that among students, to say look, you can just start, have some trust in the system and in the teachers to guide you through it, because it will be tougher in a degree – and if you get through that, that will set you up.

James further advised students to use the resources that UPP offered, and in this way removed sole responsibility for students successfully undertaking UPP and placing it also in the hands of UPP staff.

‘Supported Studies’ sessions were also an important mechanism for providing support. These sessions were an integral part of the design of the UPP program. The aim was to
provide additional learning and pastoral support to students, and to provide a space/opportunity for students to connect informally with one another and to build relationships (Johns, Jarvis & Kilpatrick, 2013). This proactive role in creating an opportunity for students to connect was one Kantanis (2002) found to be important in helping students successfully transition to university.

Encouraging the formation of connections between students and the development of social capital were identified by staff as an intentional and overt strategy to help students negotiate their first semester.

I stress a lot of times how the connectivity to people is really important. Sometimes those people can help you ... have inside information, keep you on track, just share a laugh sometimes when things seem very ominous or the end of the world is nigh or something. (Gail)

For Ellen the development of study groups, friendships and peer networks was a direct result of effort and reinforcement across the program:

... the way they go off and study together, that's quite extraordinary. ... it's a result of things we do. In Study Skills, you talk a bit about it. In orientation, we talk a bit about it. ... When I hear the [former UPP] students talk [to new students at Orientation], they talk about challenges, but they also give advice and the big one is, ‘you've got to make a friend’. That's a huge one ...

In addition to the formation of peer support networks, staff highlighted their own role in providing one-on-one support, of getting to know students as individuals. James felt that building this rapport should begin as early as possible, preferably before the student starts. He described the importance of creating an environment of trust from which it was ‘easy to take those first steps’ and from which risks could be proactively addressed, which reflected the emphasis Giddens (1991) placed on the role of trust in helping individuals negotiate risk. For Bill the learning environment was key to providing informational support whereas the one-on-one space enabled him to provide ‘personal support’.
The desire to support students in the ways described above was a value and work ethic which, according to Naomi, represented a key feature of UPP staff:

We will – most people will bend over backwards. I’m not just talking about me, but when we look at the teachers that we’ve got, the other lecturers that we’ve got, the people that stay in this area are people that want to bend over backwards to help someone to do well.

While providing support was recognised as a shared responsibility amongst staff, the role of the local ‘Campus Coordinator’ was particularly significant. The staff in these roles (one on each campus) oversaw many of the pastoral care aspects of student engagement including induction and orientation processes, as well as ongoing support and risk mitigation strategies. In response to a review of the STEPS enabling program offered at Central Queensland University in 2011, a role very similar to the UPP Campus Coordinator was introduced (Access Coordinator). Follow-up evaluation of these reforms indicated that this role was ‘essential to student success’ (Seary et al., 2016, p. 14).

There was an acknowledgement by staff that this high level of ‘in-house’ support created a sense of ‘our little internal area’ (Gail). That is, while overall UPP mimicked the wider university, it also had some special features not typically found in undergraduate degrees which helped underpin student success. This was also clear from students’ reflections where all the mechanisms they nominated as helping them succeed were either part of the UPP program or were a direct result of it (such as the formation of peer networks). However, staff were also cognisant of the need to introduce students to the wider university. This was done through using university systems such as student management, online learning and the library, as well as embedding degree-like expectations into units via learning formats (lectures/tutorials) and assessment regimes. The aim was to make UPP look and feel very much like a typical university course. In addition, as Gail explains, staff attempted to connect students to the university support mechanisms outside UPP:
We have a lot of support mechanisms ... in the wider sense of the university. We actually point them to those mechanisms. We show them the links, we take them around campus, we introduce them to the people.

For Ellen, connecting students to the broader university and its support mechanisms was part of a bigger process of establishing belonging not just in UPP, but in the whole university context:

Definitely, I think we help to facilitate the networks, the connections, and then that leads onto that sense of belonging in a new world, a new culture for them.

Providing a high level of support was, therefore, seen as an important part of UPP’s risk mitigation strategy. Support came from multiple sources: it came from the semi-structured Supported Studies sessions, from other students, from staff and, finally, from connecting students to the broader university community. The creation and use of new and existing forms of support was instigated with intent; they were the result of active interventions by staff and the program in recognition of identified risks and ways these risks could be minimised.

**Risk identification**

Despite the above range of strategies and supports, staff believed that the proactive management of risk needed to be taken to an even higher level, particularly to manage the risks encountered by the more vulnerable students. As a result, the UPP program had a structured ‘risk identification and management’ system in place to identify and assist students who might be struggling or in danger of dropping out. This system used monitoring tools and metrics to identify students at risk and proactively support them as a result, as explained by Annie:

... we check where the students are at risk ... whether they haven’t been turning up to two tutorials in a row or they haven’t been handing in their assignments, and we try and follow it up the best we can within reason. In that sense, yes, I think we’re trying to catch them early before the risk prevents them from coming back.
This process involved regular staff meetings to review student progress. Here the more intimate nature of most UPP classes provided a useful mechanism for keeping a watchful eye over students:

I think given that there's only a smallish amount of teaching staff, compared to larger degree courses and the fact that staff meet on a regular basis ... I think that's quite useful to see which students are falling through the cracks and doing that on a regular basis. (James)

Flexibility

As with students, flexibility was identified by staff as another key strategy in UPP to help manage risk. Ellen, for example, stressed the need for flexibility in relation to students with mental health issues:

... we have a lot of students with mental health problems. ... Sometimes they just need ... someone to just listen and understand and that they'll get it in later and that's an achievement, rather than dropping out.

In accommodating students’ personal situations Ellen again acknowledged that staff ‘want them [students] to learn and do well’. She did not see this as being generous (as most of the students did) but as being ‘realistic’.

Bill spoke about how he spent considerable amounts of one-on-one time with students, helping them explore options and combining his knowledge with students’ input to come up with ways that their individual needs and circumstances could be accommodated, ‘sort of almost a collaborative thing ... and as negotiator.’

Overall, staff echoed the sentiments of students, highlighting the role of holistic support and a flexible and individualised approach in negotiating the risks of study. However, they also showed that these were not mere by-products of the program, but part of an underlying awareness of risk in the program and intentional program design. The proactive and intentional creation of mechanisms to help students...
succeed once again demonstrated a willingness to share the responsibility for negotiating risk.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored the reflections of students after they had completed their first semester of UPP, with particular reference to how they managed and negotiated the risks they had identified in their interviews at the beginning of semester. Compared to usual attrition rates for enabling programs, the students in this study achieved above average, with all but one of the original group making it to the end of the semester, and most successfully completing the units in which they were enrolled. In addition to this academic success, students found that their semester in UPP provided a space for realising their potential and understanding their limitations, a space to make accommodations and adjustments, and a space to gain the cultural, academic and social capital for the academic world ahead. It was also a space to gain confidence and a sense of belonging in the university environment itself. It became possible in this space to bridge the gaps created by their backgrounds and previous educational journeys.

The students’ initial expectation that UPP was a safe space to acclimatise to the higher education environment was fulfilled. The fee-free nature of the program was considered important, as was the lower-stakes outcomes of not yet being degree-level study and the somewhat less demanding nature of the study itself.

The data from staff reinforced these sentiments. However, while the student stories in this study are largely stories of success, staff were able to shed light on what can derail students who do not succeed. Here it became evident that time to adjust and fill-in gaps in relevant capital were not the only issue, and that issues affecting the person and their circumstances could at times be insurmountable, or that the program in its current form was not able to assist students to negotiate all of their issues.

While initially students believed that success or otherwise lay almost entirely with themselves, their ability to make use of UPP and their personal support systems, they
learnt during the semester that their peers and the program itself also provided significant assistance in ways they had hitherto not conceptualised. In particular, students commented on the high level of support within the program and the ability of the program and staff to be flexible to accommodate their personal circumstances and issues. In acknowledging not only their own role, but also that of the program and its staff in helping them succeed, students retained a sense of personal agency, even to an extent becoming empowered by the experience, while at the same time acknowledging that success was not something only facilitated by their own actions.

Staff reiterated this finding of shared responsibility for mitigating and managing risk, highlighting how the program attempted to actively identify and manage risk for each student. Staff stressed the importance of being honest with students about the risks and hazards of university study, and of proactively monitoring students ‘at risk’. In this way, staff described a process of overtly addressing structural barriers to success, and of constructing a shared responsibility for it. Contrary to Beck’s (1992) ideas about risk in late modernity being solely the individual’s burden to negotiate, the stories of both the staff and the students demonstrate that it is possible to create spaces where risks can be negotiated jointly and with support. As a result, the overwhelming conceptualisation of UPP was one of a safe space, a liminal space where risk could be negotiated and managed in a lower-stakes environment before students embarked fully on their university journey.
Chapter 7: Discussion and conclusion

7.1 Introduction

In this thesis I have described how students experienced risk as they entered higher education via the University of Tasmania’s enabling program, the University Preparation Program (UPP). I did so through two voices: the voice of a group of students as they entered and transitioned through their first semester of study; and the voice of staff who work in the program.

Underpinning theories used in this thesis include Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social reproduction including the concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus and fields, Beck (1992) and Gidden’s (1991) theories on risk and individualisation, as well as, to a lesser extent, Mezirow’s (1991) theory of transformational learning. Using these, and the voices of students and staff, this thesis makes a unique contribution to understanding how enabling students experience and negotiate risk, and the circumstances that both hinder and support their success, a perspective hitherto largely missing from the research literature.

The initial student interviews, the focus of Chapter Five, examined the student participants’ decision to come to university and their initial experiences, including the challenges and issues they faced and their strategies for dealing with these. It detailed a number of paradoxes: a sense of naivety coupled with a proactive plan; a lack of confidence coupled with a sense of agency and determination; a deep-seated appreciation of risk, coupled with an overall sense of optimism.

Chapter Six revisited the student participants at the end of the semester and explored their actual experiences. It documented the ways in which they had adapted and changed, and the strategies they had employed to manage both existing and emerging issues and challenges, along with staff views about the role they and the design of UPP played in supporting students. These narratives described a process of ongoing
challenge and risk, but also of adaptation and a growing sense of confidence and belonging as students transitioned from ‘outsiders’ to ‘insiders’.

In the remainder of this final chapter I will synthesise the observations contained in the two findings chapters as they relate specifically to the four research questions underpinning this study:

- How is risk experienced and perceived by students in a university enabling program?
- How is risk negotiated by students in their first semester of study?
- What is the relationship between background, the learning experience and risk?
- How can an understanding of risk contribute to policy and practice within the enabling and higher education sectors?

7.2 How is risk experienced and perceived by students in a university enabling program?

An overarching aim of this research was to consider whether the findings of researchers outside of Australia (for example, Reay, 2003; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Brine & Waller, 2004; Lehmann, 2004), that students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds faced a degree of risk as they attempted to enter university, held for students in an enabling education program in Australia. This proposition has been shown to be true for the students in this study. The study demonstrated that risk was real and extensive for UPP students. While some of the risks are similar to those experienced by many undergraduate students, others are unique, as is the extent of risk. However, despite this, a narrative of opportunity pervades.
Experiencing risk

This study identified that at the start of their first semester students were able to articulate a range of challenges and issues that coming to university posed which met the broad definition of risk used in this thesis, that is, there was the potential to cause harm or uncertainty (Lupton, 1999; Lim, 2011). These issues/challenges included juggling the responsibilities of adulthood (incomes, living arrangements, parenting, gender roles, relationships and jobs) and for many the role of carers, either for children or other family members. Students such as Kathleen (61) struggled with an extremely unsupportive husband who actively undermined her attempts to study; Peta (23), a single mother, struggled with feelings of guilt for taking time away from her child; Nicky (24) felt a sense of disconnect from her former friends as she encountered a new world; Max (30) wrestled with his divergence from the normative career and life trajectories for someone of his age; and Dylan (24) worried about the financial impact of study and how he would manage. A number of students were actively managing health issues, both physical and mental, and were feeling unsure about the impact of study on their health. Beyond diagnosed mental health conditions, nearly all participants struggled with issues of confidence and self-belief and a feeling that they were ill-prepared, lacking the skills and knowledge required for the journey ahead.

The word ‘juggling’ was used repeatedly by students, portraying the stress and tension of attempting to manage their existing lives as well as the new challenges represented by their university study. There was also a strong sense of fear in the students’ narratives, a sense that it could all ‘end in disaster’ (Hugh, 29). These concerns were echoed in the interviews with staff, who characterised the circumstances of many students as difficult, and also relayed a sense of foreboding about the potential for students to be negatively impacted by their experience.

Many of the issues and challenges outlined in this study have also been described in the literature relating to students commonly found in enabling programs, including students from LSES, first-in family, rural and remote, mature age and refugee backgrounds (see, for example, Thomas, 2014; O’Shea 2016b; Abbott-Chapman, 2011;
Stone, 2009; Morrice, 2012), or in literature relating specifically to enabling-program students (see, for example, Stone, 2009; Willans, 2010; Willans & Seary 2011, 2018).

Associating the issues and challenges faced by students in an enabling program with the notion of risk was a unique perspective of this study. While the student participants largely avoided negative outcomes, the potential for negative outcomes in relation to finances, relationships, self-esteem, health (both physical and mental) and future prospects was tangible. Staff, in fact, were able to speak directly to negative outcomes they had observed, including students being unable to manage their many responsibilities; students being undermined by family, friends and partners; and students suffering severe financial and health issues. Some of the personal consequences were extreme, including relationship break-ups, being forced to curtail studies, the deterioration of health conditions, particularly mental health, and the loss of friends, job and security. The research demonstrated that risk was real and that it affected decision making and actions.

**Unique level of risk**

An understanding that this was a time of risk for individuals was not the only theme to emerge from the data. Also evident was that collectively the ‘enabling education space’ represented a place with a unique level of risk. As noted above, the majority of students in the enabling education space belong to cohorts which can face significant challenges in negotiating their transition to higher education such as LSES, first-in-family, mature aged, rural and remote (Clarke, 2000; Hodges et al., 2013; Habel et al., 2016; Pitman et al., 2016). Students such as Lisa (42), for example, could be characterised as first-in-family, LSES, mature aged and rural and remote. Lisa’s evidence of the challenges these descriptors brought with them could be found in her story, including a lack of understanding of the university environment, a lack of confidence, a lack of support and knowledge from her family and friends and the need to juggle multiple responsibilities. Lisa also presented with a complex life situation, over and above those related to her background, including being the single mother of four, recently having housing issues, a child with significant health issues, and herself experiencing health issues during the semester. Lisa was not alone in this respect, with
the majority of students in this study attempting to negotiate a range of complex challenges, related to both their background and their individual circumstances.

Overlayed on Lisa’s circumstances, and on the circumstances of most of the students in the study, was a history of a previously low level of educational attainment or a long disassociation from education, combined with a corresponding lack of skills and knowledge necessary for undergraduate-level study. Lisa in fact had left school in year 10 and had subsequently only achieved a VET Certificate 1 level qualification which had a significant impact on her confidence and created a high sense of uncertainty both in her knowledge and her capacity to succeed. Although on the extreme end of students in this study, Lisa was not a ‘one-off’. In fact, she represented one of many students who were attempting to manage a number of barriers and risks as she attempted her transition.

Lisa’s example illustrated and confirmed the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) at work in the enabling-program space. Reflecting a similar finding by Habel et al. (2016) Lisa defied categorisation into any one equity group and was in fact likely impacted not only by all aspects of her backgrounds, but also of her identities (for example, woman, parent, single mother). Like the ‘supra category’ suggested by O’Shea et al. (2015, p. 35) in reference to first-in-family students, enabling students reflect a complex cohort which might be impacted by a broad and diverse range of issues.

Thus, UPP was a place of risk both on a macro level, that is, being populated with students from a variety of backgrounds which bring with them inherent challenges, as well as on a micro level, with individual students often juggling complex personal circumstances, each with their own level of risk. With these already unique students presenting themselves collectively in the one ‘space’ (that is, the enabling program) this study highlighted the way in which this space itself becomes unique; there is no other space in the university sector where students present together with such levels of risk. This has significant implications for the delivery of support and learning within enabling education programs, and will be discussed further in this chapter.
The social construction of risk

Despite the findings detailed in the previous section, this study found that the conceptualisation of risk by students and staff was not straightforward. Both staff and students talked about the UPP experience as having the potential for harm and uncertainty, used language that denoted fear, and discussed ways in which potential bad outcomes could be minimised and managed. Staff also gave concrete examples of how harm had actually occurred. However, both groups also tended to downplay the notion of risk, seeing the potential opportunity education afforded, and the safe space offered by UPP, as significant mitigating factors.

Staff and students’ perception of risk is influenced by the broader world in which the students are situated (Douglas, 1992), what Henwood et al. (2008, p. 423) call the ‘wider socio-cultural discourse’ or the ‘everyday meaning’ which the society attaches to various activities. Education, like the example of marriage used by Henwood et al. (2008), is an area of life in which the discourse is often about opportunity, and in fact the value of education is barely questioned (Brynin, 2012). Compulsory education, the high level of public and private funds devoted to education and efforts to raise education standards by governments indicate macro-level acceptance of the idea that education is good. In the 2016 federal election, for example, education ranked 5th as the issue of most concern to voters (Essential Report, 2016). It promises jobs, fulfilment, enlightenment, health and incomes. While not every individual sees higher education as beneficial or as a pathway for themselves (Lehmann, 2004, 2009; Taylor, 2012; Harwood, et al., 2017), the students in this study did so because they believed it would deliver substantial benefit. Rachel (26), for example, felt education had the capacity to change her life. Students and staff thus ‘constructed’ their views about the riskiness or otherwise of what they were doing, relative to the way education is perceived by the wider society. In doing so they adopted the perception of opportunity rather than risk.

Hugh’s (29) approach typified the attitude of many of the students. He came into the program with some serious mental health issues and was plagued with significant doubt about his capacity to manage both emotionally and financially. Hugh fully
understood that his experience could go wrong and that he might fail or not complete the semester and cause himself harm in the process. However, while acknowledging this reality, this student simultaneously dismissed the level of risk as minor, and instead focused on the positive benefits studying a degree might afford him, particularly in terms of a meaningful occupation. This was echoed by other students who saw harm in not taking a risk. Staff were more aware of risk and spoke more directly about some of the dangers they believed were faced by students. However, they too juxtaposed this against a backdrop of opportunity.

Appreciating the narrative of opportunity helps explain why enabling-program students take the step to transition to university despite the risks that they identified. In this study there was a high level of trust that a higher education degree would afford benefits. There was also a level of trust that the participation in UPP would assist students to make a successful transition to university. According to Giddens (1992) trust is a crucial mechanism for helping individuals negotiate risk in post-modern societies. In this study, trust played an important role in assisting students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds to navigate their transition to higher education.

7.3 How is risk negotiated by students in their first semester of study?

The biasing of opportunity over risk does not mean that students were unaware of risk, or that they did not act to counter it. In fact, a key finding from this study was that both students and staff actively identified and negotiated risk despite playing down its potential impact. The strategies used to do this shifted and changed during the semester, demonstrating a move from an individualised responsibility for risk, to a shared responsibility where students took full advantage of UPP as a liminal ‘safe space’. As shown in the data chapters, students used the time to reorganise and adjust their lives (finances, living arrangements, work, relationships, responsibilities) and selves (identities, confidence, skills) to get ready for the next step of their journey. In negotiating risk in this way enabling program students emerged from this study as
valuable and able, a position which contrasts starkly to the deficit narrative a risk focus might unintentionally promote.

**Proactive negotiation of risk**

While many studies have identified the issues and challenges students transitioning to university face, only relatively recently has research begun to examine what resources and actions students themselves bring to managing these situations (O’Shea, 2016a; McKay & Devlin, 2016). This study adds to this literature by demonstrating that the students were both aware of the risks which confronted them and that they took purposeful and proactive action to address these risks.

Students’ proactivity was actualised in two ways. Firstly, it took the form of thinking about the issues that might impact them as they embarked on their studies, and then making significant changes to their personal circumstances before starting and enrolling in the UPP program itself to accommodate these issues, such as moving house, changing jobs or work patterns, moving in with parents, negotiating with partners and families, and adjusting their lifestyles. Secondly, proactivity took the form of purposefully using UPP to ‘try out’ university to see how university study could be accommodated into their lives; to see if and how they would cope and fit in intellectually, socially and emotionally and whether or not university study would afford them ultimate benefit. Most students were also able to identify that they were lacking the right skills and knowledge to succeed and so they saw their participation in UPP as the chance to fill-in gaps in their education and understanding of university.

In addition, students showed a willingness to learn and adapt to their new environment and take advantage of systems and ways of working which they could see had benefits. For example, several students talked about actively creating networks with their peers in order to provide a mutual support mechanism for themselves and others. Nicky (24) took this even further, seeking out not only supportive peers in UPP, but identifying peers that she thought would be continuing on with their studies, and who would continue to be a support mechanism into the future.
This understanding of the proactive way students addressed risk adds to a burgeoning understanding more generally of the attributes and resources students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds might bring with them. For example, O’Shea (2016a) in her work on first-in-family students uses Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Framework to describe the aspirational, resistant, familial and experiential capital students used to negotiate their transition to higher education. In the study outlined in this thesis, students relied heavily on identity capital (Côté, 2005), that is, their own determination and self-discipline and their past experiences in work and family life, to succeed, a finding similarly identified in relation to LSES students by McKay and Devlin (2016).

Highlighting the proactive ways students negotiated risk and the resources they brought with them to do so is a powerful way of negating some of the unintended consequences of conceptualising students as disadvantaged or at risk. As Lupton (1999, p. 115) notes, associating people with levels of risk ‘serves to reinforce the marginalised or the powerless status of individuals’. In the context of higher education, students such as those in this study could be seen as resource intensive; needing extra services and support; as not being quite equal amongst their peers; and having little to contribute to the environment generally (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope, 1998; Lawrence, 2002; Smit, 2012; O’Shea, 2016a). However, the students in this study displayed significant determination, forward thinking, proactiveness and resilience in planning and finishing their first semester of study. They also showed significant bravery in entering a world for which they knew they were not well prepared, and which they really had very little information or evidence to guide how they might survive or succeed. What they lacked in cultural and social capital, they made up in identity capital. Their intention to use personal qualities such as persistence and determination as principal weapons in their fight to overcome such hurdles speaks to an underlying acceptance that the path ahead was difficult. The students did not expect to progress without struggle. Other researchers in the field (Reay et al., 2002; Stone, 2009) have also noted this quality in enabling or similar access program participants.
This study also shows that students are able to be active participants in negotiating their own future, and in using their identity capital to overcome shortfalls in cultural and social capital. As they transition into degrees, enabling-program students have further been shown to take with them significant resources which they can share with their peers (Crawford, 2014). This includes their understanding of both overt and hidden requirements and expectations of university-level study, as well as proactively forming peer networks for the purpose of mutual support. Collectively these attributes highlight the fact that enabling students, rather than just being seen as marginalised and disadvantaged, have significant strengths and qualities to bring to their ongoing university studies, and that these should be acknowledged, celebrated and harnessed by universities. Beyond these capacities on an individual level, these attributes also have the potential to add to and enrich the higher education environment as a whole. Students progressing through enabling-program pathways bring a diversity of backgrounds and approaches that contribute to the reconstruction of universities and university populations. Far from being seen as a burden, enabling-program students should be seen as a valuable resource in the quest to change and diversify universities.

**Individualisation of risk**

A second finding in this thesis, in relation to how risk was negotiated, was that initially risk was largely individualised. This individualisation aligns with Beck’s (1992) *Risk Society* argument which suggests that structural barriers such as class, gender, education and family, which may have previously prevented students such as those in the study from entering university, are being broken down. This breakdown opens higher education to a wider range of people. However, in doing so the responsibility for taking advantage of this opportunity, and for succeeding (or failing) has been largely transferred to the individual. Beck argues that in the absence of structures and norms individuals are required to be active decision makers in their own lives, and exercise constant reflexivity in relation to their personal situations and circumstances, although often without the necessary skills and knowledge to do so successfully.

The students in this study strongly reflect Beck’s conceptualisation. They not only took advantage of opportunity that had been made available to them by the widening
participation initiatives and the opening up of university to a more diverse range of students, but they also individualised the responsibility for doing this successfully. In Chapter Five the students described how they intended to rely principally on their own personal characteristics and agency, their own identity and social capital to succeed. While they also included UPP in this conceptualisation, it was framed in terms of them individually making the most of what UPP offered, the implication being that if they failed, it would be their fault. Such positioning has been similarly articulated in the work of others such as Reay (2003) and Chipperfield (2013). For example, Reay describes a small group of women from working-class backgrounds negotiating entry into higher education via an Access Course in the UK. She found that ‘the onus of working-class educational failure is individualised in their accounts. They alone are to blame’ (p. 307). Chipperfield (2013) found that students, whom she characterises as ‘non-traditional’ (p. 623), commonly individualised failure, despite numerous other factors that might realistically be used to explain poorer than desired outcomes.

A shared responsibility emerges

At the end of the students’ first semester, this notion that risk is borne almost entirely by the individual had been tempered, creating a new understanding of how risk could be negotiated. Post-semester interviews showed that the students had adopted new support mechanisms to help them succeed. This included forming supporting friendship or study groups, and making use of support embedded in the program, such as attending Supported Studies, taking advantage of flexible arrangements, and going to staff for assistance and support.

While students still spoke of the ways in which their own personal determination and resilience (identity capital) contributed to their success, the students’ views became closer to the view of the staff, which was that negotiating the risks inherent in transitioning to higher education was a shared responsibility. Students learnt to rely not just on themselves, but also on the broader support mechanisms afforded by their peers, staff and the university. Staff also pointed to strategies which helped share the burden of risk, such as encouraging the formation of peer networks, being flexible,
providing support for individual students both emotionally and academically, and the proactive identification and discussion of risk.

These strategies were embedded in the program. They constitute a range of practices which are increasingly being identified in the literature as common to enabling programs (Crawford, 2014; Seary, et al., 2016; Relf, et al., 2017; Farrugia, 2018) leading to an emerging sense of an ‘enabling pedagogy’. This research confirms and enhances this work by identifying ways in which the UPP program actively created a shared responsibility for risk.

**UPP as a safe place**

Trust is an important element in allowing people to move forward when doing so entails risk (Giddens, 1992). UPP was characterised by both staff and students in this study as a liminal space, a space between the world outside university, and the world inside university; a space where risk could be negotiated with a degree of safety. Such characterisations imply a level of trust. Students explained how they were intentionally using UPP to assess their intellectual capacity to study at a university level, their ability to manage emotionally, physically and psychologically, as well as to see how their lives could fit around study. The students were also using their time in UPP to acquire the higher education cultural and academic capital that they understood, if imperfectly, they lacked in the field of higher education. In the students’ decision-making process about attempting university study, the conceptualisation of UPP as a ‘preparation’ space was far more dominant than that of UPP as an entry mechanism, despite the fact that most of the participants needed to get through the program to gain entry into a degree. Staff also strongly characterised UPP as a ‘try it out’ space that afforded students the time to adjust and equip themselves with the resources they would need to succeed in moving on to degree-level study and thus avoid unnecessary harm or uncertainty.

At the end of the semester, a semester in which most students in this study were successful, students described how UPP had not only generally fulfilled their expectations but often exceeded them. UPP provided the time and space to adapt and
adjust their circumstances to manage the requirements of study and a mechanism to bridge gaps in cultural, academic and social capital. In addition, it provided a space to create new identities, a sense of confidence and belonging and an opportunity to adapt their habitus to the university environment.

This conceptualisation of UPP as a liminal ‘safe place’ is a new way of considering enabling programs, even if in reality programs such as UPP have been operating under such a model for some time. Such a conceptualisation provides a strategy for supporting students in Beck’s (1991) post-modern world where risk is increasingly left to the individual to negotiate. Students were given tools to take up Beck’s (1991) post-modern challenge of creating ‘do-it-yourself biographies’ (p. 135), no longer forced to find their way just ‘on the basis of his or her own notions’ (p. 137). Further, they were provided with a space where sharing the responsibility for risk is facilitated. Not only do the students have more tools, they also have more help. They are encouraged to adopt strategies that will enable them to manage risk and they are provided with a ‘lower stakes’ environment to adjust to the task that lay ahead of them. Finally, UPP provided a space in which a student’s own resources and capital (identity and social) could be augmented with new or extended forms of capital (cultural, academic, social), allowing students to build on existing strengths, in a positive and ultimately empowering way. As Claire (50) summarised, ‘the UPP course gave me everything I needed.’

The staff perspective largely affirmed these outcomes. However, staff were also able to speak about those students who did not succeed in UPP, and here it becomes apparent that UPP in its current form did not have the capacity to always prevent negative outcomes for students, adding an important note of caution to this conceptualisation of UPP as a ‘safe space’.
7.4 What is the relationship between background, the learning experience and risk?

The purpose of this study was not just to consider the risk involved in the initial transition to university, but also to consider the impact of background in this transition, and the ongoing impact of the learning experience. Findings once again revealed a nuanced complexity in the enabling education space, with the impact both reflecting and diverging from the existing understandings of the impact of background on transition and success.

**Background and risk**

The challenges and risks faced by students in this study have previously been associated in the literature with a range of under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds such as mature aged, first-in-family, LSES and rural and remote. However, this study found that while there were indeed many students from backgrounds such as these in the program, the two dominant characteristics which transcended all backgrounds were a lack of, or long disassociation from, previous academic success and being mature-aged.

One or both of these characteristics applied to all the students in this study, and often mimicked the impact of backgrounds such as LSES or first-in-family. This meant that students shared many of the issues and challenges of students coming from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds regardless of whether in fact they did. Max (31), for example, came from a highly educated family, but his failure to complete year 12, and his long disassociation from education left him feeling unsure of how to operate in the university environment, lacking skills, capital (cultural and academic) and confidence. Max was also impacted by the issues facing mature-aged students, needing to change jobs, adjust his finances and move house in order to accommodate study into his life.

Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of capital, habitus and field are shown in this study to have significant relevance in the understanding of the topic and impact all the participants.
in one way or another. While some of the students had some personal resources and capital at their disposal, their lack of, or distance from, educational attainment (not necessarily just their social class as Bourdieu assumed) meant that they did not have all the necessary skills, knowledge and understandings (that is, capital) which typically supported success at university. This in turn magnified the risk they faced. In reality, the field of higher education represented one where much was ‘hidden’ to students from certain backgrounds, and where they could be considered cultural outsiders (Lehmann, 2009). UPP provided a mechanism whereby students could acquire the necessary capital (cultural, social, academic) which they hitherto lacked. It also provided a space where the students could acquire an understanding of the higher education field, which allowed their own habitus to develop accordingly. In understanding and adapting to this, students acquired a sense of confidence and belonging. All these underpinned an ability to meet the requirements of university, academically, culturally, socially and emotionally which in turn helped to minimise risk and for some support success.

This study shows that while Beck’s (1991) ideas around the breakdown of structural impediments in post-modern society are a reality for some, the impact of background remains important and potentially limiting. In relation to university participation for example, there are a range of factors, including socioeconomic status and class, but also other characteristics, such as failing at school, or missing school due to ill health which can result in ‘capital deficits’. These capital deficits can impact success and increase risk. Contrary to Bourdieu’s (1986) contention that education was primarily an instrument for reproducing existing social order by excluding those who did not have access to the capital it provided, this study has demonstrated that education can also be used as a tool to overcome capital deficits, allowing students to succeed where they may not have before.

**Learning experience and risk**

Mezirow (1991) examines the way in which education has the capacity to transform individuals. Mezirow describes a process of dislocation in the face of new ideas and ways of thinking and being which can be encountered through education, but which
ultimately were integrated to create a new version of oneself. Working in the enabling space, researchers (Stone, 2009; Willans, 2010; Willans & Seary, 2011) have found that for some students this process of transformation was not necessarily linear, nor without disruption. Others (Reay, 2001; Lehmann 2007, 2014) have found that transformative disruption is an experience not uncommon to LSES students, as they transition into an environment where they are required to adjust and change to a habitus different to their own.

In Chapter Six the students in this study spoke of some disruptions to their lives, including losing connections with old friends, and fractured relationships, and of the process of changing identities. However, they did not speak of any fundamental disruptions to their sense of self, nor of substantial harm or risk related to the transformative nature of entering the higher education landscape. In addition, there was no consistent relationship between their backgrounds (e.g. LSES, first-in family) and this disruption.

However, staff applying their broader lens did describe such a risk, and particularly associated this risk with a LSES and first-in-family background. Their focus was on the way in which they had witnessed significant relationships with friends and family being challenged as students encountered new ways of understanding the world and themselves. They described how for some students this disruption and conflict could lead to substantial harm, including students leaving the program or physical injury. An association between the process of studying and the experience of risk and negative outcomes is thus suggested by staff, but this was not corroborated by the students in this study.

7.5 How can an understanding of risk contribute to policy and practice within the enabling and higher education sectors?

The goal of this study was to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the way risk is experienced as students transition to university via an enabling program situated in a particular time and place. From this it is possible to generate insights and
understandings to inform key areas of policy and practice (Ezzy, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Walsham, 2006). While the diversity of enabling programs makes any claim of universality difficult, the insights gained nonetheless have the capacity to add considerably to our thinking on these topics. The following sections examine the findings of this study in these two key areas.

**Policy**

The Widening Participation policy agenda remains an important driver in higher education policy worldwide (Margison, 2016a). It accelerates the post-modern deconstruction of barriers to participation and encourages a more diverse range of students. New stories of participation are emerging, from ‘the African refugee who dreams of a law career to the grandmother who wants to work as a teacher, from the student with a disability who wants to empower others through sharing his story of university success, to the young woman from a LSES area who is the first in her family to attend university’ (Cocks & Stokes, 2013, pp. 22-23). However, in doing so new risks and responsibilities also emerge, creating vulnerabilities and obstacles for potential participants (Archer, 2007). This study demonstrates the mechanisms that can be employed to help negotiate these new vulnerabilities and risks including the provision of safe, risk negotiation spaces, and new ways of supporting and understanding the outcomes from such programs.

*The provision of risk negotiation spaces*

If the goal of encouraging participation in higher education from a broader range of backgrounds is to be realised, the provision of spaces, such as enabling programs, where the risks associated with wider participation can be negotiated, is crucial. As reiterated by Engstrom and Tinto (2008), access alone does not represent opportunity. Effective, purposeful and targeted support is also paramount and the commitment to this must be strong, ongoing, and across the political divide.

Risk negotiation spaces need to be relatively ‘low stakes’, especially financially, to encourage people to take the risk. To date a special Commonwealth Government
'Enabling Loading' ($3223 per equivalent full-time student load in 2017), as well as eligibility for Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for individual unit enrolments, has meant that most universities, including UTAS, have offered enabling programs on a ‘fee-free’ basis. However, a 2017 federal government budget proposal (still government policy but not yet approved into law as of November 2018) recommends the discontinuation of the ‘Enabling Loading’ in its current format and the introduction of a more restrictive system, and the introduction of fees for enabling students (Australian Government, 2017a). While this policy has now been dropped it is clear that such considerations are on the political radar. The learnings from this study would suggest that increasing the ‘stakes’, especially financially, has the potential to discourage various cohorts of learners from trying out higher education altogether.

In providing a risk-negotiation space, enabling education can also be referenced in broader terms than just social inclusion. Enabling programs primarily provide for that section of the population that has been traditionally excluded from educational opportunity, and this should remain its raison d'être. However, enabling programs also have the capacity to benefit the population more broadly, to include students who have missed educational opportunity because of ill health, late bloomers who want a chance to explore education and take on new careers and/or challenges or the working person who needs to or wants to change life and/or career directions. All such students benefit from the model of support offered by UPP and as long as places and access remain relatively unrestricted, enabling programs can continue to cater for both students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds and other second-chance learners.

Finally, this research suggests that the Australian practice of embedding enabling programs within existing higher education institutions, rather than in separate institutions sitting outside universities such as polytechnics, vocational colleges, Further Education Colleges or Community Colleges as is the practice in other parts of the world, has significant merit. Embedding programs in universities provides students with the opportunity to acclimatise and interact with the university environment in an authentic manner. Students in this study clearly began to identify as bona fide university students while undertaking their enabling program, and staff spoke of the
benefit of introducing students to actual systems, processes and support mechanisms available to undergraduate students. Such a practice may protect against the stratification of opportunity that has become an issue in other countries, such as the UK, USA and Canada, where students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds increasingly find themselves in low-status colleges and pathways that have arisen external to their higher education sectors (Cahalan, 2013; Croxford & Raffe, 2015; Tsiplakides, 2018).

**Recognising and accounting for the uniqueness of enabling education**

This research suggests that consideration needs to be given to the special nature of enabling programs and the students they cater for. As has been demonstrated, students inhabiting this space bring with them a complex mix of backgrounds and personal circumstances and needs, concentrated within a single cohort. While being embedded in mainstream universities (as discussed above) has merit, as does mimicking the wider university (as will be discussed further) the unique nature of the cohort also suggests that it is a space that requires ways of operating that may differ to some standard university practices. Program design and staffing levels, for example, must be ‘fit-for-purpose’ and meet the needs of the students, not merely replicate university-wide practices and standards. Funding mechanisms similarly need to support the special needs of this space as well as continued research into establishing best practice in what is still a relatively new field of endeavour.

**Reframing attrition**

A third key policy implication highlighted by the findings in this study is in the area of attrition. The fact that poorly prepared students, students with a disrupted educational past who do not as yet have an accurate understanding of what university entails, or whether or not they will be able to manage in this environment, are using UPP as a ‘try it out’ space has significant implications for attrition. In the ‘try it out’ process, some students will come to understand that university is not the right place for them, or not the right place for them at that point in time. In fact, Hodges et al. (2013, p. 5) argue that some ‘attrition from an enabling program is actually desirable, as the enabling program is playing the role of a “filter” prior to an undergraduate
program’. This type of attrition does not necessarily come with negative outcomes and for some can in fact represent a new and positive experience (McInnis, et al., 2000; Hodges et al., 2013; Merrill, 2015).

Even for students who decide university is the right place for them, the reality of university life, and of managing the many complexities of both background and personal circumstances, proves too difficult and they may either withdraw or simply stop attending (Hodges et al., 2013). Hodges et al. (2013) and Seary and Willans (2018) indicate that complex issues, particularly personal ones (for example, finances, housing, relationships, work, health, juggling responsibilities and confidence and other major ‘life events’) are important factors in student attrition in enabling programs.

With a concentration of students impacted by these factors in the enabling program space, it is not surprising that enabling-program attrition rates are higher than undergraduate rates (Hodges et al., 2013).

None-the-less, attrition numbers do matter. The higher than average (as compared to degree-level courses) attrition rates in enabling programs have both been noted and criticised in recent years by government (Kemp & Norton, 2014). Further, a recent government consultation paper on the reallocation of Commonwealth supported places for enabling, sub-bachelor and postgraduate courses (Australian Government, 2018) recommends the restriction and reallocation of government supported places for enabling-program students based on performance. That is, those institutions who have more students articulating to degree-level study will receive more places. Such a system takes little account of the challenges faced by students from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds, and could in fact lead to institutions with high numbers of students in these categories receiving less funding. It may also lead to institutions targeting students more likely to succeed and imposing entrance criteria on courses. All these outcomes would ultimately undermine the capacity of enabling-programs to fulfil their basic remit, which is to support equity and inclusion in Australia’s higher education system.

While attrition is always an issue of concern, and efforts should continue to address it, this study provides a case for both better understanding these figures and for
accepting a higher attrition rate as a natural by-product of the enabling-program process. Different, more realistic standards, not degree-level standards, should be applied to this sector. Exactly what these standards should be still needs further research, but clearly a broader understanding of the impact of attrition, both positive and negative, is required. Lastly, it is important that outcomes for enabling-program students be measured in more than just retention and attrition statistics, that a more comprehensive view be taken to acknowledge the significant social, personal and educational outcomes of such programs.

Practice

The notion of an ‘enabling pedagogy’ (Hodges, et al., 201; Lane & Sharpe, 2014; Jones et al., 2016; Seary et al., 2016, Relf et al., 2017; Motta & Bennett, 2018) and pedagogies to support students from LSES backgrounds (Devlin et al., 2012) and first-in-family students (O'Shea et al., 2015) are emerging areas of research. The findings in this study have the potential to add to this existing body of knowledge, though the diverse nature of programs and courses makes any claim to universal applicability difficult either to enabling programs themselves, or more broadly. This data highlighted five key areas of program design/pedagogy which assisted the students in this study to negotiate the risks they encountered as they enter the higher education sector. These were:

Accessibility

As already discussed, students in this study saw UPP as a less risky options than other pathways, providing a guided introduction to academia in a low-stakes environment (both financially and otherwise). That is, UPP represented a place where ‘trying university out’ was a viable option. While care needs to be taken not to set students up to fail, the current practice of having minimal entrance standards and little or no fees (that is, open access) supported access to a very wide group of students.
**Targeted support**

Targeted support included necessary academic support to gain skills and knowledge, the unpacking of hidden academic and cultural capital, and ongoing support in either groups or on a 1:1 basis as required, to help students negotiate a system they are unused to. Targeted support also included the direct facilitation of peer support networks and encouraging students to use support facilities available to the wider university population. Targeted support and the provision of dedicated time, space and staff assisted students to make use of all resources, from their personal capabilities, strengths and capital to supports provided in or by the university.

**Flexibility**

Flexibility allowed space for students to adjust to new circumstances and ways of doing. Such flexibility included offering a variety of study modes and enrolment options, as well as some flexibility around assignment submissions. However, flexibility was finely balanced against the need for realism as discussed below.

**Realism**

Providing an experience which closely mimicked the undergraduate experience allowed students to accurately assess whether or not they could negotiate and manage the risks involved in degree-level study. Similarly, situating UPP within an existing university assisted students’ adaptation to the wider environment. As noted, this realism needed to be tempered by the concurrent needs of high levels of support and flexibility. Getting this balance right is likely to be an ongoing tension.

**Active risk managements**

The purposeful identification of risk, the provision of strategies to help students manage risk, and a process to identify and support students ‘at risk’ were notable features of the UPP program. Examples in this study include the pre-admissions information and support programs, the late enrolment support process, the dedicated Supported Studies unit, and the provision of dedicated staff (Campus Coordinators) to support students in all aspects of their lives. If enabling programs such as UPP are
understood as unique environments, with a unique cohort of students who are embarking on a risky endeavour as they attempt to transition to university, then the provision of specific strategies to help manage this risk is pivotal.

7.6 Limitations

Three key limitations emerged during this study. Firstly, the students and staff who volunteered to participate in the research project did not necessarily represent a broad cross-section of the UPP student cohort or staff. No methods to target particular individuals from specific backgrounds were used in this study beyond ensuring there were participants from each of the Tasmanian campuses of UTAS and that there was representation from both males and females. A noticeable gap is the lack of students from a non-English speaking background. These students are a common cohort within UPP, especially students from a refugee background or who hold a humanitarian visa. No students from this background volunteered for the study. Similarly, there were no students from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) background. While there is a separate ATSI enabling program at UTAS (murina), students who identify as ATSI do occasionally choose to enrol in UPP rather than murina. No such students volunteered for this study. Additionally, this research refers only to the experience of on-campus students. Many students study UPP online. This study, therefore, makes no claims that the findings are representative of all UPP students or all modes of enrolment.

While UPP targets students nationally identified as ‘disadvantaged’ (DEET, 1990) in line with most other enabling programs nation-wide, the very diverse nature of how enabling programs operate means that the findings may not be applicable to all programs.

Thirdly, as highlighted several times during the study, the students in this cohort were uncharacteristically successful. This may have been just coincidental, or a by-product in part, or in full, of their participation in the study itself. The inherent determination that many of the students talked about and displayed may have underpinned their desire to participate in the study in the first place. In addition, the fact that issues and
challenges and associated strategies, were openly discussed and identified, and that the student participants knew that their outcomes were to be revisited in the post-semester interviews, may have contributed to their progress during the semester. While this is a very positive outcome for these participants, it means that the intention to also interview students who had dropped out or who did not succeed during the semester has not been realised. As similarly found by other researches (Hodges et al., 2013; Habel et al., 2016) accessing and understanding the experience of these students has proved difficult. The missing voice of unsuccessful students is a significant impediment to fully understanding this topic. This research therefore can only speak of how UPP supports successful students, and, until the impact of the program on students who drop out or fail is more fully understood, this research remains of value only in this context.

7.7 Further research

Several areas of future enquiry have emerged from this study. The first is a need for further research to fully understand the unique nature of enabling-program students. This study pointed to considerable complexity and intersectionality in relation to the type of students in programs such as UPP. However, with only a small number of students participating in this study there is likely to be even more of this story to unpack. Further research is required to fully understand who enrols in enabling programs, and how their backgrounds and identities intersect and impact their experience.

As flagged in the previous section, understanding the experience and outcomes for unsuccessful students is critical for achieving a full and complete picture of the enabling space and its students. Understanding just success can only ever paint a partial picture and thus exploring the journey of unsuccessful students remains a critical area of research that needs to be pursued. The connection between background, transformation and risk also remains unexplored, and this also represents a focus for future research.
Research which establishes a framework for consistently recording and reporting attrition within the sector would also be of benefit. Current differences in representation of attrition make it difficult to compare and analyse outcomes for students. Further, while zero attrition would always be a goal, such an outcome is highly unlikely. As such, research into what might be acceptable ‘attrition parameters’ for enabling programs would make a valuable contribution to the sector. This understanding would ensure that enabling programs are not compared like-for-like to undergraduate or other courses, to which they fundamentally differ. Research which tracks enabling-program students into degrees and looks at how successfully (or not) they negotiate this experience may also cast attrition in enabling programs in a different light.

Lastly, research needs to continue around what constitutes best practice in enabling program design and pedagogy. Enabling programs in Australia are extremely diverse, which causes issues of assessing quality and of the transferability of outcomes. While recent research has uncovered commonalities (Relf et al., 2017), there are still few standards applied to the sector. This denies the sector a level of acceptance and validity and denies the student the ability to transfer their qualifications to other relevant higher education programs and institutions. An Australia-wide framework within which enabling education operates would have benefits in terms of both quality and transferability.

7.8 Conclusion

This qualitative research is set in a particular place (Tasmania), focuses on a particular program (UPP) and is based on a small number of participants expressing their reality in a particular point of time. It puts together a richly nuanced understanding of how the students and staff see and negotiate risk and adds to the understanding of this topic in a way not possible by other methods (Creswell, 2012). The findings also suggest broader patterns which could be investigated by further studies (Rice & Ezzy, 1999).
Within these parameters this thesis has revealed that utilising the framework of risk can provide significant insight into the experience of enabling-program students, and into the types of structures and services that can support them. It has demonstrated that students appreciate risk and are active agents in managing it. The thesis also established the role of an enabling program as a ‘safe space’ in which the risks inherent in entering higher education can be negotiated. Ultimately programs such as UPP remain interventional and focus primarily on turning the disadvantaged into the advantaged (Burke, 2012). They do little to address underlying structural causes of inequity in higher education. However, within these parameters this study demonstrated that providing ‘safe spaces’ is an important strategy in helping make theoretical opportunity a reality. It is not enough to simply make university more accessible; strategies to ensure students can take advantage of the opportunity are also essential.

For those with little real understanding of what university is about and who have not travelled the more traditional paths that would prepare them for university, programs such as UPP truly do enable students to try out university. Students are provided with the time and space to explore the environment and learn, to manage their issues and challenges, test out their own abilities and identities, and to find out if it’s really ‘for them’. It is not a dichotomy of risk or opportunity, but a place where both play out simultaneously. Such understanding clearly highlights how students who may not have otherwise considered university are given the opportunity to begin a new chapter in their lives.


Dougherty, K., & Kienzel, G. (2007). It’s not enough to get through the open door: Inequalities by social background in transfer from community colleges to four-


Marks, A., Turner, E., & Osborne, M. (2003). 'Not for the likes of me': The overlapping effect of social class and gender factors in the decision made by adults not to


Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2018). ‘Why did we lose them and what could we have done?’ *Student Success. 9*(1), 47-60.


APPENDIX A

18 July 2014

Ms Lynn Jarvis

Dear Ms Jarvis

Thank you for your letter responding to the HREC review letter. I am pleased to advise that the Human Research Ethics application referred to below has been approved.

Ethics Number: HE14/292
Project Title: A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways

Researchers: Ms Lynn Jarvis, Dr Sarah O’Shea,

Professor Jan Wright Documents Approved/ Noted:
- Initial Application
- Invitation to participate: email invitation to staff (V1 June 2014)
- Consent form for staff (V1 June 2014)
- Suggested staff interview questions (V1 June 2014)
- Request for student volunteers (V1 June 2014)
- Expression of interest - student interview form (V1 June 2014)
- Consent form for students (V1 June 2014)
- Student Interview Questions (V1 June 2014)

The study was changed in 2018 from its original working title ‘A Leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways’, to its final title of ‘Risk or opportunity? The journey of students entering university via an enabling program’.

15
Approval Date: 17 July 2014
Expiry Date: 16 July 2015

The University of Wollongong/Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District Social Sciences HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. The HREC has reviewed the research proposal for compliance with the National Statement and approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with this document.

A condition of approval by the HREC is the submission of a progress report annually and a final report on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/research/rso/ethics/UOW009385.html. This report must be completed, signed by the appropriate Head of School, and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.

As evidence of continuing compliance, the Human Research Ethics Committee also requires that researchers immediately report:

- proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

Please note that approvals are granted for a twelve month period. Further extension will be considered on receipt of a progress report prior to expiry date.
If you have any queries regarding the HREC review process, please contact the Ethics Unit on phone 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au

Yours sincerely

Professor Kathleen Clapham Chair,
Social Sciences
Human Research
Ethics Committee
cc: Dr Sarah O'Shea
Participant Information Sheet for Students

This is an invitation for you to participate in a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree at the University of Wollongong. This research is called: A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges and opportunities students experience as they journey through their first semester of study in a university preparation program.

INVESTIGATORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lynn Jarvis</th>
<th>Dr Sarah O’Shea</th>
<th>Professor Jan Wright</th>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
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<td>University of Wollongong</td>
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<tr>
<td>(02) 4221 5838</td>
<td>(02) 4221 3877</td>
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Why have you been invited to participate in this research project?
You have been invited to participate in this research project because you are a student who is beginning study in a University preparation program for the first time.

What will you be asked to do?
You will be invited to participate in two 1:1 interviews – one at the beginning of the semester (before week 5 of semester) and one at the end of the semester. Interviews will take place in person and will involve discussing your experiences leading up to and starting your course in the first interview and your experience through the semester in the second interview. Interviews are likely to take approximately 30-60 minutes. They will be conducted at a mutually agreeable time and space at the University of Tasmania campus which you attend.

Students who agree to participate in an interview will be asked to sign a statement of informed consent before interviews are conducted. With your consent, the researcher may digitally record and/or take notes during the interview.

Are there any possible benefits from participation in this research project?
Your participation will benefit students enrolling in programs such as the University Preparation Program in the future. Having a better understanding of students and what they experience enables the university and its teaching staff to provide better services and support.
Are there any possible risks from participation in this research project?
There are no anticipated risks for participants in this research project. Student ID/names will not be associated with interview responses and no student will be identifiable in the report or any other publications arising from the research project.

Your results will in no way be affected or influenced by whether or not you choose to participate in this research project.

What if I change my mind during or after the research project?
You may choose to withdraw from the research project at any time up until the publication of the results as a thesis or journal article without reason or prejudice. Any data you have provided will be removed from the research project and destroyed.

What will happen to the information when this research project is over?
Research data will be held electronically in a password protected file for 5 years from the completion of the project and will then be deleted. The information received from you will be treated strictly confidentially and your name or identity will be removed from any electronic or hard copy documents.

How will the results of the research project be published?
Findings from the project may be published in a thesis, academic paper and/or presented at conferences.

Ethics
This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong.

What if I have questions about this research project?
If you have any questions about this research project, please don’t hesitate to contact Lynn Jarvis by phone on 6324 3043 or 0408 265045 or email, lmj650@uowmail.edu.au

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the University Ethics Officer, on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. Please quote ethics reference number HE14-292.

This information sheet is for you to keep. Thank you for your time.
Lynn Jarvis
Participant Information Sheet for Staff

This is an invitation for you to participate in a study conducted by the researchers at the University of Wollongong. This research is called: *A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways*. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges and opportunities students experience as they journey through their first semester of study in a university preparation program.

**INVESTIGATORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lynn Jarvis</td>
<td>Faculty of Social Sciences</td>
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<td>(02) 4221 3877</td>
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**Why have you been invited to participate in this research project?**

You have been invited to participate in this research project because you are staff member involved in the delivery of teaching and student support in a University enabling program. Your input will help explore how the university perceives and acts in relation to the risks that might impact 'enabling' students.

**What will you be asked to do?**

You will be invited to participate in one 1:1 interview with the opportunity to provide further feedback as desired for the duration of the research project. The initial interview is likely to take approximately 30-60 minutes. It will be conducted at a mutually agreeable time and place at the University of Tasmania campus at which you work. You will also be encouraged to provide ongoing feedback on the way in which risk is managed and experienced within the University Preparation Program at any further point during the data collection phase.

Staff who agree to participate in an interview will be asked to sign a statement of informed consent before interviews are conducted. With your consent, the researcher may digitally record and/or take notes during the interview.

**Are there any possible benefits from participation in this research project?**

Your participation will benefit students enrolling in enabling programs such as the University Preparation Program in the future. Having a better understanding of the way risk they experience enables the university and its teaching staff to provide better services and support.

**Are there any possible risks from participation in this research project?**

There are no anticipated risks for participants in this research project. Names or other identifiable information will not be associated with interview responses and no staff member will be identifiable in the report or any other publications arising from the research project.
Participation in this research will have no implications for your current or future employment.

**What if I change my mind during or after the research project?**
You may choose to withdraw from the research project at any time without reason or prejudice. Any data you have provided will be removed from the research project and destroyed.

**What will happen to the information when this research project is over?**
Research data will be held electronically in a password protected file for 5 years from the completion of the project and will then be deleted. The information received from you will be treated strictly confidentially and your name or identity will not be revealed.

**How will the results of the research project be published?**
Findings from the project may be published in a thesis, academic paper and/or presented at conferences.

**Ethics**
This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong.

**What if I have questions about this research project?**
If you have any questions about this research project, please don’t hesitate to contact Lynn Jarvis by phone on 6324 3043 or 0408 265045 or email, lmj650@uowmail.edu.au

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the University Ethics Officer, on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. Please quote ethics reference number HE14-292.

This information sheet is for you to keep. Thank you for your time.
Lynn Jarvis
Appendix C

Consent form for Students Version 1, June 2014

Consent Form for Students

RESEARCH TITLE: A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways

RESEARCHER/S:

Lynn Jarvis  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Wollongong

Dr Sarah O’Shea  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Wollongong  
(02) 4221 5838

Professor Jan Wright  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Wollongong  
(02) 4221 3877

I have been given information about *A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways* and discussed the research project with Lynn Jarvis who is conducting this research as part of a Doctorate of Education degree supervised by Dr Sarah O’Shea in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong.

I understand that if I consent to participate in this project I will be asked to participate in two interviews to talk about my experiences before and during my first semester of study in the University Preparation Program at the University of Tasmania. I have had an opportunity to ask Lynn Jarvis any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. I also understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are unlikely to be any risks or burdens associated with this study.

My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my progress or treatment in the University Preparation Program in any way.
If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Lynn Jarvis 0408 265045 or Dr Sarah O'Shea [02] 4221 5838 or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. Ethics approval no. HE14-292.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

☐ Participate in two 30-60 minute interviews

☐ Have my interviews recorded and transcribed for later use

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used primarily for a DEd thesis, and will also be used in summary form for journal publication and I consent for it to be used in this manner. I also understand that I can withdraw at any point and will be given the opportunity to review my interviews once they have been transcribed and withdraw my data or parts thereof if desired.

Name:

........................................................................................................

Signed Date

........................................................................................................

... .../.../...
Consent Form for Staff

RESEARCH TITLE: A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways

RESEARCHER/S:

| Lynn Jarvis  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Wollongong | Dr Sarah O’Shea  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Wollongong  
(02) 4221 5838 | Professor Jan Wright  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Wollongong  
(02) 4221 3877 |

I have been given information about *A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways* and discussed the research project with Lynn Jarvis who is conducting this research as part of a Doctorate of Education degree supervised by Dr Sarah O’Shea in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong.

I understand that if I consent to participate in this project I will be asked to participate in one interview to talk about how the university perceives and acts in relation to the risks that might impact students studying in the University Preparation Program at the University of Tasmania. I understand that I will also be able and may be asked to provide any further reflections or thoughts in relation to this topic for the duration of the research. I have had an opportunity to ask Lynn Jarvis any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. I also understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are unlikely to be any risks or burdens associated with this study.

My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my employment or my relationship with my supervisor or other staff at the University of Tasmania.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Lynn Jarvis 6324 3043 or Dr Sarah O’Shea [02] 4221 5838 or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. HE14-292
By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

☐ Participate in an 30-60 minute interview
☐ Have my interview recorded and transcribed for later use

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used primarily for a DEd thesis, and will also be used in summary form for journal publication and I consent for it to be used in this manner. I also understand that I can withdraw at any point and will be given the opportunity to review my interview once it has been transcribed and withdraw my data or parts thereof if desired.

Name:

........................................................................................................

Signed  Date

...  .../.../...
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Transcription Services

A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways

I, ________________________, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regard to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Lynn Jarvis related to her doctoral study on A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;

2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Lynn Jarvis;

3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;

4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Lynn Jarvis] in a complete and timely manner.

5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber’s name (printed) __________________________________________________________

Transcriber’s signature _______________________________________________________________

Date __________________________________________________________
Appendix E

A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways

Student Interview Questions: Interview One

1. Tell me a about your journey through education to this point? What did you family think about education, what did you think?

2. What has led to you deciding to do the University Preparation course now? [Prompts – When did you first start thinking of going to uni? What has motivated you? What are your long term plans?]

3. What opportunities do you think studying this course represents?

4. Have you thought much about what kind of things might be issues or problems for you as you start uni? If so, what were they? [Prompt: manage financially; coping with demands work, family, friends, other commitments; reactions/support from family/friends; being in the university environment – knowing what to do and where to go; coping with the level of work; health issues?]

5. What resources do you think you bring with you as you start your study [prompt: personal attributes, previous experience, motivation, friends etc.]

6. Is there anything you think may put you at a disadvantage?

7. Have you faced any problems or issues leading up to and starting your course?

8. Do you think of yourself of ‘taking a risk’ at the moment? If so, what kind of risk are you taking? How does it make you feel?
Students Interview Questions: Interview Two

1. Tell me about what happened during the semester.

2. If things went to plan, what kind of things enabled you to successfully complete the semester [prompt both inside and outside of the course itself]?

3. If things didn’t go to plane, what kind of things contributed to you being unable to successfully complete the semester [prompt both inside and outside of the course itself]?

4. Was there anything the university could have done to manage situations that arose during the semester that either did, or had the potential to, disrupt your studies?

5. Thinking back to the question I asked you first-time around – do you think what you have just done (ie starting uni in an enabling course) is risky?

6. What about for other people such as fellow students?
Appendix F

A leap of faith: The negotiation of risk amongst students entering higher education via enabling pathways

Staff Interview Questions

1. What kind of things do you think represent risk for students as they start their UPP course? [prompt – personal, educational, within the program itself]

2. How do these impact students?

3. Do you think students have a good understanding of the risks involved in entering higher education via an enabling program? Does this matter?

4. What kind of things does the UPP program do to mitigate these risks?

5. Is there anything we could do to mitigate these risks which are not currently doing?

6. Overall, how ‘risky’ do you think it is for students to study in the University Preparation Program?
Appendix G

Example mind map using SimpleMinds: Themes, first student interviews