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COHESION, COHERENCE AND CONNECTEDNESS: A 3C MODEL FOR ENABLING-COURSE DESIGN TO SUPPORT STUDENT TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Recent Australian government policy has focused on attracting students from under- represented and diverse groups to tertiary education with university enabling courses one pathway for these students. This trend towards broader participation has altered traditional perceptions of a typical university student and raised delivery challenges. The ability to engage these students as learners and improve their academic outcomes and confidence towards successful course completion is increasingly important to universities because of attrition costs to governments, students and higher education institutions.

This paper reports on the re-development of an enabling course at an Australian university committed to breaking down barriers that restrict entry to education. Cohesion, coherence and connectedness emerged as central principles guiding leadership style, course design and development, staff-student communication and collaborative teaching and learning approaches. Data including student and staff voices, university retention and progression statistics and student unit teaching evaluations was used to evaluate the impact on student satisfaction and transition. The research highlights that building a collaborative course culture based on a 3C model of cohesion, coherence and connectedness when, used interdependently, improves students' confidence, skills and knowledge to successfully transition to undergraduate tertiary study.

Introduction

Transitioning students into undergraduate courses through enabling entry pathways is of critical importance to universities in that they support alternative entry points for non-traditional students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, traditionally under-represented in higher education. The importance of these pathways is emphasised by national targets set at twenty percent of undergraduate enrolments to be from low SES backgrounds and for 40% of 25-34 year olds to have attained a qualification of at least a Bachelor level by 2020 (DEEWR, 2008, p. 12-14). The Grattan Institute Report Mapping Australian Higher Education (2013) acknowledges active policies to encourage enrolment in four areas: "students with disabilities, Indigenous students, regional and remote students, and low socio-economic status (SES)" (Norton, 2013, p. 29).

The 2014 Australian Federal government budget report recently indicated changes to the unemployment benefits described as an "earn or learn" policy. Young Australians under 30 years of age will now have to work for the dole and school leavers will have a six-month waiting period for youth allowance. The full impact of these policies including the increase in student higher education loan payments (HELP) will further influence future student decisions about university study. The impact on the demand for university access resulting from these policies is yet unknown. However, the ability to engage and retain students will remain very important to universities, as the

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issue of attrition costs to governments, students and higher education institutions will continue. Explorations into how enabling programs engage these students is important because as Hodges, Bedford, Hartley, Klinger, Murray, O'Rourke and Schofield (2013, p.36) highlight "There has been little published in relation to enabling pathway programs for entry into higher education generally, and even less in relation to university tertiary preparation pathway programs".

Edith Cowan University (ECU), a large metropolitan and regional university in Western Australian is committed to the enhancement and development of alternative entry pathways to higher education (ECU annual report, 2013). The University Preparation Course (UPC) provides alternative entry for students from diverse educational, social, cultural and economic background targeting school leavers, recent school leavers under 20 years of age and mature age applicants. Currently over 1000 students per year graduate from the UPC with a large percentage transitioning to undergraduate courses.

In 2013, the ECU UPC team, supported by an independent researcher undertook research to gather data on the UPC student and staff experience of the redevelopment of the course. Conditions that support successful student transition are well documented in the literature (Nelson, Kift & Clarke, 2012; Cullity, 2006; Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006), however the success of the application of strategies and conditions, the authors argue, is in the interdependence of their implementation within a course culture. Through the analysis of both the literature and data collected a *3C model* of enabling course design emerged. In the *3C model* cohesion, coherence and connectedness serve as guiding principles for leadership style, course design and development, staff-student communication and collaborative teaching and learning.

Background to the ECU University Preparation Course (UPC)

Enabling programs currently exist to both increase participation in tertiary study and support students from diverse backgrounds to enter university better equipped to succeed. The ECU UPC is a one-semester course (full time) and consists of five units. Three units are compulsory and focus on the development of literacy, numeracy and learning skills and knowledge necessary for undergraduate study. The fourth unit is a choice between humanities and science, normally dependent on future course direction. Approximately 80-82 percent of students who successfully complete the UPC enrol in undergraduate courses at ECU and in some cases other Western Australian universities. A significant proportion of these students are from low SES backgrounds or considered 'non-traditional' (e.g. regional, Indigenous) university students. These students benefit from additional opportunities and guidance provided in the course. Cross-faculty university academic staff led the course and coordinate units demonstrating strong institutional support and ensuring stability of staffing over time.

A key performance indicator for the 2012 UPC leadership team was to deliver a 10% increase in the number of ECU course enrolments, by the end of the first year. The UPC program evaluation focused on the development and implementation of strategies to inspire, retain and assist UPC students to complete the course and pursue appropriate pathways for further study. Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) and Nelson, Kift and Clark (2012) use the term 'transition pedagogy' to describe such holistic approaches to curriculum that involve principles such as design, transition, engagement, diversity, assessment and evaluation. The redevelopment of the UPC was informed by transition pedagogy and key elements of ECU curriculum policy such as being employability oriented, student focused and learner-centred. The aim of the leadership team was to develop and deliver a cohesive, coherent and connected program to support student transition to tertiary study.

The ECU undergraduate curriculum framework, with the central notion of a 'learning journey' (Nelson, Kift & Clark, 2012) was developed with a university wide developmental and cohesive approach to learning, teaching and assessment, and an awareness of the types of institutional wide approaches advocated by Kift et al., (2010). In regard to early student experiences Kift et al., (2010) suggest this is 'everyone's business'. Their transition pedagogy

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approach includes institutional integration, coordination and coherence and an intentionally designed first year curricula, necessary, they argue, to mediate the learning experiences of diverse cohorts and facilitate student retention. Kift et al., (2010) identify principles guiding the first year experience, which include an engaging first year curriculum with mediated support, awareness of and timely access to support services and the creation of a sense of belonging though involvement and engagement. These principles and those from other first year experience literature assisted the UPC team to develop course design principles of cohesion, coherence and connectedness.

Cohesion

The importance of cohesion is consistently identified in the literature and in the typical descriptors universities accord to curriculum design. Bahr and Lloyd (2011) suggest curriculum matters mainly because of its potential impact on students, with cohesion equated with integration and coherence. Kift et al., (2010) recommend that curriculum design and delivery should be student focused, explicit and relevant. Bahr and Llyod (2011) recognise that course cohesion is often at risk through what they term 'course cohesion drift'. This 'drift' they suggest can be a result of factors such as staffing changes, migration of unit resources, opportunistic inclusions and poor attention to detail (p. 22).

Munns, Nanlohy and Thomas (2000) argue negative past educational experiences can cause fear of failure, lack of confidence and anxiety about learning experiences for students. It is assumed (given the nature of the cohort) many students approach-enabling courses with this mindset. The importance of having teachers who recognise student strengths and build on these to improve student self-belief is critical. Feeling academically competent is one of the most important factors for student motivation as it enhances self-belief (Cullity, 2006; Kift et al. 2010; Krause, 2005). Ryan and Deci (2000) indicate the most important building block for building self-belief is strength-based teaching. However Krause (2005) cautions that for many students the idea of self-efficacy is one that needs to be taught and developed, not assumed. Over the duration of a course students may become more independent learners, but scaffolding and support need to be offered for those who need it, especially in initial periods of study.

Staff perception of student capacity is important. Understanding the diverse nature of the UPC cohort, the principles of first year experience and in particular how staff perceived the student cohort and planned specific learning experiences for them was critical. Those students who develop good learning strategies and hence better self-efficacy are more likely to persist in their study and remain at university (Krause, 2005). Attention to building student efficacy through intentional learning for personal understanding of learning needs, strategies and skills required for success, was recognised as a course wide responsibility.

In a cross-faculty team, approaches to and experiences in teaching and learning vary. The leadership team agreed with the thoughts of Kinzie and Kuh, (2010), who suggested educationally effective institutions shared responsibility for educational quality and student success. This shared responsibility occurs when leaders regularly remind colleagues about institutional aspirations, learning and teaching priorities, core values and select new colleagues who share these values and principles (Kinzie & Kuh, 2010, p.8). The importance of modeling collaboration through actions and words is acknowledged. Tinto (2010) gives credence to the focus on staff who care, particularly at the classroom level when he suggests, it is important that all students are involved as active members. Zepke (2013) also acknowledges that while researchers develop multiple propositions for student engagement, it is up to teachers and institutions to interpret and shape the ideas for their own learners.

Coherence

Setting out clear expectations of what the university will provide and be like is important.

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Long, Ferrier and Heagney (2006) stress that providing students with clear information about their courses, content, fees, assessment, contact hours and career prospects allows them to feel control of their schedules and long term plans. Cullity's research on alternative entry programs (AEP) for mature age students identifies characteristics of what she refers to as responsive and aligned programs (2005, p, 252). These programs Cullity (2005) identifies as having administration and design practices that are responsive to both student affective and academic needs and their experiences of university life. Tinto (2009) stresses that 'student success does not arise by chance. It is the result of an intentional, structured and proactive set of strategies that are coherent, systematic in nature and carefully aligned to the same goal" (p.10). Kift et al's (2012) third generation approach to first year experience identifies student engagement, timely access to support, the development of a strong sense of belonging and an intentionally designed curriculum as important in transition pedagogy.

The transition to an unfamiliar academic environment is as McMillan (2013) states a 'profoundly reflexive and emotional construct' because it involves the undoing of learning in the context of a new environment with different subjects, learning approaches and teaching styles (p. 169). The literature is clear that course clarity and coherence is important as it may lessen some of the 'culture shock' associated with university transition. Students in transition need a roadmap and a guide (McMillan, 2013).

Connectedness

Throughout the literature the importance of relationships is emphasised in student centred approaches to learning and teaching (Cullity, 2005; Kift et al., 2012; Krause, 2007; Tinto 2010). Krause (2007) alerts practitioners and administrators to the "significance of staying connected with each other and with students in the university learning environment" (p.66). This reflects the idea that a holistic approach should be taken for students, whereby university staff, work together to provide students with a seamless transition to and progression through academic studies.

Given, student engagement is a key contributor to student achievement and retention (Creagh et al. 2013); a guide to good practice should take into account notions of equity and social justice with particular awareness of student rights, giving respect to individual cultural, social and knowledge systems. Krause (2005) stresses the importance of students being able to voice their expectations and for staff to clear up misconceptions. Both Krause (2005) and Morda et al., (2007) see staff/student connections as crucial to improvement in student confidence and retention. Graunke, Woosley and Sherry (2005) found that positive student interaction with peers and staff was related to higher levels of satisfaction with the university, fostered a sense of belongingness, strengthened commitment to the university's educational goals and standards, and had a positive impact on academic performance" (p.2). Cullity (2005) concurs that positive student staff relationships are fundamental to mature age student engagement in learning' (p. 254). Peer mentoring, based at the school or department level that incorporated initial adjustment strategies and ongoing support was reported as important for student retention (Darlaston-Jones, Cohen, Haunold, Pike and Young & Drew, 2003).

Methodology

Cohesion, coherence and connectedness have emerged as central principles in the literature and these have guided leadership style, course design and development, staff-student communication and collaborative teaching and learning approaches. To measure the impact of the implementation of a *3C model* of enabling course design we have listened to student voices about their experience of course development and delivery and investigated university retention and progression and student unit teaching evaluation data to evaluate the impact on student satisfaction and transition. These results along with the qualitative data were used to inform the design of the *3C model.*

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Mixed methods offered a set of rich data while addressing the research questions. A online student survey (N=450) was developed using the literature as an interpretive lens and a series of semi-structured interviews with staff (N=13) supplemented by course retention data and the university unit and teaching evaluation instrument (UTEI) provided further data on the impact on retentions and progression. Ethics approval to undertake the qualitative and quantitative research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee.

A qualitative approach was used to understand insider accounts of supports and barriers to student transition, providing insight into the experiences of those being researched. An initial literature review was undertaken using keywords found in the literature significant to the study. This provided a comprehensive investigation of enabling course literature and in particular conditions that support student transition to university. The literature was independently annotated and coded by the researchers. A data matrix was used to organise and collate the annotations for the identification of key themes (Creswell, 2013).

Results

Enrolment Progression and retention

To measure of the impact of the implementation of the strategies used in the revised UPC, transition statistics for UPC students were investigated through ECU records from 2011-2012. This data was used to determine the retention of the UPC students in undergraduate courses and to track the student enrolment status, through to their enrolments in the following semesters. A generally high transition rate (82%) from the UPC to undergraduate courses and 80% of 2012 student enrolments in the next period was demonstrated.

A recent report funded by the Australia Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) (Hodges et al., 2013) investigating enabling program and processes and strategies for improving student retention also reported that ECU's UPC (a participant university) official attrition rates were consistently lower compared to the five other Australian institutions. It should be noted that at the time of the research the UPC had medium level entry criteria, a point of difference to other institutions and offers a filtering process for candidates. This initial screening could impact on retention and transition.

Table 1: *Attrition rates of three university enabling courses varying in mode and entry requirements; with comparison to highest undergraduate attrition rates*

Institution	Program	Mode	Academic entry	Age	Official attrition
University of Newcastle	OF	Mixed	No	20 +	45%
University of Newcastle	Newstep	Internal	No	17 – 20	40%
University of New England	PEC	External	No	No	57%
Edith Cowan University	**UPC**	**Mixed**	**Yes; medium**	**17 +**	**15%**
Highest domestic u/g	Undergraduate	Mixed	Yes; high	No	31%

(Source: Final Report. Office for Learning and Teaching, 2013): Enabling retention: processes and strategies for improving student retention in university-based enabling programs.

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UTEI Data

The Unit and Teaching Evaluation Instrument (UTEI) is an ECU student evaluation instrument, surveying students on measures of satisfaction with content of units, lecturers, tutors and teaching and learning. The mean scores in these tables are on a 200-point scale of –100 to +100 and the ECU average hovers around +50. A score close to 50 indicates average student satisfaction, that is half of the respondents indicating satisfaction and half indicating dissatisfaction. The data below compares average UPC UTEI data over two years (4 semesters) to the whole of university average. The results show higher than average student satisfaction on all measures (course, lecturer and tutor). Scores in the (60-70) range indicate very high rates of student satisfaction even given the diverse nature of the large UPC cohort.

Table 2: *UPC UTEI results*

	Mean OS	*Mean OS*	*Mean OS*
UPC Average UTEI data: Semester 1&2 2013/4	59	69	70
Whole University Average Semester 1&2 2013/4	49	60.5	60

Source ECU University records 2013/14

Student Survey

Student confidence

A common anxiety experienced by UPC students is self-doubt' about their academic capabilities particularly among mature age learners. Research on mature age students (Cullity, 2006, p.7) indicates this self-doubt can be heightened or lessened by the interactions the students have with staff, which she suggests can improve confidence. "*Along with the constant support from tutors, lecturers and learning advisors I have learnt many useful skills and an increased confidence level to take into my undergraduate studies*" (Student survey)." Assisting students to change attitudes about themselves and see themselves as successful learners is a challenge for all enabling courses as changes in perception and self-belief are on a deep cognitive and emotional level referred to by Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, as "identity shifts" (2013 p. 631). *"seeing that university isn't as scary as I thought it would have been*" (Student survey response).

Research survey data indicates 95% of respondents (N=119) agreed with the statement "The UPC has increased my confidence in my ability to be successful at university". Table 3 indicates confidence levels pre and post UPC. A 37% positive shift in perceived confidence was indicated with 3% of the respondents indicating they still lacked confidence to succeed at university post UPC compared to 22% pre- UPC.

Table 3: *Level of confidence in your ability to be a successful learner at university*

Student sample n=119				
	Pre- UPC		**Post- UPC**	
	Number	%	Number	%
Very confident	19	16%	34	29%
Confident	43	36%	71	60%
Somewhat confident	30	25%	11	9%
Low confidence	23	19%	3	3%
No Confidence	4	4%	0	0%

Source: Student survey data 2013

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Interrogation of the retention and first year experience literature was refined to identify conditions that enhanced student participation rates, levels of confidence and learning skills, improving student persistence and progression in their studies. Themes identified supported the choice of the conditions selected to interrogate through the survey. Table 6 gives some insight into the student perceptions of the impact of these conditions on improvement in confidence to continue in higher education studies. The results indicated 100% agreed that they had, a more positive image of themselves as a successful learners post UPC and 98% perceived personal growth. There was strong recognition of improvement in skill development and study techniques.

Table 4: *The conditions that support increased confidence to continue in higher education studies*

% Agreement:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reduced anxiety about university life	28%	68%	4%	
A more positive image of myself as a successful learner	30%	70%		
Personal growth	33%	65%	2%	
Improved study techniques	34%	61%	5%	
Networking with other students	28%	66%	4%	2%
Balancing work and study	19%	69%	11%	1%
Implementation of deeper learning	23%	68%	9%	

Source: Student survey data 2013

While these results show a positive shift in 'student identity' the analysis of the qualitative data was important to give participant insight into the particular aspects of course culture, curriculum, teaching and learning, ethic of care and relationships that students identify as supporting this shift. A sense of efficacy is indicated by the comment *"good results along the way has certainly boosted my confidence"* (Student survey).

Students were asked if they had considered leaving the course and if so, what were the reasons for staying. They identified factors that helped them to complete UPC and this qualitative survey data was coded for emergent themes. Quantitative survey data was analysed to support understanding of the impact of these factors. Key conditions supporting progression emerging from the data and matched to our key principles included:

Cohesion

Kift et al. (2010) recommend that curriculum design and delivery should be student focused, explicit and relevant. An interview comment by a course leader indicated the importance of this for the UPC cohort:

> *Our units are heavily scaffolded, extremely well supported and…run by tutors who genuinely care. We try to take the ambiguity out of their learning and they don't have to second guess about what they need to do, we make it very clear what they need to do and provide them with opportunities to achieve the outcomes.* (Staff interview: Course Coordinator).

The following student comments reflect that for some (N=16), cohesion was a consideration in supporting them to stay. *"the course was [sic] well balanced, not overwhelming"*; *"assessments explained in detail so I felt confident in what was required"*; *"course content tailored to effectively prepare students for undergraduate study"*.

However, not all students had positive experiences and comments such as

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"struggling with math, my tutor doesn't explain things enough for me to understand, no matter how much I ask"; "because the course was so general it wasn't targeting any of my interests" identify the importance of student-centred teaching and Cullity's (2005) warnings that non-contextualised, generalist content disengages students.

Coherence

To lessen the 'culture shock' associated with university transition, clearly articulated course expectations and conditions is common in much of the retention literature (Nelson et al., 2011). The quantitative survey data indicates strong agreement that resources and academic workshops supported learning.

Table 5: % Student agreement on course cohesion

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Resources available (BB, Unit Plans, readings, guest speakers) supported the development of my confidence in learning	43%	53%	4%		
Attending embedded LA workshops and/or appointments increased my confidence to work independently in the future?	15%	40%	37%	8%	

Source: Student survey data 2013:

Reference to the quality and availability of resources were consistent in the qualitative survey responses. Responses such as *"online guidelines to assessments, clear rubrics and plenty of feedback" ""knowing what I have to do (blackboard)", "consistent materials", "information easily accessible" "helpful information on blackboard", "course content tailored for students"* were common (N=16) in the student survey data. The embedded support provided by the academic learning advisors was reported as a positive resource supporting student success; *"Attending workshops lowered my anxiety"* (N=10). Improved confidence through the development of skills (N=12) such as *"referencing"; "academic writing" and "time-management"* were also identified.

Connectedness

That a culture of support and care is evident to students is indicated by the quantitative results in table 9. Students indicated a positive perception of a culture of support (88%), positive staff interactions (94%) and a culture of care (92%) and fairness (94%).

Table 6: % Student agreement: Course connectedness

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My first impression of the UPC course (Orientation and first tutorials) was that there was a culture of support for students	38%	50%	13%		
Staff in the UPC course care about my progress	50%	42%	5%	3%	
Interactions with UPC staff has been positive	94%		6%		
I have been treated equally and fairly	56%	38%	6%	3%	

Source: Student survey data 2013.

Qualitative data supported these findings of positive staff interactions and culture of care in supporting student progression in the course. Key descriptors of staff consistently emerged in qualitative survey data and included references to qualities such as staff being knowledgeable

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and willing to help (N=28); being understanding and motivating (N=30); approachable and flexible (N=9) and providing timely feedback (N=3). A strong reference to the support of friends and peers (N=28) was another key emerging condition described and a culture of support and care indicated with comments such as; *"Constant support from lecturers, tutors and learning advisors"; "advice, emotional support as well as academic support"; "a call provided me with option which reassured me and I regained the confidence to continue"; and "hands on help, support and flexibility"* (N=13).

Krause (2005) emphasises a two-pronged approach to student retention involving the need for universities to implement strategies and develop community and culture to increase confidence and engagement but that this needs to be coupled with the students' own self-regulatory learning behaviours. The survey data indicated strong student identification of individual motivation, aspirations and commitment in driving their success. Comments such as *"commitment, hope for a better future, career aspects"; "I promised myself whether I liked the course or not that I would continue"; "not wanting to give up"; "determination to finish"; "will power and will to succeed"* were common (N= 22) responses.

Developing a 3C model for enabling transition to university

In an enabling course involving only five units and run over one semester, a cohesive curriculum is achievable. In redeveloping the course curriculum the leadership team identified the UPC units should build towards a clearly articulated 'whole' rather than as previously, having units developed in isolation. When teaching, learning and assessment is fully in the hands of isolated unit coordinators this can result in what Bahr and Llyod (2011) termed 'course cohesion drift'. Holistic planning involved developing a shared vision, collaborative course culture, deeper understanding of the student cohort, and shared development of units. Consistent and comprehensive course and unit reviews, course activities designed to enhance cohesion such as mapping of assessments, embedding institutional academic support (at the point of need) and making all course communication clear, consistent and coherent were implemented.

A priority of the leadership team was to build a collaborative culture, underpinned by a jointly developed shared vision and guiding principles. The collaborative culture involved more than just a shared commitment. Strategic recruitment of staff from across the university meant strong cross-institutional commitment to the UPC. Unit coordinators were drawn from the Schools of Education, Nursing, Communication and Arts and Engineering. Also important, was that each staff member was willing to participate in the building of a clear culture of 'students first'. The Unit Coordinators were selected for particular qualities including a student-centred teaching and learning philosophy and willingness to explore student strengths (rather than deficits). The leadership team recognized the strong correlation between staff values and teaching and learning philosophies and the student experience. This 'whole of team' approach is identified in the following staff comment; *"There is an extremely strong culture developed….units operate effectively as a suite of units as part of the course and we do have the whole student focus…. that's where the culture is strongest in the student orientation and focusing on enabling"* (Staff interview).

Consequently, initial course wide meetings focused on examining staff perceptions of the student cohort, understanding the diverse nature of the UPC cohort, and appreciating the principles of first year experience. This shared awareness was critical as students who develop good learning strategies and hence better self- efficacy are more likely to persist in their study and remain at university (Krause, 2005). Attention to building student efficacy towards personal understanding of learning needs, strategies and skills required for success, was a focus of intentional learning in one of the foundation units, but also a course wide responsibility.

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Due to the cross-faculty nature of the team, approaches and experience in teaching and learning varied. Nonetheless, the course leaders regularly reminded colleagues about institutional aspirations, learning and teaching priorities and core values in the manner emphasized by Kinzie and Kuh, (2010). Furthermore, within the UPC it was considered important to model collaboration through actions and words. A strong commitment by all UPC staff to the principle of building on strengths and supporting student persistence and confidence meant that the team, including unit coordinators, sessional staff, learning advisors and student support staff participated in the following specific activities to encourage a student focused environment:

Shared vision of students:

- Course wide agreed 'shared values'
- Sessional staff participation in 'overview of course principles' PD session to support understanding of a whole course culture.

Commitment to student-centred learning

- Shared professional learning in regard to on-line learning environments to both improve and standardise on-line delivery.
- Participated in workshops (engagement and collaborative learning strategies) to continue to improve engagement through the teaching and learning environment.
- Assessments and unit activities mapped across the course to ensure assessments match outcomes and students were not being over assessed and to highlight to all staff the pressure points of the semester ensuring a team approach to keeping students on track.
- Regular reviews of units to ensure shared understanding of issues and innovations and where possible connections between units made explicit to students

The UPC has a distinct advantage over other programs in addressing values associated with transition and first year success (Cullity, 2005; Kift et al 2010; Krause, 2005; Long et at, 2006; Nelson et al, 2012) in that there is a dedicated unit that focused on core study skills. Introducing students to university information systems, time management, university communication processes, understanding unit documentation such as unit plans, coversheets, understanding process for seeking help, understanding themselves as learners, motivation and metacognition, key skills such as note-taking and summary and reflective writing, and presentation strategies are some of the key skills and knowledge developed over the semester.

A professional and collaborative approach to sharing unit content allows reinforcement of coherent messages and supports the transferability of skills for these students. Blackboard sites and unit plans have been standardised so information is easily found in all units, assessments are mapped across the course and where similar skills are taught unit coordinators share information in unit reviews. Academic learning advisors are part of the UPC team and embed 'just in time' support at the point of need. "*Coordinators work hard at keeping everyone informed of what the other units are doing…there's mapping across assessments so we have an overview of what's due when. The unit coordinators work closely with us and we ask them what sort of help we can give them so we can plan workshops specifically related to the assignments*" (Staff interview academic learning advisor). Specific processes and strategies put in place to ensure student clarity include:

Clarity of information:

- A comprehensive orientation program specific to needs and supported by mentors.
- UPC Pathways Officers support Student Recruitment at open days and answer direct UPC questions.
- Specific UPC information evenings build links across the wider university community and reduce overload of information.
- A consistent Black Board (BB) environment across all units with links to the learning

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advisor and community sites provided on each site.

Course coherence:

- Regular minuted team meetings ensuring consistency and coherence via course and unit reviews.
- A professional team approach, to course mapping and assessment auditing.
- Embedded learning support for students (dedicated learning advisor workshops) at the point of need within all UPC units.

Kift et al., (2010) stress that curriculum must inspire, excite and students must gain mastery. The processes described above were developed to both engage learners in formal academic curriculum and mediate support for that learning. UPC staff made a clear commitment to mediate learning and assist UPC students on the journey to becoming self-managed self-directed learners.

Finally, positive student interaction with peers and staff is cited consistently in the academic literature as related to higher student satisfaction, sense of belongingness, engagement in learning and positively related to academic performance (Cullity, 2005; Kift et al, 2010, Krause 2005, Woosley and Sherry, 2005). To facilitate positive staff and student relationships a dedicated student support Pathways Officer was appointed to assist in developing strategies to help build a sense of community in the UPC. What underpinned the success of the UPC however was that these collaborative attitudes were owned by all. This permeated to Unit Coordinators finding the right sessional staff capable of to adhering to the overall course principles, as indicated by the following:

> *"We had to ensure that we developed a culture of sharing and that it filtered through from the top to the sessional tutors who work in the course…its been very positive, I believe it develops relationships that are not normally found in undergraduate studies. These students see this as an opportunity and the environment we have created allows them to dream big"* (staff interview -coordinator).

UPC students acting as mentors and tour guides at the course orientation exemplify the commitment to positive ongoing relationships. Mentors email students in the first week allowing students a vehicle to express their feelings and concerns at entering university. The early identification of at risk students is also important and attendance data is collected from all units in the first few weeks and students contacted. Many of these students call the pathways office to ask further questions or advice. The calls build a sense of community as students come to understand they are valued. UPC pathway staff also instigate weekly informal conversation/chat sessions for students in the first few weeks of semester to support any students with concerns.

The processes described demonstrate that developing sound relationships is fundamental to addressing academic issues that may exist. The types of social strategies identified by Morda et al., (2007) to increase student retention include; detailed course and career information provided by a university-wide Expo embedded in a foundation unit, academic skills taught alongside units by the Learning Advisors, students at risk being contacted by Pathways staff and university expectations being covered both at Orientation and within course content. Strategies implemented to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness to the university therefore include:

Staffing and perception of students:

- Careful selection of sessional staff with positive views of student potential
- Commitment to treating students with respect and understanding individual learning needs.
- The development and training of peers to provide a mentor program.

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Connections built across the university to support transition to undergraduate studies

- Detailed course and career information provided by a Career/Course Expo embedded as course content and run in partnership with a wide range of ECU faculties and schools.
- Academic skills taught alongside all UPC units by the Learning Advisors with timely and embedded support around student need.

Social engagement and peer and course-wide support
- Clear expectations of university covered both at Orientation and in course units.
- Past students as peer mentors and tour guides at Orientation.
- Student concerns recognised and targeted in the first week in UPU0001.
- Mentors email, check concerns and offer support in the first week (mentor support embedded in a unit)
- Systematic and positive approaches to following up students at risk.
- Weekly informal chat drop-in sessions mediated by pathways staff.

The systematic implementation of enabling strategies informed by academic literature and inherently valued by the UPC team led to the development of a *3C model* for enabling course design to support student transition to undergraduate study based on the principles of cohesion, coherence and connectedness (see Figure 1). While many of these strategies and conditions exist in university programs, it is the holistic and systematic nature of the implementation that builds community and a collaborative course culture within the UPC. This model draws on Tinto's (2000) approach to transition and recognises the importance of orientating students to university in an atmosphere of support rather than stress and anxiety, via collaborative pedagogy and viewing the student as an active, capable participant in the learning process. Tinto (2000) describes three aspects of learning communities: shared knowledge, shared knowing and shared responsibility, indicating mutual dependence in the learning community. These mirror the interconnected principles of cohesion, coherence and connectedness evident within the UPC.

Figure 1.

A 3C Model for enabling-course design to support student transition to undergraduate study.

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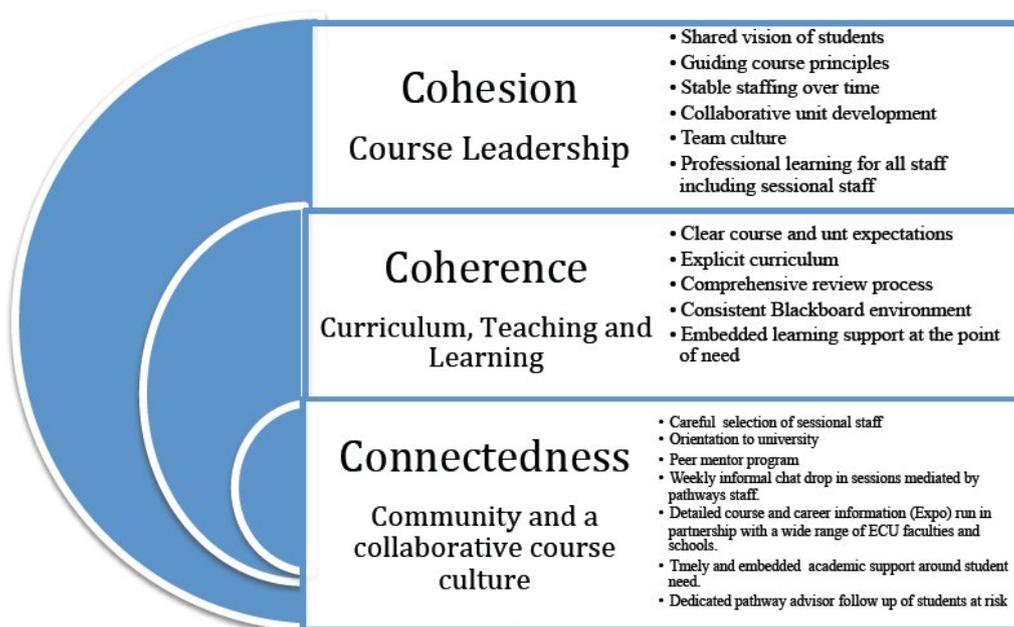
Conclusion

This paper shares the practical insights, implementation strategies and impacts of the re-development of a university-enabling course. Enabling courses are complex and it takes time and commitment to develop a shared vision amongst the teaching team that recognises student potential in their transition to university. As Bar and Lloyd (2011) highlight both leadership and cohesive design elements influence course cohesion and this thinking has been critical in developing the UPC. Three elements cohesion, coherence and connectedness have emerged from the academic literature and the experience of redeveloping of the UPC as central principles guiding leadership style, course design and development, staff-student communication and collaborative teaching and learning approaches. A *3C model* of interdependent conditions supporting the building of enabling courses to promote student confidence emerged. The outcome of the research highlights that building a collaborative course culture based on a *3C model* of cohesion, coherence and connectedness, when used interdependently, improves students' confidence, skills and knowledge in their transition to undergraduate tertiary study.

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