LARGE GRANTS RESEARCH PROGRAM REPORT

# Increasing access and opportunity:

## Nesting enabling programs in senior schooling

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# Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University, University of Southern Queensland and Southern Cross University are committed to reconciliation and recognise and respect the significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' communities, cultures and histories. Further, we acknowledge the cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and pay respect to Elders past, present, and future. We celebrate the continuous living cultures of First Australians and acknowledge the important contributions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have and continue to make in Australian society.

The authors that contributed to this project did so from the following lands:

- Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar—Edith Cowan University (Mount Lawley and Joondalup), Murdoch University (Murdoch Campus)
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- Binjareb Noongar Boodjar—Murdoch University (Mandurah Campus)
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**NAEEA**

We wish to acknowledge the significant role of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) in building a rigorous and supportive network of enabling practitioners in Australia.

NAEEA's previous benchmarking projects in 2016 and 2023 established a robust framework for benchmarking enabling programs in Australia, and the framework forms the foundation for this project.

All participants in this project are NAEEA members, and the goal of this project is to extend benchmarking to unique offerings within the enabling sector, specifically ISEPs. This is the first national, cross-institutional and cross-sector benchmarking study of ISEPs that will contribute to standardising courses, quality assurance, transparency, and portability of qualifications, while also guiding best practices for ISEPs.

**Inclusivity**

At Edith Cowan University, we have a strong and maturing commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion and we acknowledge the benefits that diversity brings to our institution, allowing all of us to thrive. Everyone is entitled to see themselves positively reflected and acknowledged in our community, especially in the language we speak and write. Using inclusive practice fosters an inclusive culture and delivers a curriculum that reflects the natural diversity of human experiences.

**ACSES**

This project was funded in part by a grant from the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES).

# At a glance

**Background**

In-school enabling programs (ISEPs) provide a direct pathway to higher education for Year 11 and 12 students who aspire to university but lack access to, or do not thrive in, Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)-based systems.

This research project was designed to understand the efficacy of ISEPs as a pathway into success in higher education, and to provide guidance to Australian universities and high schools in establishing effective and scalable program models.

**What we did**

This project is the first national, cross-institutional benchmarking and impact study of ISEPs in Australia, examining models and outcomes with a focus on impact for equity groups.

A multi-phase mixed methodological approach was adopted, comparing ISEP models at four universities and 94 high schools. Multiple quantitative and qualitative datasets were gathered to evaluate efficacy, from program structure through to transition into undergraduate study.

**What we found**

ISEPs are academically rigorous, quality pathways that effectively prepare students for the transition to higher education, mitigating some of the disadvantages students from equity groups typically face in first-year university. Students and educators highlighted the transformative socio-emotional benefits of ISEPs for students who had struggled in, or not had access to, ATAR: these included increased confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging, alongside the development of essential academic literacies.

ISEPs reach and enrol high proportions of students from equity cohorts, addressing systemic barriers to higher education. Within the programs, students achieve high levels of academic success and completion.

**What we recommend**

The National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) should establish a nationally endorsed enabling education framework, with common learning outcomes, portfolio standards, and external moderation, ensuring quality, transparency, and portability.

Universities should implement targeted strategies to address systemic barriers impacting equity cohorts and provide sustained support for their transition and success throughout later years of study.

Federal and State governments and the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) should secure sustainable funding for ISEPs through national recognition or by formal integration into educational policy and funding models.

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# Executive summary

This project represents the first national, cross-institutional benchmarking and impact study of in-school enabling programs (ISEPs) in Australia. Designed in response to requests from the secondary schooling sector, these programs are delivered through university-school partnerships and provide senior secondary students with a rigorous pathway to higher education. ISEPs are intended for students who aspire to university but lack access to, or do not thrive in, Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)-based systems. The study was undertaken in alignment to the Australian Universities Accord's call for expanded, equitable pathways to meet the ambitious target of 55% bachelor attainment by 2050, and the need for a greater understanding of the efficacy of ISEPs as a pathway into higher education, particularly for students from equity groups.

Through collaboration across four universities and their partner high schools, this project examined the models and outcomes of ISEPs across Australia with a focus on impact for equity groups. The universities participating in this project deliver ISEPs in partnership with high schools across three states and various education systems (public and private)—Edith Cowan University with UniPrep Schools, Murdoch University with Flexi Track High, Southern Cross University with UniStart for Schools, and University of Southern Queensland with UniPrep. The comparative research project spanned 94 high schools across Australia, with stakeholder voices and a principal consultation group to provide guidance on a final output: *A Practical Guide for Implementation* (Jones et al., 2026a) for high schools and universities. The project examined curriculum, assessment, and delivery models across four universities, analysed academic outcomes and transition rates to university for ISEP graduates, and explored student and educator perspectives on program efficacy and socio-emotional impact. It also aimed to provide sector-wide guidance for quality assurance and scalability.

This project was designed using a multi-phase approach to gather multiple quantitative and qualitative data sets and develop a 360-degree understanding of program efficacy, from program structure through to transition into undergraduate study. The four phases of the project are outlined in Table 1 below.

*Table 1: Project design*

| **Phases** | **Focus** |
|---|---|
| Phase one | Benchmarking ISEPs to understand partnership models across the sector, as well as curriculum design, delivery, and assessment. |
| Phase two | Collection and analysis of university transition (retention, conversion, and success) data from 2021 to 2023, to compare and understand the efficacy of different program models. |
| Phase three | Collection of stakeholder voices, including student survey, student interviews, and educator interviews. Correlational and thematic analysis approaches applied to respective data sets. |
| Phase four | Synthesis of findings from phases one to three to develop a comprehensive understanding of ISEPs. |

Benchmarking of practice across the universities showed strong alignment and academic rigour across ISEPs, highlighting shared principles in curriculum, assessment, and moderation practices that ensure a high-quality pathway to university for diverse contexts and school communities. ISEPs are designed to increase access to university, particularly for students from equity groups. Project outcomes showed that ISEPs enrolled high proportions of students from equity cohorts, including those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, regional and remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. At some universities, equity representation was as high as 80% of the cohort. Within the program, students achieved an overall success rate of 87% and completion rate of 79%, exceeding typical post-school enabling program benchmarks.

Approximately half of ISEP graduates progressed to undergraduate study at their home university. Once at university, students from equity groups who were admitted via ISEPs had similar first-year retention rates as peers from non-equity groups, demonstrating that these programs effectively prepare students for transition despite the challenges associated with cumulative disadvantage. However, success rates were slightly lower for students belonging to two or more equity groups, highlighting the need for sustained support beyond the enabling stage. Qualitative findings revealed that ISEPs deliver transformative socio-emotional benefits for students from equity groups, reducing ATAR-related stress and fostering confidence, resilience, and belonging. Students described the programs as life-changing, while educators emphasised their role in dismantling systemic barriers and breaking cycles of disadvantage. These programs not only provide academic preparation but also cultural readiness, demystifying university systems and expectations for students who are often first-in-family to attend higher education.

In summary, ISEPs are academically rigorous, socially responsive, and aligned with national equity objectives. They provide a viable, scalable mechanism for widening participation in higher education, particularly for students from underrepresented groups. Continued investment, policy recognition, and research will be essential to sustain and expand these programs, ensuring all students, regardless of background, have equitable access to university and the opportunity to flourish.

# Findings

The following findings synthesise each of the project phases to provide a comprehensive understanding of their impact and effectiveness.

**Access to university for the underserved:**

- ISEPs reach and enrol high proportions of students from equity cohorts, addressing systemic barriers to higher education. Within the programs, students achieve high levels of academic success and completion, reflective of the rigorous and scaffolded approach to learning within ISEPs that supports equity.
- Students found ISEPs to be a confident and credible pathway to university. Students consistently described ATAR as a pressure point and selected an ISEP when ATAR was not accessible or was harming wellbeing.
- ISEPs convert underserved aspiration into capability and empowerment. Through the ISEP, students gain confidence, academic literacies, and self-belief in university

attainment. 90% of students surveyed indicated that the ISEP helped them to believe they could achieve success at university.

**A quality pathway:**

- ISEPs share strong alignment in program purpose, curriculum design, assessment standards, and quality assurance processes, ensuring academic rigour and comparability with post-school enabling programs. ISEPs are distinct in their emphasis on partnership and context-specific delivery differences tailored to the senior schooling cohort and community.
- ISEPs expand access to university, particularly for students experiencing intersecting forms of disadvantage. At several institutions, the ISEP pathway had higher proportions of students from multiple equity groups commence university than other pathways.
- Once at university, students from equity cohorts entering via ISEPs are retained at near parity with their peers, indicating ISEPs help narrow retention gaps that remain pronounced in ATAR pathways. While success rates are slightly lower, students from equity groups demonstrate resilience and persistence, underscoring the effectiveness of ISEPs in supporting transition and mitigating some of the disadvantages students from equity groups typically face in first-year university.
- All ISEPs supported positive outcomes for students. Based on quantitative outcomes data, and after accounting for differences in size, programs that are well established and incorporate classes within the school timetable had the highest success and retention rates at undergraduate study.

**A confident pathway to university:**

- The intentional, inclusive, and scaffolded curriculum design within ISEPs contributed strongly to preparedness for success at university. Students and educators recognised profound shifts in students' perception of their own capacity and possible futures, with the programs equipping students with academic skills, instilling confidence and motivation and creating accessible pathways to university.
- ISEPs build confidence and self-efficacy, supporting students to succeed and flourish at university. Students who entered university via an ISEP reported strong wellbeing and flourishing, with results on measures of resilience, wellbeing, and belonging comparable across students from equity and non-equity groups. This holistic view of student success and flourishing is encouraging given the association between student progression and factors such as mental health and equity group membership, and sense of belonging, resilience, and wellbeing.

# Recommendations

The findings of this project inform recommendations for the National Association of Enabling Educators Australia (NAEEA), Federal and State departments of education, universities, and enabling educators. The recommendations stem from the context of the research project being located across Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia, however recommendations may be relevant to other states and territories across Australia.

**The following recommendations are provided for the NAEEA:**

1. Create a modified version of the Common Learning Outcomes tailored for ISEPs to ensure relevance and applicability to the senior schooling context.
2. Establish a nationally endorsed enabling education framework, with common learning outcomes, portfolio standards, and external moderation, ensuring quality, transparency, and portability.

**The following recommendations are provided for universities, Federal and State governments, and the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC):**

3. Universities and Federal and State governments—Develop an integrated student outcomes framework that improves data quality and incorporates holistic evaluation, capturing measures of academic readiness, transitions, confidence, and wellbeing, and enables granular review of equity and pathway outcomes.
4. Universities—Prioritise university engagement toward schools and students experiencing genuine disadvantage to ensure resources are allocated to maximise impact for students facing the greatest barriers to university.
5. Universities—Implement targeted strategies to address systemic barriers impacting equity cohorts and provide sustained support for their transition and success throughout later years of study, ensuring actions address enduring challenges and promote long-term equity outcomes.
6. Federal and State governments and ATEC—Secure sustainable funding for ISEPs through national recognition or by formal integration into educational policy and funding models.
7. Federal and State governments—In collaboration with curriculum authorities, schools, school communities, and universities, expand and strengthen senior schooling to provide pathways to university that are accessible, inclusive, and rigorous and provide students with confidence in their chosen pathway. The expansion should address systemic issues within senior schooling, including availability of options for all students and reducing ATAR-related stress.
8. Federal and State governments—To meet the ambition of the Australian Universities Accord, maintain sustained action to address educational inequity commencing in the early years and continuing through schooling, particularly for cohorts underrepresented in higher education.

**The following recommendations are provided for enabling educators and high school partners:**

9. Build deep partnerships with high schools and across universities through shared program and curriculum development and designs that provide contextually flexible pedagogical approaches to ensure alignment, efficacy and responsiveness to cohort needs.
10. Undertake collaborative longitudinal research to inform policy and practice aimed at enhancing student outcomes, with a focus on pathways and equity groups.

# 1. Introduction

The Australian Universities Accord sets the ambitious target of 55% of Australians attaining a bachelor's degree by 2050 (Department of Education, 2024). However, with increasingly diverse cohorts, disparities in schooling outcomes, and the challenges of delivering education across regional and remote Australia, meeting the needs of university-aspiring students who are not flourishing within the traditional senior curricula offered at schools requires additional learning pathways to higher education. ISEPs respond to this need and provide valuable means for enacting government targets. Through intra- and inter-sectoral collaboration, this research project was designed to understand ISEP models and their efficacy as a pathway into success in higher education, and provide guidance to Australian universities and high schools in establishing effective and scalable ISEPs for effective transition into higher education.

To understand multiple facets of program effectiveness—from program model design through to university retention—the project was split into four phases, with four research questions informing the first three phases:

1. How are ISEPs designed and delivered for different contexts across Australia?
2. What are the academic outcomes of students within ISEPs and at undergraduate level, particularly for priority student groups?
3. Do these programs adequately prepare students for the transition to undergraduate study?
4. How do secondary school educators and post-secondary ISEPs students conceptualise the role, benefits, and challenges of ISEPs?

The report begins by situating the project within the broader field of enabling education, highlighting ISEPs as the latest evolution in a sector that has been developed and refined over five decades. ISEPs initially emerged as a request from the secondary sector wanting pathways to university for university-aspiring and academically capable students, for whom pathways within current senior schooling were not available or not showcasing the abilities of students. The variety of pathways to higher education are explored, along with the effectiveness of each for a diversity of cohorts. Finally, the academic success of students who commence university from different pathways is considered, alongside an exploration of conceptualisations of success in higher education.

From situating ISEPs, the methods section provides an overview of the project. This section foregrounds a bricolage of approaches employed to construct a comprehensive understanding of the design and efficacy of ISEPs. The methods and findings sections are structured around the three research phases of the project, enabling a coherent presentation of results corresponding to each stage of the research and aligned to research questions.

The first phase examines ISEP design through exploration of program structures and cross-institutional comparison of curriculum intent, learning outcomes, assessment design, and moderation practices using an adapted six-phase benchmarking process (Davis et al., 2023a). Phase two examines the academic outcomes of students both within the ISEP and on transition to undergraduate study. This section gives consideration to the academic

outcomes of ISEP graduates and their school leaver peers who enter university via different pathways. The third phase explores the academic and socio-emotional efficacy of ISEPs from the perspectives of students who completed a program and are now at undergraduate study, and educators associated with the programs in high schools. Surveys and interviews with students and interviews with educators gave space to understand their perceptions on the role and utility of ISEPs, as well as an exploration of the socio-emotional impact on wellbeing for students. The discussion contextualises the project results within broader public discourse and sector discussion of widening participation and senior schooling. This final phase (four) is a synthesis of phases one to three. This discussion provides a rounded understanding of how ISEPs provide an accessible, confident, quality pathway to university for students who do not have access to, or are not thriving in, the ATAR system, particularly those from equity and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The conclusion summarises the project and puts forward several recommendations for a range of stakeholders. As an emerging subtype of enabling program, and with this project as the first comprehensive exploration of ISEPs, there is scope for further research, with suggested research focus provided.

# 2. Background

Educational enabling programs in Australia, developed independently to meet the diverse needs of universities and their students, facilitate the transition to undergraduate study for those otherwise excluded from higher education. Despite existing for five decades, enabling programs remain unregulated through exclusion from the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), yet there is evidence of a high level of consistency with shared learning outcomes, curriculum, and outcome standards in programs across Australia (Davis et al., 2023a; Davis et al., 2023b).

Enabling programs occupy a critical space in Australia's higher education landscape, serving as a bridge for students who might otherwise be excluded from university study. Enabling programs are designed to provide essential academic skills and confidence, enabling learners to transition successfully into undergraduate degrees. Unlike traditional degree programs, enabling programs are preparatory in nature, often fee-free, and accessible to students from diverse backgrounds, including those facing educational disadvantage or disruption. Enabling programs have evolved over time to meet the needs of varied cohorts and contexts, reflecting a commitment to widening participation and equity in higher education. More recently, integrating enabling programs within senior school has emerged in response to requests by the secondary schooling sector. These programs extend innovative post-school enabling education models, offering senior secondary students a direct pathway to university through collaborative partnerships between schools and universities.

Australian secondary education has traditionally been structured as a binary of pathways. Since the establishment of the ATAR in 2009, the ATAR has evolved beyond its original purpose, functioning both as an indicator of secondary school achievement and as a mechanism for university entry (Learning Creates Australia, 2023; Pilcher et al., 2025). Paradoxically, though the ATAR is regarded as a national measure, its calculation remains deeply embedded in state and territory systems and procedures, with each jurisdiction applying its own assessment and certification processes (Shergold, 2020). Building on this context, in framing the discussion on the emergence of ISEPs as a senior school pathway, consideration must be given to factors impacting Australian adolescents, particularly those from equity groups.

## 2.1 An evolution of enabling education

University enabling programs, otherwise known as bridging, foundation, or preparation programs, prepare students with the essential skills for academic success within higher education. Though delivered by universities, enabling programs are distinct from traditional degree programs. Defined within the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* as: "a course of instruction provided to a person for the purpose of enabling the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award", these programs are designed to prepare and qualify students for undergraduate study.

With minimal or no entry requirements, and generally provided at no cost to the student, enabling programs enrol high proportions of students from equity groups and thereby play an important part in Australia's widening participation agenda. Pre-tertiary pathway students

“are typically from groups underrepresented at university, and/or have experienced disruption during their educational journeys” (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Hopkins, 2021; Olds et.al, 2018). Many are from low socio-economic status backgrounds, are first-in-family to attend university, have had substantial gaps in learning, or encountered challenges associated with disability, neurodivergence, or mental ill-health within or impacting their education. Literature suggests that these students commence study with diverse needs that require additional pastoral, mental health, and academic support (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Hopkins, 2021; Jones et al., 2016; Olds et al., 2018).

Enabling programs in Australia developed independently to meet the diverse needs of students, communities, and universities and have evolved and been refined over 50 years, such that programs are highly contextualised to place. The programs are offered with varying structures, funding models, and delivery modes. A consistent body of work indicates that the teaching and learning within enabling programs typically entails scaffolded curriculum, philosophies of care, social justice, and student flourishing (Stokes, 2024; Hattam et al, 2024; Jones et al., 2019; Crawford et al., 2016), in both face-to-face and online learning environments (Hopkins, 2021). Several universities provide cohort- or discipline-specific programs, such as targeted programs for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students or students in senior schooling. The latter—ISEPSs—are a relatively new subset of enabling programs.

ISEPs are like standard enabling programs, but students complete the programs while enrolled in high school. The programs provide a direct pathway to university for students who may not have access to, or would not flourish on, an ATAR pathway (Jeong et al., 2024; Olds et al, 2022). While some high school enabling programs are delivered at a university campus after school hours or during school holidays, the majority of ISEPs are delivered by school teachers during school time. In this partnership model, the programs are designed by university enabling academics who work closely with partnership schools to coordinate, facilitate, and deliver the enabling programs to current Year 11 and/or Year 12 students. In alignment with the broader enabling sector, ISEPs are designed to equip students with the academic skills and confidence for a successful transition to university. With a focus on students who have faced educational disadvantage, disruption, or who have not thrived in traditional secondary education systems, the nesting within senior schooling enables the development of skills within a supportive environment, thereby providing a direct and supportive pathway to higher education. A small number of universities have offered ISEPs for two decades; however, more recently there has been an emergence of programs, with seven universities now offering ISEPs.

The evolution of enabling education continues with this project, undertaken in a period of change for the enabling sector. The Australian Universities Accord emphasised the need to expand the higher education enabling sector through an increase in quality preparatory courses and funding that reflects the full cost of delivery. Legislation has created a new funding category for enabling courses, rebadged as “Fee-Free Uni Ready” (FFUR) places, with a significant investment from the Australian Government ($350 million over four years) to help achieve the Australian Universities Accord’s ambitions (Department of Education, 2024b). As at the end of 2025, the FFUR initiative had introduced consistency in funding for student places and increased the allocation of places, with current restriction to Table A providers. There is potential variability in the impact of the new funding arrangements (Norton, 2024), and the sector is in transitional arrangements as the Australian Government

works to define FFUR programs. As part of this initiative, the Australian Government has also indicated it will work with providers to professionalise and increase the quality and consistency of FFUR courses, with a view to increasing portability (Department of Education, 2024a). Where ISEPs sit within legislative and funding arrangements is currently unclear, with universities funding these programs in different ways under previous funding models.

Acknowledgement of the roots of enabling education is important in considering its future. Enabling programs have developed over time to be contextually relevant to the local community in which the program operates, and there are concerns that potential over-standardisation would detract from the tailoring of courses to specific student, cohort, or community needs (Davis et al., 2023a; Norton, 2024). In the first comprehensive, cross-institutional benchmarking project of enabling programs involving nine Australian universities, Davis et al. (2023a) demonstrated that there exists a consensus across the enabling sector regarding the level and quality of outcomes expected at the completion of an enabling program, and provided a framework for benchmarking in alignment with the Higher Education Standards Framework's benchmarking requirements for assuring program quality.

In alignment with a consensus-driven approach and as part of standard university quality assurance process, this project initially commenced as a benchmarking of learning outcomes, curriculum and assessment, and academic outcomes of ISEPSs. Enabled by the provision of funding through the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES), the project was expanded to explore curriculum and outcomes more deeply and seek the perspectives of both students who had completed an ISEP and educators in high schools. Nationally, and for Western Australia in particular, this project is a timely exploration of ISEPs. In Western Australia, concern regarding continual decline in ATAR participation prompted a review of post-school pathways in 2023, which included ISEPs. The benchmarking reported in this project was undertaken prior to the release of the *Pathways to Post-School Success: Review of Western Australian Senior Secondary Pathways* (2024) and is noted within the report. In relation to ISEPs, the *Pathways to Post-School Success* report recommended that universities should improve data collection and analysis on students who enter through enabling courses to better understand the effectiveness of courses and how to best support students (Recommendation 21). Additionally, universities should work with the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) to create and maintain consistent standards and parity for enabling courses, ensuring transparency and quality, as well as drawing from universities' current benchmarking activities (Recommendation 22) (Department of Education Western Australia, 2024). Similar to the work of Davis et al. (2023a), this project seeks to contribute rigorous data on ISEPs structure and outcomes to the sector and wider higher education community.

### 2.1.1 Enabling education as a (sub) discipline

Historically, the variability of enabling programs gave rise to a perception of a lack of consistency and quality. However, increasingly, research indicates 'enabling education' as a "coherent and distinct sub-discipline" (Davis, 2023b). While not defined within the Australian Qualifications Framework and with no nationally recognised common standard, benchmarking of enabling programs demonstrates remarkable consistency in learning outcomes, standards, curriculum, and teaching philosophies (Davis et al 2023a; Davis et al, 2023b). Additionally, enabling programs share approaches drawn from enabling transitional pedagogical models, pedagogies of care and social justice (Stokes, 2025; Hattam et al.,

2024; Jones, Lisciandro & Olds, 2019; Crawford et al., 2016) in order to acknowledge socio-emotional impact of and on learning.

As a more recent development in the history of enabling education, ISEPs have not had the same level of analysis. Stemming from the broader enabling education discipline, these programs are founded on the same principles, though to date there has been no formal benchmarking of ISEPs and research has consisted of individual institution or small-scale comparative analysis (Ramos et al 2025; Maclaurin et al, 2024; Olds et al, 2022). Outcomes from this project will contribute to a better understanding of the efficacy of ISEPs and contribute to the growing canon of enabling research.

## 2.2 Pathways to higher education

Widening participation in higher education has been a focus within the Australian tertiary education sector for several decades. Expansionary policies, government funding mechanisms, and individual institutional initiatives have seen a variety of pathways emerge, particularly to increase participation from communities historically underrepresented within higher education. Stemming from Australian higher education's elitist beginnings (Gale & Tranter, 2011), these pathways, which include enabling programs, are often problematically referred to as "alternative" pathways, creating a system which appears "ATAR-centric" and with a perceived hierarchy of admission paths and educational quality (Li et al., 2022; Louden, 2024; Pilcher et al., 2023). To meet the ambitions of the Australian Universities Accord, it is increasingly pertinent to consider and recognise the variety of pathways to university and the effectiveness of each for a diversity of cohorts.

### 2.2.1 Pathways in senior schooling

There exist a range of pathways to university and a growing proportion of students, particularly those from equity groups, utilising a broad range of pathways to enter university (Li et al., 2022). While there is concern about national ATAR participation rates, it remains the most common pathway for domestic school leaver entry to university in Australia. In 2023, almost half of domestic students commencing bachelor's degrees had recently completed secondary education, and of this school leaver cohort, 63% were admitted on the basis of their ATAR alone, 7% were admitted using their ATAR plus additional criteria, and 30% were admitted solely on the basis of other criteria (such as an overseas assigned ranking score, portfolio, audition, or school recommendation scheme) (Pilcher et al., 2025).

The ATAR attainment and use for entry to university varies across states and territories, and student cohorts. The proportion of completing Year 12 students who achieve an ATAR ranges from 38% in Western Australia to 79% in New South Wales, and analysis of ATAR attainment over time shows mostly stable rates across states and territories, apart from Western Australia and Victoria with declines over time (Pilcher et al., 2025). For the context of this project, the universities and high schools are located in Western Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales—states with the lowest, fourth lowest, and highest ATAR attainment rates respectively (Pilcher et al., 2025).

The determination of senior school pathways for students involves a complex interplay of factors, and there is a growing critique that this single ranking system disadvantages certain

equity groups. Research from tertiary institutions suggests that the ATAR “is a narrowly conceived instrumentalist sorting process” (Rovis-Hermann, 2024). Russell et al. (2021) demonstrated that the ATAR allows effective grade predictions in first year for science-based recall subjects, but is less predictive for units incorporating work placements requiring interpersonal skills. In more public discourse arenas, such as the media, principals are communicating concern that the ATAR is an inadequate measure of student achievement and capability and creates undue stressors on students (Carey, 2023).

However, governments and curriculum authorities exert influence in the sector. For example, in the Western Australian context, the previous Minister for Education, Dr Tony Buti, reported to the media his concern that “alternative” pathways did not adequately prepare students (Bridges, 2023) and this perception shaped aspects of the initial *Pathways to Post-School Success Review*. However, consultations with schools, parents, and students as part of the review revealed suitable justification for ISEPs, noting that many considered the programs offered rigorous curriculums and quality learning opportunities, addressing the gaps in more traditional senior curriculums (Department of Education Western Australia, 2024). Despite the recognition of ISEPs as a means to enhance curriculum breadth and rigour, evidence suggests that systemic inequities remain, particularly for students from equity groups.

Research indicates that students from equity or other historically marginalised groups variously experience structural barriers in senior school of limited subject access, lower school resourcing, inflexible or inconsistent educational adjustments, and standardised assessments that are not culturally or contextually relevant and do not account for interrupted schooling or English language development (Harvey et al., 2023; Louden, 2024; Pilcher et al., 2025). For example, Harvey et al. (2023) examined the extent of non-ATAR streaming across Queensland and found that streaming decisions made in Year 9 and Year 10 disproportionately limited student choice in senior school subjects for marginalised groups. Additionally, students who complete a non-ATAR pathway are unlikely to transition to higher education post-school, with only 6.4% of non-ATAR students transitioning to a bachelor’s degree compared to 64% of students on an ATAR pathway, remaining relatively stable over time (Harvey et al., 2023; Queensland Government, 2025). These practices and barriers have implications in access to higher education.

The availability of subjects contributing to an ATAR across schools is impacted by the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA), geographic location, and size of student populus, and thereby further constrains direct pathways to university. For example, higher ICSEA schools, major city schools, and larger schools provide more ATAR subjects than others. As such, students from the highest ICSEA-quartile schools complete a higher proportion of ATAR subjects than students from the other ICSEA-quartile schools (Department of Education Western Australia, 2023).

Expanding equitable pathways to university, as emphasised by the Australian Universities Accord, is essential given that “the data is clear that ATAR disproportionately rewards students from high-SES backgrounds, while compounding barriers for those from regional, low-income, Indigenous, and disability cohorts” (Pilcher et al., 2025, p. 37).

Consequently, ISEPs have emerged in response to secondary school sector requests for a pathway to higher education, amid debates over the suitability for diverse cohorts of how the ATAR is determined over two years of senior schooling. In Western Australia, the state with the largest and longest-running initiatives, universities can apply to have an ISEP recognised

as an “Endorsed Program” by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA). Endorsed Programs provide learning opportunities not covered by Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) courses or Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs, and contribute unit equivalents toward the WACE. These programs are delivered in diverse settings including schools, workplaces, universities, and community organisations, and encompass workplace learning, community service, and enrichment programs. Endorsed programs represent only a small proportion of senior school unit completions, consistently accounting for around 3-4% of total units between 2016 and 2022 (Louden, 2024).

### 2.2.2 Senior schooling and mental health

The potential impacts of senior schooling, particularly the ATAR, on mental health and wellbeing is an important consideration within this discussion. Crisp et al. (2025), in their longitudinal study of adolescent mental health, recognise high rates of psychological distress in youth, but also flourishing until later years of adolescence, when flourishing diminishes to “middling and stumbling”; they note that this coincides with stressors of moving into adulthood and finishing school. Similarly, the Mitchell Institute report on declining ATAR levels notes that there are “high and growing levels of psychological distress among young people aged 16-24” and that the pressures of “academia” impacts this (Pilcher, 2025, p. 28). Correspondingly, the 2025 Mission Australia Youth Survey (14-to-19-year-olds) highlights that "two in five young people (39%) reported stress related to their mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, one in five (19%) scored in the high psychological distress range of respondents” (McHale et al., 2025, p. 4).

The report highlights how intersecting identities among students from equity groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, and those living with a mental health condition, compound mental health and educational challenges. Of the 17,000-plus survey respondents, 98.7% were students, 5.6% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 10% identified as having a disability (two-thirds psychosocial), and 15% were living with a mental health condition (McHale et al., 2025, p. 10). Anxiety, depressive disorders, and neurodevelopmental conditions such as Autism and ADHD were the most frequently cited mental health concerns (McHale et al., 2025, p. 10).

Concerningly, “school or study problems” was the common source of overall stress for participants (58%) (McHale et al., 2025, p. 69). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, school or study issues (46%) and mental health concerns (45%) were also dominant (McHale et al., 2025, p.32). For non-Indigenous students, 26% noted feeling like they couldn’t achieve their work or study goals, highlighting the biggest barriers to achievement as: lack of motivation (66%), confidence (39%), and mental health issues (34%) (McHale et al.,2025., p. 4) which are proponents effecting self-efficacy. These findings reflected participants’ diminished self-efficacy when it came to study and work goals, and as theorised by Bandura (1997), this can adversely affect educational achievement and retention.

Emerging research highlights a strong link between ATAR-focused pathways and poor student mental health (Olds et al., 2022; Shergold et al., 2020). Patfield (2024), building on Shergold’s *Review of Senior Secondary Pathways* (2020), found that framing the ATAR as the ultimate measure of success creates significant stress and anxiety for students.

Interviews revealed that those with complex home lives, physical or mental ill-health, and intersecting disadvantages felt particularly burdened by ATAR pressures (p. 5). Patfield argued that “ATAR tended to hide systemic inequities, neglecting engrained issues within and across schools that ultimately shape the kinds of results achieved in high-stakes tests” (p. 11). Students viewed early entrance schemes as more inclusive, valuing the whole learner and reducing the mental health toll associated with an ATAR. Consequently, Patfield called for pathways that prioritise wellbeing and equitable access to post-school opportunities. Similarly, Olds et al. (2022) advocated for senior school structures that foster belonging, reduce alienation, and actively support mental health needs. Together, these findings point to an urgent need for reforms that balance academic rigour with student wellbeing, particularly for those facing disadvantage.

### 2.2.3 Academic outcomes by pathway

There exists an increasing variety of pathways to university, and examining outcomes by entry pathway is essential to ensure diverse routes genuinely prepare students for success and inform equity-focused policy and program design. Recent analyses show that equity cohorts navigate multiple pathways into higher education and that outcomes vary across these routes (Li & Jackson, 2023). For example, Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways have grown as an entry option, yet studies report mixed results for academic success and retention, with persistent challenges around preparedness and transition (Olds et al., 2022; Pilcher & Torii, 2018). At the same time, the strongest growth in participation has occurred through enabling programs, though usage patterns differ; low SES students appear to make relatively limited use of enabling pathways, while regional and remote students more often favour VET (Li & Jackson, 2023). Notably, some of these findings draw on data sets dominated by mature age enrolments (for example, 2011–2019), underscoring the need to disaggregate outcomes by age and pathway to avoid overgeneralising from older cohorts.

Post-secondary enabling programs consistently demonstrate effectiveness in supporting students from equity cohorts to access and succeed in higher education, with evidence of strong progression into first-year studies (Lisciandro, 2022; Pitman et al., 2016). Crucially, retention and attrition need to be conceptualised differently in enabling contexts as withdrawal can be a positive, agentic decision when students recalibrate goals toward alternative qualifications or employment, challenging deficit framings of success (Bennett et al., 2013; Hodges et al., 2013). These insights point to the value of enabling pedagogy, targeted academic literacies, and wraparound supports as mechanisms that build confidence, belonging, and readiness for the demands of undergraduate study (Lisciandro, 2022; Hodges et al., 2013).

In contrast, research on ISEPSs remains limited and primarily qualitative, despite promising early indicators. Practice and qualitative studies report improved Year 12 completion, heightened tertiary aspirations, and stronger perceptions of preparedness among participants in programs such as FlexiTrack High and TLC Learning for Tomorrow (Maclaurin et al., 2025). Emerging cross-institutional work also highlights the importance of school-university partnerships, alignment with first year expectations, and enabling transition pedagogy as design principles (Daly et al., 2025; Ramos, Ryan & Forbes, 2025). However, robust longitudinal evidence linking ISEP participation to undergraduate retention, achievement, and completion is scarce. Addressing this gap is the central aim of the current

project, which will generate evidence to inform policy, program design, and equity strategies in Australian higher education.

### 2.2.4 Conceptualisations of success

Quantitative measures of student success such as grades, conversion, retention, and pass rates are often shared as the defining markers of student success. These are used by the Australian Government and institutions to validate program viability. Yet such definitions are neoliberal in nature and limit discourse or considerations of success as multi-dimensional, and inclusive of other socio-cultural and socio-emotional elements (Baker et al., 2020; Maclaurin et al., 2024; Rubin et al., 2022). For example, Jackson et al. (2023) indicate enabling programs can give “confidence, resilience and ... purpose” for students who achieved a lower Australian Tertiary Admission Rank” (pp. 598–599). Pedler recognises a sense of belonging within as a “student’s subjective feelings of connection and integration with their institution and campus community” (Pedler et al., 2022, p. 398). Pedler (2022), as well as others (Larsen & James, 2022; Larsen et al., 2025; Thomas 2011), importantly note the relationship between student not-belonging and high attrition. Additionally, as noted by Larsen and James (2022) and Thomas (2011), this connection between retention and belonging recognises belonging as a marker of student success.

The importance of belonging as a central proponent of wellbeing is recognised in enabling literature, particularly as parts of Enabling Transition Pedagogies (ETPs) (see Nieuwoudt & Jones 2025; Olds et al., 2022; Crawford et al., 2016; Nieuwoudt, 2021, 2023). Including wellbeing curriculum principles recognises “the social and emotional layers of learning” as a factor impacting student success and transition, and as an important consideration when designing an enabling program, particularly for ISEPs where students are operating in a liminal space between school, enabling, and university (Nieuwoudt & Jones 2025). A sense of belonging is a crucial aspect of positive wellbeing. For enabling, similar to university students, a sense of belonging is developed through learning communities, relationships, and a “deep connection” with the university (Larsen & James, 2022; Larsen et al., 2025; Jones, Lisciandro & Olds, 2019). This is demonstrated to have a positive effect on self-efficacy—students’ sense of belief in themselves and their ability to achieve—which is also recognised in the literature as a key marker of success as it contributes to confidence, resilience, and stickability. In contrast to numerical qualifiers of success, these socio-emotional elements (sense of wellbeing and self-efficacy) are additional important markers of success as they take into account the whole student. Binarily, they demonstrate the distance travelled from cultural outsider to insider, non-aspirational to aspirational, and importantly, non-belief to belief in academic ability to go to university.

## 2.3 Emerging ways forward

In summary, there is growing concern that the current structure of the ATAR system is failing to meet the needs of students, particularly in regional and remote areas where opportunities to achieve competitive rankings are limited. Nationally, enabling programs are designed to be responsive to the local context and communities, and ISEPs were designed in response to an identified need in senior secondary sectors for a non-ATAR pathway to university. But government and education departments often perceive ISEPs as diverting students away from ATAR pathways, even though ATAR attainment was in decline for a decade before

their emergence. These departments also have a lack of understanding of the academic rigour ISEPs entail. Furthermore, there is insufficient data to demonstrate the impact of initiatives such as ISEPs, as government agencies do not collect comprehensive school leaver information, and there is no consistent tracking of student progression across universities (for example, through USI linkage from schools to higher education following completion of an ISEP). While a few long-standing programs exist, most have been established relatively recently, contributing to misconceptions and gaps in evidence about their effectiveness. Thus, this project offers a multi-lens approach to spotlight the different ways these programs are efficacious and responsive to their context, and grow the canon of research in the discipline of enabling education.

# 3. Methods

This project adopted a four-phase mixed methodological approach to develop an understanding of ISEP models and to understand the efficacy of ISEPs. This comparative research project spanned four universities and 94 high schools across Australia. The project utilised a benchmarking framework to explore curriculum documents to understand commonalities and differences in ISEP design, extant university transition data, along with the voices of school-based partners and post-secondary ISEP students to understand the outcomes from and perspectives of ISEPs. Exemplifying the partnership approach within ISEPs, school-based partners informed the design and content of final research outputs. ECU, as lead institution, obtained ethics approval for this project (2024-05572-JONES) and cross-institutional approval was acquired from the partner universities.

## 3.1 Phase one: Benchmarking of in-school enabling programs

The first phase focused on benchmarking the design of the four programs to establish a baseline understanding of program model structures, Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs), curriculum, and assessment design and delivery, not only as a way to ascertain if there was a comparability of standards, but to understand what common elements make a program effective. Phase one engaged Morgan and Taylor's (2013) six-phase benchmarking framework, templates for cross-institutional collaboration and consistency, and method for reporting outcomes as employed in the recent *Report on Benchmarking of Enabling Programs across Australia to the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA)* (Davis et al., 2023). The benchmarking of ISEPs included: program objectives, learning outcomes, curriculum content, assessment methods, and delivery across institutions to identify similarities and differences in programs, which could inform sector guidance on program development and review.

## 3.2 Phase two: Understanding academic outcomes

Phase two sought to understand the academic outcomes of students within ISEPs, as well as in the first year of undergraduate studies and in comparison to peers entering university from high school via other pathways (including post-school enabling programs and direct entry via ATAR pathways). Administrative data (student records) routinely captured by the institution during application, enrolment, and reporting of results were drawn on for this part of the research. In the first instance, data specialists from the data management team at the lead institution created a shared data dictionary and data collection template which detailed variable definitions, categories, codes, and data collation procedures. This was then shared with the data management teams/data specialists at each of the other respective universities who liaised to retrieve and collate the required data using a consistent approach.

### 3.2.1 Part I: Outcomes within in-school enabling programs

The first part of this analysis involved looking at rates of completion, success, and conversion to undergraduate enrolment for domestic students who attempted an ISEP at one of the four universities between 2021–2023. Table 2 shows the total number of unique students enrolled past Census in an ISEP at each university between 2021–2023 for inclusion in this analysis.

*Table 2: Total unique students enrolled in an in-school enabling program in 2021–2023 and included in analysis of quantitative student outcomes*

| Provider | Course | Total unique students enrolled in 2021–2023 |
|---|---|---|
| ECU | UniPrep Schools | 891* |
| MU | FlexiTrack High | 630 |
| UniSQ | UniPrep | 264* |
| SCU | UniStart for Schools | 139 |

*ISEPs at ECU and UniSQ enrol students in both Year 11 and 12, therefore these figures may include some students who were not in Year 12 in 2021-2023 (for example, Year 11s only beginning the program in 2023 and still enrolled/continuing in 2024). For ECU, 705 students were enrolled in UniPrep Schools during Year 12 for the period 2021-2023, but this number is unknown for UniSQ UniPrep.

Additional demographic information pertaining to equity status amongst these cohorts was collected. Table 3 details equity group definitions used, mostly guided by the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) definitions (Australian Government, 2025a). The proportions of each ISEP cohort belonging to none, one, or two or more of these equity groups was determined. Further, the proportion of each cohort that were classified as low SES or regional/remote were also separately identified.

*Table 3: Equity status indicators used in this study*

| Equity group | Definition | Reference |
|---|---|---|
| English as an additional language or dialect | A domestic student whose language spoken at home is not English (student self-reported during application/enrolment)*. | (Australian Government, 2025a) |
| Low socio-economic status (SES) | Student's first reported address/postcode (or latest if unknown) mapped to lowest quartile (25%) of postcodes nationally based on 2021 Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia. | (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023) |
| Regional/remote | Student's first reported address/postcode (or latest if unknown) mapped to regional/remote classification, based on Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) measure. | (Australian Government, 2025b) |
| Disability | Students who have indicated that they have any disability, impairment, or long-term condition which may affect their studies (using TCSI reporting code E615). | (Australian Government, 2025c) |
| Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander | Student identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander during application/enrolment (TCSI data element E316 with code 3, 4, or 5). | (Australian Government, 2025d) |

*For the purposes of the data dictionary the TCSI "Non-English speaking background" (NESB) definition was used.

To determine the ISEP completion rate, the total number of unique students who completed the program in 2021–2023 was compared to the number that could have completed the program in 2021–2023 (that is, excluding Year 11s continuing the program into 2024). Of those who completed the program in 2021–2023, the total number who went on to commence an undergraduate program in 2022–2024 (inclusive) was then calculated to determine the rate of conversion to undergraduate enrolment. Lastly, success rate was measured to provide an indication of student academic performance during the ISEP. This was calculated according to the TCSI definition (Australian Government, 2025e), that is, the equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) of units passed, divided by the EFTSL of units attempted (enrolled past Census date).

### 3.2.2 Part II: Outcomes at undergraduate study by admission pathway

The undergraduate outcomes of school leaver-aged domestic students who commenced an undergraduate course at one of the four universities between 2022–2024 were studied. "School leaver-aged" was defined as younger than 20-years-old as at 31 December of the year prior to commencing their undergraduate course. This was used to ensure that the undergraduate outcomes of domestic students who entered university via an ISEP were being compared with domestic peers of a similar age group.

Table 4 describes the pathways (basis of admission) included in this analysis and the relative cohort sizes that entered each institution via these pathways between 2022–2024.

Within each cohort/pathway, equity status was also identified (whether students belonged to none, one, or two or more equity groups).

*Table 4: Pathway description and cohort sizes identified for analysis**

| Pathway | Description | ECU | MU | UniSQ | SCU |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In-school enabling program | Students that completed/passed all the requirements of a university's in-school enabling program, as part of their schooling in 2021–2023, and commenced an undergraduate program in 2022–2024. | 261 | 306 | 70 | 24 |
| Post-school enabling program^ | Students who previously completed a post-secondary enabling program at the higher education provider, any time prior to beginning undergraduate study at that provider in 2022–2024. | 1243 | 331 | 288 | 429 |
| Recent school leaver (ATAR) | Students whose basis for admission was recent secondary education—ATAR only, or ATAR plus other criteria. | 2401 | 557 | 1470 | 559 |
| Recent school leaver (non-ATAR) | Students whose basis for admission was recent secondary education—only other criteria, ATAR not considered. | 399 | 1077 | 1167 | 1982 |
| Other provider enabling program | Students whose basis for admission was an enabling program delivered by another provider. | 371 | 185 | 275 | 0 |

* Note that students who entered their undergraduate program based on work/life experience, other higher education study, or VET qualifications were not included in this analysis.

^At UniSQ, there were some discrepancies in how post-secondary enabling students were registered at admission, with a different basis of admission (non-ATAR, or other provider) occasionally recorded. Therefore, caution is to be exercised in interpretation of these results.

Notably, due to the timing of data retrieval from university databases, this data provides a snapshot of student outcomes mid-2025. Once the cohorts for analysis were identified (stratified by pathway and then by equity status), retention and success rates were calculated according to the TCSI definitions (Australian Government, 2025e; Australian Government, 2025f). More specifically, retention from first year to second year undergraduate study was ascertained using the new normal retention rate calculation, defined as "the number of students who commenced a course in year (x) and did not complete in year (x) or year (x + 1), and continued in year (x + 1) (retained students), as a proportion of all students who commenced a course in year (x) and did not complete in year (x) or year (x + 1)" (Australian Government, 2025f). Notably, where the sample size was very low (fewer than 10 students or less than five EFTSL) data were suppressed/not reported.

**Data analysis**

Descriptive statistics (for example, counts and percentages) are reported. As data were supplied to researchers in aggregate only, rather than as individual data points, no statistical differences were tested between comparison groups.

## 3.3 Phase three: Student and educator perspectives

Phase three explored student and educator perspectives. The project aimed to collect interview responses from a sample size of 34 educators and survey 100 ISEP graduates. In total, 1450 students were invited to participate in the interviews.

### 3.3.1 Student survey

The survey was open to students who completed an ISEP delivered by one of the four universities in 2021–2023 (*n* = 1327) and had transitioned to undergraduate study. Demographic information was collected as part of the survey. Students were categorised as belonging to an equity group if they resided in a low SES postcode (according to the definition in Table 2) and/or had self-identified as either Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, first-in-family to attend university, having a disability or ongoing medical or mental health condition, diagnosed neurodivergence, and/or living in a remote or regional location. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistical tests were used to explore the survey respondent characteristics.

Participants were asked questions relevant to their experiences of the ISEP they completed. This included questions about reasons for choosing to participate in the program, the skills developed in the program, their perception of how well the program prepared them for university studies, and their level of satisfaction with the program. Both Likert-style (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions were employed for this part of the survey. Students also completed a six-item Brief Resilience Scale (BRS), the short version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), and a five-item adapted version of the Sense of Belonging Index. More information about these measures is provided in Appendix A.

In total, 1450 past students were invited to participate in the survey; 73 provided consent and accessed the Qualtrics survey. There were 19 empty responses that were excluded from the analysis. There were 54 valid survey responses (4% response rate), mostly encompassing students who had completed their enabling program at a Western Australian university (82% of respondents). Survey participation may have been influenced by timing issues, as the release was delayed and, due to an administrative error, the correct cohort subsequently received the survey during their exam period rather than the intended early-semester timeframe.

### 3.3.2 Student and educator interviews

On completion of the survey, students were invited to participate in a 30-minute interview, which formed the second qualitative data set. Interview questions focused on why students

decided to enrol in the ISEP, how much they enjoyed the program, and if the program helped to prepare them for university or life in general. Six students attended interviews, from across the universities.

Educator interviews were also completed to garner the experiences and reflections of those teaching the programs. In total, 116 educators were invited to participate, with 14 interviewed. Participation in the interviews could have been impacted by principal and departmental agreement. The semi-structured interviews (O'Donoghue, 2019) with educators focused on their perceptions of programs within the senior schooling landscape, considerations and concerns, and factors that influenced and contributed to student engagement.

Interviews were conducted by project staff not associated with the high school or ISEP of the interview participant. While the student survey data was anonymised when collected, the interview data was cleaned and de-identified prior to analysis.

### 3.3.3 Data analysis

**Quantitative data analysis**

Likert-style survey responses are expressed using descriptive statistics, that is, means, standard deviations (SD), and/or proportions. As variables were normally distributed, parametric tests were used. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess differences between students from equity and non-equity groups. The level of significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$. Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 30. Qualitative data collected from the open-ended survey fields were thematically analysed, as described below.

**Qualitative data analysis**

Each set of qualitative data was thematically analysed as a unique data set by three different research teams within the project to minimise bias and subjectivity across the analyses. Similarly, keeping the analysis separate in the first instance ensured the voice and experience of each participant within the set was captured and analysed.

Subsequent analysis included the combination of all three data sets. Analysis of the qualitative responses was conducted using Braun and Clarke's reflective thematic analysis (2006). This approach enabled the researchers to capture the student's and educator's subjective experience and identify and analyse the meaning of patterns and themes in the data set. The first step was for each researcher to generate initial codes, reading each response for recurrent words and phrases. This allowed for a degree of familiarisation with the responses and an inductive, data-driven process that captured the content of the data. The data was coded using an open coded approach and a structured codebook was then created from which core commonality and themes became more apparent. The researchers then, through recursive, iterative, and collaborative discussions, compared each codebook, examining the similarities and reoccurrences, but also statements that conveyed conviction and personal stories. Effective reflective thematic analysis holds both ontological and epistemological considerations (Byrne, 2021); while some data presented clearly expressed an obvious semantic meaning, other data provided more hidden, latent content. For example, some comments referred to wider social contexts that indicated the student

experience had a ripple effect in their community; these comments were therefore highlighted by the researchers as well.

Further analysis and negotiation between researchers conducting coding and a third researcher outside of the initial coding enabled the codes to be rigorously thought through and collapsed into themes and sub-themes, and ordered for a “cogent narrative” (Byrne, 2021, p.1403) for each data set. The themes from all data sets were synthesised into superordinate themes in a final findings discussion, highlighting overlaps between survey and interviews.

Final analysis of the quantitative and thematic findings regarding academic and socio-emotional efficacy, as attributes of success, were coalesced in phase four and are outlined below. Additionally, these findings informed the creation of an implementation guide for high schools and universities (Jones et al., 2026a). Consultation was undertaken with partnership school principals during this final process to ensure the implementation guide was a useable tool that could offer key insights and steps for high schools considering implementing an ISEP, and guide universities on how to design an ISEP and create a strong partnership model.

# 4. Findings

## 4.1 Phase one: Benchmarking of in-school enabling programs

The benchmarking highlights seven key findings across the ISEPs. While there were variances in duration and delivery methods, overall, the universities shared comparable partnership models, visions, and goals, as well as a high degree of alignment in topics, content, and learning outcomes. Additionally, assessments were comparable in terms of type, academic rigour, and grade outcomes, and allowed students to demonstrate essential skills for success at an undergraduate level. All universities provided clear and accessible rubrics to support well-structured assessments, ensuring consistent standards and expectations across courses, as well as rigorous moderation practices to maintain consistent marking across the duration of programs. Finally, all courses were designed to improve access to undergraduate study. The courses particularly focused on supporting students from regional and remote areas, low socio-economic backgrounds, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Benchmarking highlights the rigour of ISEPs, showcasing the universities' commitment to delivering high-quality programs focused on appropriately challenging curricula for high school students to adequately prepare them for undergraduate studies. Benchmarking discussions revealed a number of common principles and practices when designing ISEPs, indicating strong alignment with sector stands and demonstrating program viability as a pathway to university. Through the benchmarking process, it was agreed that developing a community of practice to share practice and align curriculum and assessment/grading levels will be integral to maintaining the academic standards of ISEPs nationally. In line with the NAEEA Benchmarking Project (Davis et al., 2023), the findings from the benchmarking of ISEPs are provided with further details in the *Benchmarking Report of In-School Enabling Programs Across Australia* (Jones et al., 2026b), linking with "good practices" in program design and delivery, and "benchmarking impacts" suggesting future improvements to programs.

**Finding 1:** All programs include a partnership model: curriculum is designed by the university and implemented by the high school with university support.

**Finding 2:** All programs target specific cohorts, primarily regional and remote, or equity schools.

**Finding 3:** All programs have a process for student eligibility and admission, including recommendation by school, and English competency standards requirements.

**Finding 4:** Course learning outcomes in all four programs emphasise common academic, learning, and socio-emotional skills.

**Finding 5**: Assessments in all courses are highly scaffolded, shared assignment types, with common academic skill focus in order for students to demonstrate comparable standards and alignment with common learning outcomes.

**Finding 6**: All four courses provide scaffolded assessment explanation and rubrics that are clear and explicit for students.

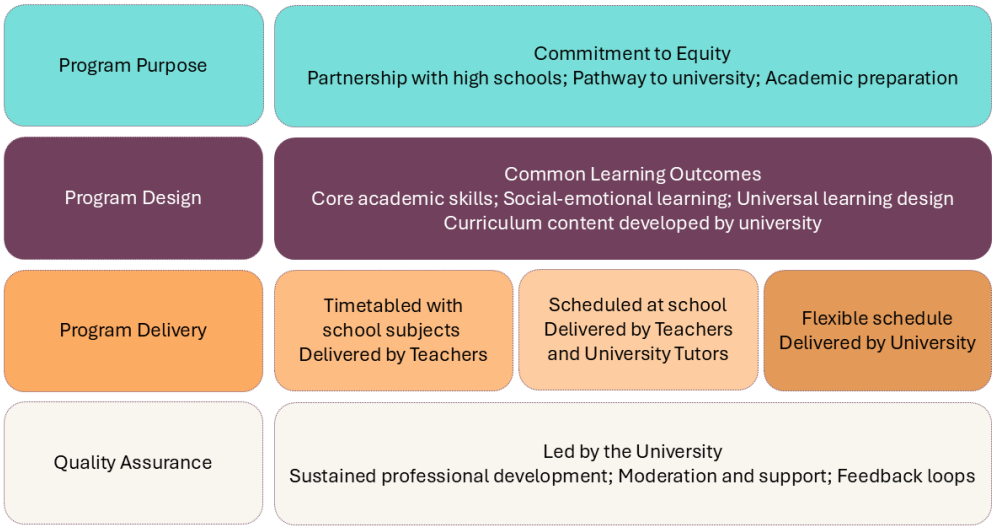
**Finding 7**: All courses include moderation practices prior to major assessments that ensure consistency of marking of assessments by teachers and within universities.

Through the benchmarking process, a number of commonalities and distinct differences emerged across the ISEPs. The four programs shared a commitment to equity and the development of an academically rigorous pathway to university implemented in partnership between high schools and the university. Similarly, across program design there was commonality in learning outcomes, with a focus on the development of core academic skills and socio-emotional learning to be successful within university study. Given the commitment to equity, program design also focused on accessibility and inclusivity. All programs also had quality assurance mechanisms led by the university to uphold the integrity and quality of program design and outcomes.

While duration of programs varied somewhat, the strongest distinguishing feature was the delivery and teaching. Three types of program delivery were evident across the four ISEPs. The ISEPs of ECU and SCU were scheduled into the school timetable and delivered by high school teachers. MU's ISEP featured a collaborative model where the program was embedded in the high school timetable, but delivered with a team approach where high school teachers and university tutors shared delivery responsibilities, and learning was supplemented by online support from university tutors. Finally, UniSQ offered the most flexible model, with the ISEP available online and supplemented by online support from university tutors. In this model, integration with the school timetable varied based on the individual school, and the program also supported students who were in home school to enrol.

These distinctions highlight the contextual nature of ISEPs, where universities have been responsive to the needs of their local communities. Additionally, the similarities and variations in program components lead to an emerging typology of ISEPs, as represented in Figure 1 below. Further work is required to build and refine this typology with a broader sample of ISEPs across the country. Additionally, it provides a way to consider programs and explore which types of program work for which students and communities.

*Figure 1: Typology of in-school enabling program models*




There were seven phase one recommendations identified at the end of the benchmarking process, specific to the design and delivery of ISEPs. These recommendations are most applicable to enabling educators, universities, and the NAEEA:

1. **Establishment of guiding principles:** Develop a set of guiding principles and Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) to support institutions and organisations in the rationale, design, and delivery of ISEPs to ensure consistency and quality across ISEPs.
2. **Strengthening partnerships:** Define the relationship between institutions and their partner schools, recognising their role in program success.
3. **Development of adapted CLOs:** Create a modified version of the NAEEA CLOs tailored specifically for ISEPs to ensure their relevance and applicability.
4. **Cross-institutional collaboration:** Continue cross-intuitional collaboration to collect data on efficacy of programs, maintain entry and assessments standards through benchmarking, and resource sharing.
5. **Development of Community of Practice:** Develop an understanding of high school student profiles and target cohorts.
6. **Pedagogy development:** Further develop pedagogical approaches that specifically address the unique needs and learning styles of high school-aged students
7. **Transition processes for students:** Ensure the inclusion of transition processes for students at critical junctures to provide clear pathways and support mechanisms to facilitate progression into undergraduate programs.

## 4.2 Phase two: Understanding academic outcomes

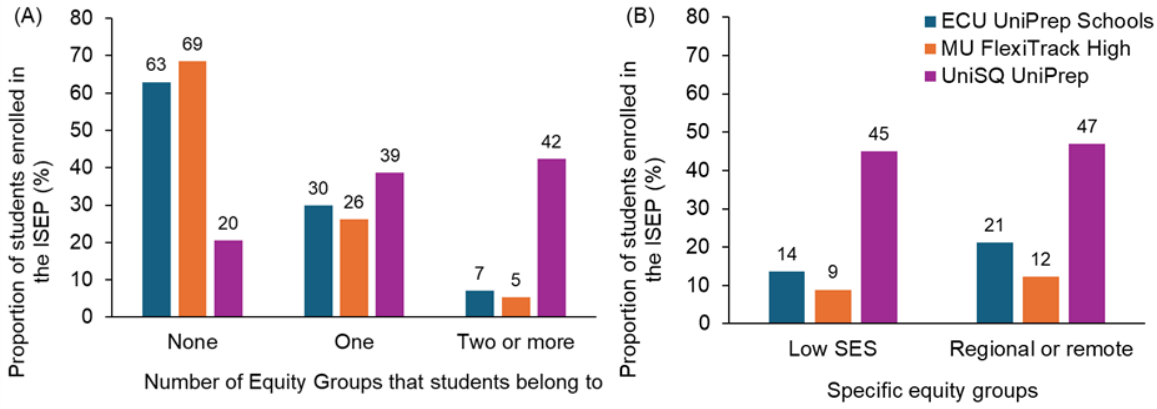
Phase two sought to understand the academic outcomes of students within ISEPs, as well as in the first year of undergraduate studies and in comparison to peers entering university from high school via other pathways (including post-school enabling programs and direct entry via ATAR pathways). The findings consider academic outcomes in relation to the typology of ISEPs, and program maturity and cohort size across the four participating universities.

### 4.2.1 Part I: Outcomes within in-school enabling programs

The equity status of student cohorts enrolling in the ISEPs offered at the four institutions were examined (Figure 2). Equity groups included in this analysis were: English as an additional language or dialect, low socio-economic status (SES), regional/remote, disability, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (see Figure 2). As shown in Figure 2, 37% of ECU UniPrep Schools students and 31% of MU FlexiTrack High students belonged to one or more equity groups. The majority (80%) of the UniSQ UniPrep cohort belonged to one or more equity groups. This may be explained in part by the high proportions of UniSQ UniPrep students residing in low SES and/or regional and remote postcodes. This demographic information was not captured for SCU UniStart for Schools.

As noted in phase one, ISEPs are designed for and have eligibility criteria of students who have faced educational disadvantage or disruption. This definition extends beyond government-defined equity groups and reflects populations recognised in the sector as experiencing educational disadvantage, such as carers, students who are first-in-family to attend university, refugees, and students in out-of-home care (Department of Education, 2024b; Harvey et al., 2016). These groups are known to be enrolled in ISEPs, particularly students who are first-in-family, however are not reflected in the proportions reported above as not all universities collect this information. Similarly, challenges with accessing data as noted above also limit visibility of equity cohorts.

*Figure 2: The proportion of students enrolled in the in-school enabling program between 2021–2023 that belonged to (A) none, one, or two or more equity groups and (B) who were identified as residing in low SES or regional/remote postcodes.*




Note: ECU, *n* = 891; MU, *n* = 630; UniSQ, *n* = 264; SCU data was not available.

Next, the ISEP student success, completion, and conversion to undergraduate rates were analysed. Table 5 shows that firstly, in-program success rates ranged from 73–91%, with the overall success rate sitting at 87% (based on total EFTSL passed versus attempted across all four programs). Secondly, the program completion rate ranged from 70–90% for programs where data were available; and overall, 79% (1161/1474) of all students who attempted an ISEP at ECU, MU, or SCU in 2021–2023 completed the program. Lastly, of those who completed the program in 2021–2023, the conversion to undergraduate enrolment rate ranged from 24–54% across the four universities (Table 5). Overall, 50% (660/1327) of all completing ECU, MU, UniSQ, and SCU students went on to commence an undergraduate program in 2022–2024.

*Table 5: In-school enabling program student success, completion, and conversion to undergraduate rates*

| Program | Success rate | Course completion rate* | Conversion to undergraduate rate* |
|---|---|---|---|
| ECU UniPrep Schools | 85% | 494/705 (70%) | 260/494 (53%) |
| MU FlexiTrack High | 91% | 566/630 (90%) | 306/566 (54%) |
| UniSQ UniPrep | 84% | Not available^ | 70/166 (42%) |
| SCU UniStart for Schools | 73% | 101/139 (73%) | 24/101 (24%) |
| All programs | 87% | 1161/1474 (79%) | 660/1327 (50%) |

*Raw counts and percentages shown.

^In total, 166 UniSQ UniPrep students completed the program, however the denominator for this calculation was unknown. Total program enrolments (*n* = 264) included students who could not have completed the program due to being in Year 11 and continuing the program beyond the timeframe under analysis.

The high in-program success and completion rates may be attributed to a number of reasons associated with the design model of the program, and particularly a foundational element—nesting within senior schooling. In part, the academic outcomes may be attributed to reasons such as: (a) students enrolled in ISEPs are simultaneously engaged in compulsory education; (b) some ISEPs models have timetabled classes within school hours and a dedicated teacher to help motivate and engage students in learning: (c) ISEPs may contribute credits towards achievement of the senior secondary certificate of education (Olds et al., 2022); and (d) some ISEPs have fees (Olds et al., 2022) that may discourage withdrawal.

The data captured here underestimates the extent of conversion to undergraduate enrolment, as it does not capture those who enrolled at a different university than associated with their ISEP. At present, most partner high schools do not offer multiple ISEPs, and while these programs provide a vehicle for university access, the undergraduate course selection available at the partner university may not necessarily match student aspiration. Additionally, ISEP completion is increasing in portability between institutions, and students can use evidence of their ISEP completion to enrol in undergraduate courses. Finally, the timeframe of the study provides a transition period of one to three years following high school completion, and as such students in the later year cohorts will not have had as long to transition, and some may take longer to commence university because of a variety of factors

(for example, requirement to undertake paid work, family commitments, or costs of relocation).

**Summary**

The quantitative student data collected as part of this study provides insight into the outcomes achieved by students when enrolled in an ISEP, as well as conversion to undergraduate study at university.

- In relation to access and participation, ISEPs are reaching and enrol a large proportion of equity cohorts, with 41% of students from equity cohorts across three ISEPs with data. Enrolment of students from equity groups ranged from 31% to 80% across individual programs.

  These proportions underestimate the volume of students experiencing educational disadvantage or disruption who are enrolled in ISEPs, as the programs adopt a more expansive definition of equity cohorts than current government definitions.

- Within an ISEP, students achieve high rates of success (87% overall success rate) and strong completion rates (79% overall completion rate). Murdoch University's ISEP was notable in achieving a 91% success rate and 90% completion rate.

  Success rates are in line with the historical data previously reported for one of the longer-running ISEPs included in this study (Olds et al., 2022). The ISEP completion rates are higher than typically observed in the enabling sector and may be attributed to a number of reasons associated with the design of the program, and particularly the nesting within senior schooling.

- ISEPs widen access to university, with 50% of students who complete an ISEP commencing university within one-to-two years. This represents 660 students who commenced an undergraduate degree between 2022-2024 via an ISEP who otherwise may have not commenced during this period.

This data underestimates the extent of conversion to undergraduate enrolment as measurement was restricted to conversion to the university that delivered the ISEP only, and more recent ISEP graduates have not had as much time to commence studies.

### 4.2.2 Part II: Outcomes in undergraduate study by admission pathway

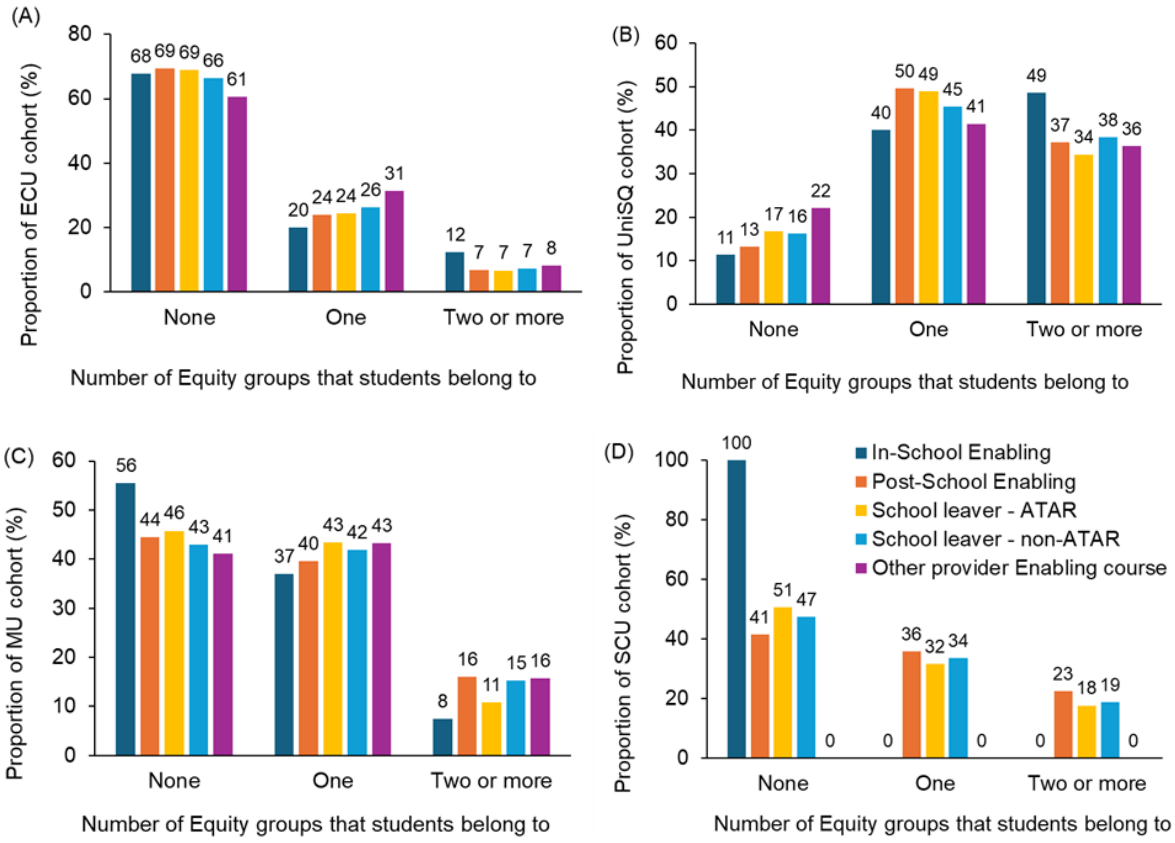
This section explores the academic outcomes of students who completed an ISEP and commenced undergraduate study compared to their school leaver peers who entered university via other pathways.

**Access to university by pathway**

To explore undergraduate outcomes, the profile and outcomes of all commencing school leaver students across the four universities were analysed. Firstly, the equity profile of each pathway cohort at each university was examined and compared to determine how well different entry pathways contribute to supporting enrolment of equity groups and equity group representation at the respective universities (Figure 3). Each university was found to have a unique equity profile.

For those that accessed undergraduate study at ECU via the ISEP, the proportion that belonged to one or more equity groups (32%) was similar to cohorts entering via other pathways (Figure 3A). However, the proportion belonging to two or more equity groups was highest for the ISEP pathway (12%) compared to peers entering via other pathways (7–8%). A similar pattern was observed at UniSQ, though there were much higher numbers of students from equity groups overall (89% of the ISEP pathway cohort) and belonging to two or more equity groups (49% of the ISEP cohort; Figure 3B).

*Figure 3: Undergraduate student equity status by basis of admission/pathway at (A) ECU, (B) UniSQ, (C) MU, and (D) SCU.*




A starkly different student profile was observed at MU and SCU (Figures 3C/D), whereby the ISEP cohorts contained the lowest proportions of students from equity backgrounds relative to peers entering via other pathways (44% and 0% belonging to one or more equity groups at MU and SCU, respectively).

**Retention rate by pathway**

The undergraduate retention rate for domestic school leaver-aged students who commenced their degree between 2022–2024 at the four universities was examined and comparisons were made based on admission pathway (Table 6). The first-to-second year retention rate of students who entered via an ISEP ranged from 66% to 79% at the respective universities, with an overall/cumulative retention rate of 75%. This was similar to the 76% overall retention rate observed for “recent school leaver (non-ATAR)” and “other provider enabling program” pathways, and only slightly lower than the cumulative retention rate for “ATAR entry” (79%) and “post-school enabling program” (82%) pathways. Notably, the post-school enabling program achieved the highest retention rate of any pathway at most universities

investigated, and overall/cumulatively across all four universities (Table 6). The ratio of commencing undergraduate retention rates for ISEPs to post-school enabling programs was, in most instances, close to 1, suggesting ISEPs are achieving similar undergraduate retention outcomes to post-school enabling programs.

*Table 6: Total number of domestic school leaver-aged students retained into the second year of undergraduate study during 2023–2025, for those that commenced their degree between 2022–2024.*

| Admission pathway | Retention rate* | | | | Overall retention rate* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ECU | MU | USQ | SCU | |
| In-school enabling program (ISEP) | 206/261 (79%) | 227/306 (74%) | 46/70 (66%) | 17/24 (71%) | 496/661 (75%) |
| Post-school enabling program | 1064/1243 (86%) | 258/331 (78%) | 212/283 (75%) | 323/415 (78%) | 1857/2272 (82%) |
| Recent school leaver (ATAR entry) | 2040/2399 (85%) | 413/557 (74%) | 1100/1466 (75%) | 364/521 (70%) | 3917/4943 (79%) |
| Recent school leaver (non-ATAR) | 354/397 (89%) | 852/1077 (79%) | 849/1166 (73%) | 1349/1862 (72%) | 3404/4502 (76%) |
| Other provider enabling program | 278/369 (75%) | 136/185 (74%) | 229/275 (83%) | - | 643/829 (76%) |

*Counts (numbers retained into second year versus total commencing undergraduates) and retention rate percentage shown. Overall numbers reflect the total/cumulative number of row counts across all institutions (both denominator and numerator).

**Success rate by pathway**

The undergraduate success rate of students who entered university via an ISEP was compared to students admitted via other entry pathways. Success rate provides a crude measure of academic achievement by indicating the relative proportion of study load passed versus attempted. Notably, withdrawals after Census due to non-academic reasons (for example, health, financial, and/or personal circumstances) can negatively impact the success rate.

In this study, the success rate calculation was based on all units/subjects attempted (as of mid-2025) by domestic school leaver-aged students who commenced their degree between 2022–2024. As shown in Table 7, the undergraduate success rate of students who entered university via an ISEP ranged from 61–83%, with an overall success rate of 76% for this pathway across all institutions studied. This was slightly lower than the overall success rates for undergraduates who entered via other enabling pathways, which ranged between 81–82%. Recent school leavers who entered via ATAR and non-ATAR pathways had the highest overall success rates of 88% and 84%, respectively.

*Table 7: Undergraduate success rates for all domestic school leaver-aged students who commenced their undergraduate studies between 2022–2024 via various university admission pathways.*

| Admission pathway | Success rate (%) | | | | Pathway success rate (%)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ECU | MU | UniSQ | SCU | |
| In-school enabling program | 83 | 74 | 61 | 78 | 76 |
| Post-school enabling program | 86 | 74 | 68 | 85 | 82 |
| Recent school leaver (ATAR) | 91 | 87 | 84 | 87 | 88 |
| Recent school leaver (non-ATAR) | 92 | 85 | 78 | 84 | 84 |
| Other provider enabling program | 82 | 77 | 82 | - | 81 |

*Pathway success rate calculation is based on the total/cumulative EFTSL passed versus attempted across all four universities.

When interpreting these success rates, it is important to consider differences among ISEPs in size, program models, history, and cohort composition. ISEPs with longer histories and structured timetabled classes tend to achieve higher success rates.

**Undergraduate outcomes for students from equity groups**

ISEP students were stratified by equity status to determine whether belonging to an equity group impacted on undergraduate outcomes (Table 8). At ECU and MU, students from equity groups who entered university via the ISEP had similar retention rates to those who did not belong to any equity groups. No comparisons between students from equity and non-equity groups were possible at UniSQ and SCU due to insufficient numbers. However, success rates appeared to be lower for those who had cumulative disadvantage (belonging to two or more equity groups). Notably, the sample sizes for comparison were relatively small, so caution must be exercised in the interpretation of this data. However, overall, this data suggests that the ISEP pathway supports the persistence of students from equity backgrounds through the first year of undergraduate study, despite the impact of cumulative disadvantage on academic progression.

*Table 8: Undergraduate retention and success rates of in-school enabling pathway students, stratified by equity status.*

| University | Retention rate* | | | Success rate (%) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Non-equity | 1 equity group | 2+ equity groups | Non-equity | 1 equity group | 2+ equity groups |
| ECU | 140/177 (79%) | 41/52 (79%) | 25/32 (78%) | 83 | 86 | 73 |
| MU | 128/170 (75%) | 80/113 (71%) | 19/23 (83%) | 74 | 74 | 73 |
| UniSQ | - | 20/28 (71%) | 22/34 (65%) | - | 77 | 48 |
| SCU | 17/24 (71%) | - | - | 78 | - | - |

*Counts (numbers retained into second year versus total commencing undergraduates) and retention rate percentage shown. Where counts were fewer than 10, data are not reported.

The undergraduate success and retention rates of students from non-equity and equity groups across all pathways were also compared (Table 9). Collectively across the four universities, there were more students who identified as belonging to one or more equity groups ($n$ = 7134) than students who did not ($n$ = 6261). Retention rates were similar for those from equity and non-equity backgrounds admitted on the basis of completing any enabling program; and overall (across all pathways), the difference in retention between students from equity and non-equity groups was only 2% (77% versus 79%). Success rates were marginally lower overall for students from equity versus non-equity groups (83% versus 87%, respectively), and this trend could be observed in every admission pathway including most enabling cohorts.

As per Table 9, students from equity groups were retained at the highest rates in undergraduate study if they articulated via a “post-school” (81%) or “other provider” (80%) enabling program. Those who were admitted on the basis of an ISEP had lower retention rates (73%), but only marginally lower than recent school leavers (76–77%) despite the higher success rates of the latter.

*Table 9: Success and retention rates of all school leaver-aged students from equity and non-equity groups who commenced their undergraduate studies between 2022-2024 at one of the four universities (ECU, MU, UniSQ and SCU).*

| Admission pathway | Non-equity students | | | Equity students | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***N*** | **Success rate (%)** | **Retention rate (%)** | ***N*** | **Success rate (%)** | **Retention rate (%)** |
| In-school enabling program | 379 | 79 | 76 | 282 | 73 | 73 |
| Post-school enabling program | 1225 | 85 | 83 | 1066 | 79 | 81 |
| Recent school leaver (ATAR) | 2437 | 90 | 82 | 2550 | 86 | 77 |
| Recent school leaver (non-ATAR) | 1858 | 85 | 74 | 2767 | 82 | 76 |
| Other provider enabling program | 362 | 79 | 76 | 469 | 81 | 80 |
| All pathways | 6261 | 87 | 79 | 7134 | 83 | 77 |

**Summary**

The quantitative student data collected as part of this study provides insight into the outcomes achieved by students who commence university via an ISEP compared to their peers who commence via other pathways.

- ISEPs can increase access to university for students from equity groups relative to other pathways, though institutional and contextual variability plays a part. At several institutions, the ISEP pathway had higher proportions of students from multiple equity groups commence university than other pathways.
- Once at university, students who enter via an ISEP are retained at rates comparable to other pathways, and retention for students from equity and non-equity groups within the ISEP pathway is similar, suggesting that ISEPs help narrow retention disparities for equity groups. The ATAR pathway had the largest gap between retention rates of students from equity and non-equity groups.
- Retention of students in equity groups is strong for students who enter university via enabling pathways. This finding is consistent with previous research (Li et al. 2023)
- Amongst students who entered university via an ISEP, the success rates of students from equity groups and non-equity groups were comparable, though lower than other pathways. Gaps in success rates between students from equity and non-equity groups exist across all pathways.

Overall, ISEPs widen access for students from equity groups. Once at university, these students demonstrate resilience and persistence, despite lower success rates.

## 4.3 Phase three: Student and educator perspectives

Phase three explored the perspectives of ISEPs and conceptualisation of success beyond academic measures from the perspective of students and educators who had participated in ISEPs. Student perspectives were sought through a survey and interviews, and educator perspectives were captured through interviews.

### 4.3.1 Student perspective: Quantitative survey response findings

Quantitative data relating to student perspectives of the ISEP were collected via a survey. Table 10 shows the demographic characteristics of the student survey respondents (*n* = 54). The mean age of respondents was 19 years and the majority were female. Two-thirds of respondents identified as belonging to one or more equity groups. Of these equity subgroups, students commonly identified as being first-in-family to attend university (43%) and/or as having a mental health condition (35%).

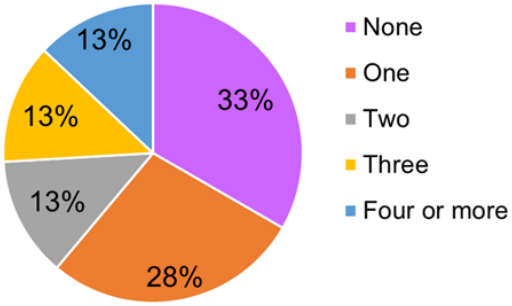
*Table 10: Demographics of survey sample*

| Demographic characteristics | Frequency (%) |
|---|---|
| Mean age, years* | 19.53 (1.88) |
| Gender | |
| Male | 11/54 (20%) |
| Female | 42/54 (78%) |
| Non-binary | 0/54 (0%) |
| Unknown | 1/54 (2%) |
| Belong to one or more equity groups | 36/54 (67%) |
| Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander | 1/54 (2%) |
| First-in-family to attend university | 23/54 (43%) |
| Disability or ongoing medical condition | 10/54 (19%) |
| Mental health condition | 19/54 (35%) |
| Diagnosed neurodivergence | 10/54 (19%) |
| Living in a regional or remote location | 10/54 (19%) |
| Living in a low SES postcode | 7/54 (13%) |
| Re-located to attend university | 7/54 (13%) |
| Enabling program completed: | |
| UniPrep (ECU) | 21/54 (39%) |
| FlexiTrack High (MU) | 25/54 (46%) |
| UniStart (SCU) | 6/54 (11%) |
| UniPrep (UniSQ) | 2/54 (4%) |

*Continuous variable is expressed as mean with standard deviation.

As seen in Figure 4, 28% of all respondents identified as belonging to one equity subgroup and a further 39% identified as belonging to two or more equity subgroups. Students were also asked about their paid and unpaid commitments while studying at undergraduate level. Almost all (92%) students were engaged in paid employment at the time of the survey, with almost a fifth engaged in full-time paid work. A smaller percentage (25%) were engaged in caring commitments for six or more hours per week.

*Figure 4: Number of equity subgroups that students identified as belonging to (n = 54)*




As noted in the analysis of student demographics in phase two, expanded definitions of equity-deserving groups provide a more fulsome picture of the cohorts enrolled in ISEPs. Of note here is the inclusion of first-in-family, with 43% of students within this grouping. Further, the way questions were asked within the survey in comparison to the TSCI may have influenced responses, particularly in relation to disability, medical condition, mental health condition, and neurodivergence. The demographics presented through the survey results are more in alignment with institutional understanding of the cohorts enrolled in ISEPs, and reflective in more mature data capture since the commencement of this project. It is also notable that participants of student surveys had all completed an ISEP and commenced an undergraduate degree.

**Student experience and preparedness**

Students were asked to rate their enjoyment of the ISEP, how confident they felt on their first day of university, whether they felt the ISEP improved familiarity with the university environment, and preparedness for university. Table 11 shows the mean rating (and SD) for all respondents, as well as a comparison between students from non-equity and equity groups. Generally, the mean rating was between “neutral” and “extremely”, indicating that students enjoyed their ISEP, felt somewhat confident on their first day of university, gained some familiarity with the university environment, and felt prepared for university. Responses were mostly not significantly different when stratified by equity status, though students from equity groups rated familiarity with the university environment slightly lower than those from non-equity backgrounds. This may reflect the experience of students who did not complete a campus visit. For example, the regional and remote subgroup sit within the equity cohort and their mean rating of this question sat even lower at 5.63 (+/- SD of 3.54, n=10).

*Table 11: Student mean ratings (+/- SD) of enjoyment, confidence, familiarity and preparation for university, as well as satisfaction with the in-school enabling programs on a 11-point Likert scale.*

| **Survey questions** | **All respondents** (*n* = 41–48) | **Non-equity group** (*n* = 12–14) | **Equity group** (*n* = 29–34) |
|---|---|---|---|
| How much did you enjoy your ISEPs experience? | 7.79 (1.75) | 7.64 (1.34) | 7.85 (1.91) |
| How confident did you feel on your first day of university? | 5.93 (2.25) | 5.83 (2.33) | 5.97 (2.26) |
| If you participated in a campus experience visit during the ISEPs, did it improve your familiarity with the university environment? | 6.49 (2.84) | 7.67 (1.30) | 6.00 (3.16) * |
| How prepared did you feel for completing a university degree after completing the ISEPs? | 7.33 (1.84) | 7.33 (1.30) | 7.32 (2.01) |

* Significant difference was detected via independent samples t-test comparing students from equity versus non-equity groups ($p < 0.05$).

Participants were also asked to rate how well the ISEP developed their skills such as time management, academic reading and writing, mathematics, critical thinking, research, and referencing, as well as mindset and attitudes for university study. As shown in Table 12, mean ratings suggest students perceived the ISEP to have well- or very well-developed their academic skills such as writing, reading, critical thinking, use of technology, research, referencing, and a growth mindset. Development of some skills such as sitting exams, mathematics, and leadership tended to be rated more neutrally by students. When stratified by equity status, students from non-equity groups rated all skills (on average) as being well- or very well-developed, while mean ratings by students from equity groups in some instances were lower. However, there were no statistically significant differences detected, except that students from equity groups rated group work/collaboration skills as being significantly less developed by the ISEP compared to those from non-equity groups.

*Table 12: Student mean ratings (+/- SD) of how well the in-school enabling programs developed their skills^.*

| **Skill** | **All respondents** (*n* = 47) | **Non-equity group** (*n* = 12–14) | **Equity group** (*n* = 29–34) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Time management | 3.72 (1.26) | 3.85 (1.14) | 3.68 (1.32) |
| Academic writing | 4.51 (0.86) | 4.62 (0.51) | 4.47 (0.96) |
| Academic reading | 4.43 (0.88) | 4.69 (0.48) | 4.32 (0.98) |
| Mathematics | 3.23 (1.19) | 3.67 (1.07) | 3.06 (1.21) |
| Critical thinking | 4.15 (1.08) | 3.85 (1.21) | 4.26 (1.02) |
| Use of technology (e.g. learning management system) | 4.49 (0.88) | 4.31 (0.95) | 4.56 (0.86) |
| Sitting exams | 3.27 (1.30) | 3.73 (1.19) | 3.10 (1.32) |
| Research | 4.47 (0.80) | 4.62 (0.51) | 4.41 (0.89) |
| Referencing | 4.46 (0.89) | 4.69 (0.48) | 4.36 (0.99) |
| Familiar with university systems and supports | 4.19 (1.03) | 4.25 (0.87) | 4.16 (1.10) |
| Growth mindset | 4.07 (0.95) | 4.23 (0.72) | 4.00 (1.03) |
| Group work / collaboration | 3.54 (1.21) | 4.17 (0.72) | 3.28 (1.28)* |
| Leadership | 3.49 (1.18) | 3.92 (0.79) | 3.32 (1.27) |
| Confidence / self-belief | 3.78 (1.01) | 4.15 (0.69) | 3.64 (1.08) |
| Discipline specific knowledge | 3.91 (0.86) | 4.08 (0.67) | 3.84 (0.92) |

^Grey shading identifies mean ratings that round closest to the “well” or “very well” descriptors in the 5-point Likert scale.

* Indicates that a significant difference was detected via independent samples t-test comparing students from equity versus non-equity groups ($p < 0.05$).

Next, students were asked about how their ISEP shaped their perceptions of university and self. In total, 55% (26/47) of students indicated that the teaching, learning, and other experiences in the ISEP positively influenced their perceptions of university. In addition, 90% (43/48) of respondents indicated that the program helped them to believe they could achieve success at university, and 83% (39/47) indicated that the expectations set by the ISEP were consistent with their actual university experience. Belonging to an equity group did not significantly influence the extent that student perceptions of university ($\chi^2 = 0.228$. df = 1, p = 0.633, *n* = 47), self-belief ($\chi^2 = 0.227$. df = 1, p = 0.634, n = 48), and expectations ($\chi^2 = 0.106$. df = 1, p = 0.745, *n* = 47), were changed by the enabling program.

Lastly, students were asked to rate how likely they would be to recommend the ISEP to others and how satisfied they were overall with the program. As shown in Table 13, the mean student rating was high, indicating that overall, students were very satisfied and highly likely to recommend the ISEP to other senior secondary students. Satisfaction did not significantly differ by student equity status.

*Table 13: Mean student satisfaction with the in-school enabling programs^.*

| **Survey questions** | **All respondents** (*n* = 46–48) | **Non-equity group** (*n* = 12–14) | **Equity group** (*n* = 29–34) |
|---|---|---|---|
| How likely would you be to recommend the ISEP to others for their senior secondary studies? | 8.88 (1.75) | 8.71 (1.33) | 8.94 (1.91) |
| Overall, how satisfied are you with the ISEP and its impact on your university transition and experience? | 8.57 (1.68) | 9.00 (0.91) | 8.39 (1.89) |

^ An 11-point Likert scale was used (10 = extremely satisfied or likely to recommend, 0 = not at all satisfied or likely to recommend). No significant differences were detected via independent samples t-test comparing students from equity versus non-equity groups ($p < 0.05$).

As part of this student survey, questionnaires were included to measure resilience, belonging, and wellbeing. Internal reliability was found to be good for the BRS (Cronbach's α = 0.806), the SWEMWBS (Cronbach's α = 0.835), and the Sense of Belonging Index (Cronbach's α = 0.817). While mean wellbeing and belonging scores were slightly lower for students from equity backgrounds compared to those not belonging to any equity groups, there were no significant differences detected at the 5% confidence level (Table 14). Belonging was positively associated with measures of wellbeing ($r = 0.517$, $p < 0.001$) and resilience ($r = 0.549$, $p < 0.001$), as were resilience and wellbeing ($r = 0.473$, $p = 0.001$).

*Table 14: Respondents' mean total scores of resilience, mental wellbeing, and belonging*.*

| **Scale** | **Construct** | **All respondents** (*n* = 44) | **Non-equity group** (*n* = 12) | **Equity group** (*n*= 32) | **P value** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BRS | Resilience | 3.14 (0.51) | 3.19 (0.39) | 3.11 (0.56) | 0.652 |
| SWEMWBS | Mental wellbeing | 22.27 (5.18) | 24.58 (5.38) | 21.41 (4.90) | 0.069 |
| Sense of Belonging Index | Belonging | 17.45 (3.63) | 18.75 (2.76) | 16.97 (3.83) | 0.149 |

*Scores expressed as mean with standard deviation in brackets. P-values test for differences in scores for students from equity versus non-equity groups.

Quantitative measures of resilience, wellbeing, and belonging collected as part of this survey provided a more holistic view of student success and flourishing for this cohort of students than outcome data alone. A range of variation was identified in the instrument scores, however, importantly there were no significant differences between students from equity and non-equity groups in the scores for any of these measures. As equity group membership is a recognised mental health risk factor (Orygen, 2017) and students who have a poorer sense of belonging, resilience, and wellbeing are more likely to consider dropping out (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015; Eisenberg et al., 2016), these results are an encouraging finding from the data and are in alignment with qualitative findings as discussed in the next section.

**Summary**

The quantitative student reflections captured via survey within this study provide insight into student perception of the effectiveness of ISEPs in preparation for university, as well as an indication of wellbeing and flourishing once at university.

- Students expressed very high satisfaction with ISEPs (mean satisfaction of 8.57/10) and likelihood to recommend the ISEP to other senior secondary students. There were no significant differences between students from equity and non-equity groups, suggesting that ISEPs are successfully meeting the needs of students enrolled.
- In total, 90% of students said the ISEP helped them believe they could achieve success at university, and 83% said the program expectations matched the reality of university study. There were no significant differences between students from equity and non-equity groups.
- Students felt the ISEP contributed strongly to building academic skills (such as academic writing and reading, and critical thinking) and a growth mindset.

Resilience, wellbeing, and belonging data provided a snapshot of student success and flourishing, and results showed that sense of wellbeing and flourishing at undergraduate study were similar for students from equity and non-equity groups.

### 4.3.2 Student and educator perspectives: Qualitative survey and interview findings

This section reports on the findings for thematic analyses of qualitative survey responses and interviews with students who had completed an ISEP and transitioned to university study, as well as interviews with educators in high schools associated with ISEPs.

**Student survey findings**

A thematic analysis of the survey qualitative responses identified two main themes: “students under duress” and “a flourishing pathway”, inclusive of several subthemes. There were two additional comments of note: “diversifying topics” and “teacher selection”.

Students repeatedly told the story of being under duress in their educational setting before choosing an enabling pathway. Thirty-five responses across the six questions described the varied forms of duress that impacted students’ wellbeing prior to the commencement of the program, which additionally influenced their reason for enrolment. This duress fell into three subthemes: “ATAR struggle”, “health”, and “external pressures”. ATAR struggle was the dominant subtheme, with 25 students mentioning ATAR as a stressor for such reasons as workload and failing grades. One student noted: “I struggled a lot with ATAR; I did well in classes and assignments but fell through with the exams” (SS 8). Another stated: “I dropped out of ATAR due to stress and poor mental health, but I still wanted to attend university” (SS 19). Duress also included health and wellbeing stressors such as mental or physical illness, with 10 students noting that this impacted the decision for program enrolment. For example, one student stated: “I was studying five ATAR subjects and waiting for an ADHD assessment. As the five ATARs had been challenging with undiagnosed ADHD (diagnosed and medicated at the end of Year 12), I found [the ISEP] more effective…as the learning was a lot more practical, and the learning and content felt more in-depth. That challenged me but also helped me learn better” (SS 2). Another expressed that they “struggled with ATAR” and the “stress levels were affecting me because of ATAR” (SS 49). Similar stress was reflected in the response: “I chose my [ISEP] because I was unsure and worried that I would not be able to maintain a 70-point ATAR if I continued with four ATAR classes in Year 12” (SS 45). Other external life challenges, such as work and sporting commitments, competed with time required for ATAR. The thread throughout responses was that ATAR, as a condition for university entrance, was pressurising when students were aspirational but not thriving in the ATAR model.

“A flourishing pathway” contained responses demonstrating how students thrived academically, socially, and emotionally, acknowledging growth, confidence, and empowerment. Throughout the analysis of this theme, three subthemes were identified as contributing to a flourishing pathway: “the empowered student”, “confident pathway”, and “understanding university culture”. Thirty-six responses described the socio-emotional attributes and academic skills developed through participation in an ISEP, and 35 references captured how the ISEP created a confident pathway for students, sponsoring aspiration through preparation.

Qualitative responses in “a flourishing pathway” highlighted that it was the accessibility and design of ISEPs that alleviated ATAR-related stress and fostered socio-emotional recovery during senior schooling, with benefits extending into university life. The first subtheme, “the empowered student”, highlighted students’ development of self-efficacy. The word

“confident/confidence” was mentioned 15 times, highlighting the extent to which the programs expanded students’ skillsets and knowledge, specifically academic writing and referencing. Students also gained empowerment through the explicit guidance on academic expectations, which developed their understanding and confidence in participating in the university culture. One student noted that “[the program] explained exactly what universities expect of you” (SS 25). Responses repeatedly noted how this gave them confidence in their transition: “It gave me an understanding of how university works and I felt more confident that I would be able to achieve success as I had prior knowledge” (SS 21). This sense of readiness made "starting my undergraduate degree less daunting as I already had an idea of what was expected of me” (SS 24). Respondents reported the ISEP fostered growth and capability, and saw successes in the program as signifiers for future success at university, as opposed to surviving the educational challenges of ATAR. One respondent said, “I felt that the enabling program enabled me to gain a sense of confidence to succeed in university as the different assignments and feedback were well laid out” (SS 11).

Another student expressed: “I felt confident that if I could succeed in [the ISEP] I could transfer my skills into university tasks”.

Students also saw ISEPs as a “confident pathway” to university, as opposed to the uncertainty of ATAR. Responses showed the programs offered reassurance and clarity, as one student explained: “I was also informed about what the enabling program would be like, and that if I passed, I would get the equivalent of a 70-point ATAR. The enabling program sounded fun to me, so I decided to do it and keep an ATAR that would help me get into my desired course” (SS 45). Another student noted: “[I] had external factors hindering my education, and I was advised to enter the program. The experience was totally different from normal schooling and actually better prepared me for uni” (SS 48). One student now enrolled in a Masters program, who had failed maths in Year 11 and did not think university was for them, stated:

> As cheesy as it sounds, this course was one of the best things [that] ever happened to me. Since then, I have encouraged 14 people to do [it], including my partner who did the course and is a psychologist now, and my sister who is a school teacher in one of the best schools in WA. (SS 7)

The final subtheme, “understanding university culture”, contained student descriptions of ISEPs as “a preview into university culture” (SS 7), emphasising the value of foundational academic skills. One student noted: “It gave me more faith in myself and my writing ability” (SS 8), while another similarly stated: “It taught me how to do things like academic writing and referencing, which was probably what I was most nervous about” (SS 27). Students repeatedly acknowledged that learning about elements of university culture and its systems also supported their transition to undergraduate study. For example, one student noted: “Having that slight head start gave me so much ease (for example, knowing how to operate the websites, how to reference, and research topics appropriately)”; they also reflected that the ISEP made them “confident in using university systems and self-management” (SS 6).

**Student interview findings**

When analysing student interview responses, similar themes to those of the student survey were identified: “ATAR struggle”, “university aspiration in need of pathway”, and “academic skill and knowledge development”. ATAR was referred to 21 times in the interviews, and all responses referred to the negative impacts of ATAR such as stress, workload, and grades/failing. The responses overwhelmingly showed that university aspiration was already present, with five out of the six students commencing an ATAR pathway, and the sixth student’s refugee status impacting on ATAR enrolment. For example,

> ATAR didn't work out for me very well. It's not that it is a bad thing, it was more my ability to handle stress at the timeframe. [I] couldn't handle all of it at once, so my grades weren't showing what I could actually do. [The ISEP] was a great program that still allowed me to show my performance level of work and get me through to university. (SI 003)

Students had experienced subject failure or underperforming in ATAR subjects, with some no longer managing the “excess stress” (SI 002). One student noted that when their teachers recognised their ATAR grades were not going well and they were struggling, “they [a teacher] brought up the option of [the ISEP] as a program that my high school offered for me to participate in so I could continue my dream of going to uni” (SI 003).

All the responses highlighted how access to an ISEP facilitated university ambitions, after struggles with ATAR.

Similar to the subthemes of “confident pathway” and “understanding university culture” identified in the survey thematic analysis of “a flourishing pathway”, themes of confidence and empowerment through skills developed emerged during the interviews. In the theme of “academic skill and knowledge development”, students noted that the ISEP developed practical abilities, particularly in referencing, academic writing, and research, as well as independent learning and time management skills, which gave them confidence in their abilities to be successful at university. Understanding university assignment “structure” and level of essay writing were highlighted as important to their progression (SI 001, SI 002, SI 003). The skills of referencing, like in survey responses, was repeatedly commented on. One student noted:

> I really like how much they focus on referencing in the enabling program, because a lot of people who I talked to had just come out of high school [and] had no idea with a lot of that stuff … I think the enabling programming gave me a lot more confidence to start university. (SI 005)

Many respondents similarly noted that the skills and knowledge learned in the ISEP positioned them ahead of peers who had not undertaken a program, as one student expressed:

> It definitely felt like I had a bit of a step up … compared to those who didn’t maybe do a bridging program, having that prior knowledge, because … going into that first year of uni, I had knowledge, I had information that others around me might not. (SI 003)

The interviews reinforced the quantitative and qualitative findings from the surveys, namely that students felt the academic skills and knowledge, as well as the familiarisation with

university systems, gained in the ISEP were instrumental in building confidence and aiding their transition into university. Educator interviews also reiterated these sentiments.

**Educator interview findings**

Reflections from the 14 educator interviews highlighted an understanding of ISEPs as a commitment to equity and providing access to university. Central to these discussions were five key themes: “navigating knowledge and assumptions about program rigour”; “breaking down barriers to access”; “transformative student experiences”; “academic skill development and literacies for university”; and “structural challenges in senior school”. These responses offer insight into how educators teaching the programs view ISEPs as responsive, inclusive approaches for student access to higher education.

The theme of “navigating knowledge and assumptions about program rigour” was identified as responses highlighted that misconceptions about enabling programs persisted in school communities. Educators referred to parental lack of understanding of program rigour and outcomes, often due to limited awareness and entrenched assumptions. Educators felt some students viewed ISEPs as “a bit of a shortcut” (EI 012) to university (rather than waiting for a post-school enabling program) or a “backup plan” (EI 004), while others acknowledge them as “a safety net” (EI 011). These attitudes are reinforced by the dominance of ATAR as “the best way to be prepared for university” (EI 009), creating pressure on students and families, and fostering scepticism among some teachers teaching into ATAR who “feel a bit threatened” (EI 005). Despite this, educators emphasised that ISEPs are rigorous, highlighting the need for “greater education on what these programs can offer young people” (EI 002).

The theme of “breaking down barriers to access” highlighted significant barriers to university access, particularly for first-generation and regional students. Educators noted that ISEPs play an important role in connecting students when university is “a long way away” (EI 011). ISEPs were described as “opening up doors” for students who “never really thought university was in their pathway at all” (EI 010), especially for those who are disengaged or face physical, neurological, or mental health challenges (EI 005). Educators stressed the presence and importance of clear, welcoming communication from universities to dispel misinformation, and emphasised that these programs break cycles of disadvantage, foster confidence, and create opportunities for groups such as refugee students.

As well as providing access, and in alignment with the thematic findings from students, “transformative student experiences” was an identified theme in this data set. Educators commonly saw ISEPs as boosting students’ confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy, helping to break down “initial fear around university or tertiary study” (EI 001) and foster “self-esteem and confidence”, with benefits extending to “other areas of their life” (EI 002). Many students were “chuffed and surprised at how capable they were” (EI 011), showing “growth” in academic maturity and responsibility (EI 001). Responses also highlighted that ISEPs built resilience and developed the belief in students that they belonged in higher education. One educator observed a “direct correlation between engagement” and improved results, putting students ahead of their “peers who are doing ATAR” (EI 002).

Educator interviews, similar to student thematic findings, highlighted “academic skill development and literacies for university” as a core theme and benefit of ISEPs. Educators noted that students developed essential skills like “referencing, academic writing, study habits, and goal setting” alongside strategies such as “growth mindset and time

management" (EI 003). Exposure to university systems and expectations, including assessment standards and campus resources, helped demystify higher education and gave students "a leg up on some of their contemporaries" compared to the ATAR pathway (EI 012). As one educator summed it up, "It's just amazing where they [students] go—and it's only three terms—from where they start" (EI 001).

According to educators, ISEPs not only build competence through scaffolding and feedback, but foster confidence and preparedness for an adult learning environment, breaking down barriers and reducing anxiety about university life.

Despite the benefits, educator interviews revealed structural challenges in implementing ISEPs, as seen in the final theme of "structural challenges in senior school". Responses referred to the difficulties in aligning school and university systems, interruptions from school events, and the need to adapt content for diverse contexts, which "takes more time and effort and investment to contextualise" (EI 002). Educators highlighted the importance of additional training and support to manage the steep learning curve, noting the need to "[find] the time to learn the modules before I teach" and requesting "a little bit more support" (EI 004, EI 006). Socio-economic factors such as "poverty in this town" and students needing to work (EI 011) further complicated delivery. Despite these challenges, educators acknowledged universities' responsiveness and adaptability, emphasising that a partnership model with sustained support for teachers and contextual flexibility are critical for program success.

**Synthesis**

The three data sets (student survey, student interviews, and educator interviews) were distilled into three superordinate themes: "access and opportunities", "university acculturation and preparedness", and "socio-emotional journey and wellbeing".

The first superordinate theme, *"*access and opportunities", highlighted how both students and educators saw ISEPs as dismantling systemic barriers and breaking cycles of disadvantage by offering a pathway to higher education for students who were first-in-family, living in a regional or remote area, or disadvantaged by the ATAR system or other life factors (such as health or external factors). It was also highlighted that in order to maintain ISEPs as an effective opportunity, universities must remain responsive, adaptable, and provide ongoing educator support.

The second superordinate theme, "university acculturation and preparedness", was overwhelmingly repeated through the three data sets. Students reported gains in academic literacies such as referencing, writing, research skills, and critical thinking, as well as familiarity with university systems such as learning management systems, grading systems, and university websites. The development of both academic and cultural understanding of university eased the student transition, building confidence and readiness.

The final superordinate theme, "socio-emotional journey and wellbeing", demonstrated that ISEPs supported students' socio-emotional state by shifting them from a stressful and disempowering educational experience to a confident pathway. The ISEP reduced ATAR-related anxiety and built confidence in academic skills and knowledge, as well as self-efficacy, in terms of students' ability to progress to university.

# 5. Discussion

*Yes, we want students to go to university,*
*but we want them to be better prepared.*

–Tony Buti, WA Minister for Tertiary and International Education (2023)

The deficit rhetoric that has encircled ISEPs in recent years has focused on an unfounded belief that they are easy pathways, not rigorous, and the reason ATAR participation is falling. In public discourse, ATAR remains the bastion of preparation for higher education. However, as this project and recent literature in the field suggests, ATAR itself is the reason ATAR participation is failing. Its restrictive pedagogical model, limited provision to regional and remote students, high school streaming processes, and what Patfield refers to as a "mysterious scaling process" (2024, p.18), privileges high ICSEA schools and those students who fit a rigid mould. This has resulted in an ever-widening gap of aspiring students who have attempted ATAR and struggled, or who could not attempt it because of its limitations. Those whom ATAR has not, and currently does not serve, are left with a non-confident pathway. In response to the secondary sector's call to arms, universities designed ISEPs that centre student flourishing both academically and socio-emotionally. Yet, since the inception of ISEPs, universities have had to extinguish prevailing flames of doubt over their rigour. Government departments supported by media have sought to dismantle these programs with the same intensity used to undermine disadvantaged non-ATAR students, perpetuating the sentiment that so-called "alternative pathways" are simply "not good enough".

However, this cross-institutional multiphase project has revealed the opposite is true. This discussion is the final phase in this project, synthesising the overall findings from phases one to three. This synthesis demonstrates, through quantitative data, as well as student and educator voices, that ISEPs provide confident pathways into undergraduate study. This is achieved by offering underserved students a rigorous, well-designed program that combines academic and cultural preparation, building self-efficacy for successful transition to, and achievement in, undergraduate study.

## 5.1 Access to university for the underserved

An aim of this project was to identify how ISEPs are designed across Australia, and if these programs are supporting students from priority groups (for example, equity, first-in-family, and so on) to successfully transition into university. The benchmarking revealed that all ISEPs target specific cohorts from equity groups, primarily regional and remote, or equity (low ICSEA) schools. Quantitative data highlighted that 41% of enrolled ISEP students were from an equity cohort; this included 19% of students who were living in regional or remote areas who, without the pathway, may have had to wait for post-secondary pathways due to limited access to ATAR. One educator remarked they were working at a public school supporting marginalised students that didn't "have the facilities here to provide a full ATAR program" (EI 012). Additionally, quantitative data underestimates the proportion of students from equity cohorts who are enrolled in an ISEP, as the government-defined equity groups

do not capture students recognised as experiencing educational disadvantage, such as carers, first-in-family, refugees, or students in out-of-home care. One respondent noted:

> I was a refugee and my Year 12 [qualifications] were not accepted in Australia. I did the [ISEP] course and went straight to [university] and studied biomedical science as my undergraduate. After my undergrad degree, I went on to do a Graduate Diploma in Electrical Engineering and now have one semester left on my Master's degree. (SS 6)

The student survey findings also highlighted 43% of students were first-in-family to attend university. These respondents had articulated directly from high school to university via an ISEP and belonged to one or more equity groups, underscoring the program's role in widening participation. These quantitative findings are supported in the synthesis of qualitative thematic findings first superordinate theme of "access and opportunity", where respondents repeatedly shared how ISEPs provided students a pathway into university who otherwise would not have had one during secondary schooling, particularly students from equity groups.

Finally, benchmarking ISEPs highlighted that the most effective ISEPs had a strong partnership model between the schools and universities. This is in alignment with Nieuwoudt and Jones' assertion that "the needs of this enabling cohort necessitate strong partnerships and connections between universities and schools" (2025, p. 119) as part of an enabling transition pedagogy that suits the context of ISEPs and is responsive to the needs of the students. The strong ISEP partnership model creates a sustainable bridge in the "third" or liminal space of transition in which ISEPs exist (Tenakov & Attree 2023; Nieuwoudt & Jones 2025), which is of importance for a successful and smooth transition.

## 5.2 A quality pathway to university

As established, there is a prevailing misconception in public discourse that ISEPs lack rigour or quality preparation for university. In contrast, benchmarking, as well as survey and interview findings, highlighted the multiple facets of ISEP rigour. Firstly, benchmarking highlighted alignment with the broader enabling sector, showing all programs were aligned to CLOs outlined by NAEEA, but recognised that ISEP CLOs also must remain responsive to the senior school context and socio-emotional needs of the cohorts. Alignment to the NAEEA CLOs demonstrates quality assurance in outcomes and is a recommendation of the Davis et al. (2023) benchmarking report for post-secondary enabling programs, understood sector-wide as important with the absence of an AQF level for surety of purpose, rigor, and portability. Moreover, benchmarking the programs' design further demonstrated ISEP rigour with strong alignment program structure. Of note was the highly scaffolded curriculum of academic skills, knowledge, and assessment. When collecting educator perspectives about ISEPs, respondents repeatedly commented on how scaffolding contributed to student academic growth in the program:

> It's so well scaffolded and it's amazing what they produce. It blows my mind every time … because I get to see aspects of their work when they want me to have a look at it. And you look at it and go, 'wow.' (EI 001)

Similarly, educator responses also recognised the strength of ISEPs in teaching core academic skills such as academic research, referencing, and writing, raising the academic standard of students' work not just in the programs but in other subjects as well. Students also saw this development of core academic skills as important to their successful transition, as synthesised in the thematic findings superordinate theme of "university acculturation and preparedness".

As established, ISEPs widen access for students from equity groups, but also provide a quality preparatory pathway (design and delivery) into higher education. This is demonstrated with retention of undergraduate students at near parity with their peers. ISEP graduates enrolled at ECU and MU—the two longest-running programs—are retained at approximately 79–83%, which is comparable to the retention rate of their non-equity group peers. Given the commitment to equity, ISEPs focused on accessibility and inclusivity. Educators recognised the supportive nature of ISEPs, noting they were opening doors for "young people who are disengaged" or those with "physical, neurological, or mental health challenges" (EI 005). Educators recognised how ISEPs allowed space in program design to be responsive to needs such as additional classes or support. All programs also had quality assurance mechanisms, such as moderation and academic integrity process led by the university, to uphold the integrity and quality of program design and final outcomes. The typology of models, identified in the benchmarking, recognised the similarities in program purpose, design, and quality assurance, with differences in partnership model and delivery methods in schools. ECU and SCU integrated ISEPs into school timetables with high school teachers, MU adopted a collaborative approach with teachers and university tutors, and UniSQ offered a flexible online model with university tutor support, including options for home-schooled students. While similar, these distinctions highlight the contextual nature of ISEPs, where universities have been responsive to the needs of their local communities.

Finally, the quality of the programs as pathways is reflected in the quantitative outcomes data, with high success (87%) and strong completion (79%) rates, and 50% of students continuing on to undergraduate study at their partner university within one-to-two years. ISEP entrants were retained from first to second year at 75%, comparable to students on non-ATAR (76%) and other provider enabling program (76%) pathways, and close to those on ATAR (79%) pathways, while retention of students from post-school enabling pathways was highest at 82%. Undergraduate success for ISEP graduates was on average 76%, with ECU at 83% and SCU at 78%, and overall performance was similar to post-school enabling, with a retention/success ratio close to 1. Quantitative outcomes data indicates programs with the highest retention and success rates, after accounting for differences in enrolment numbers, are those that are well established and incorporate classes within the school timetable. This is an important finding for schools and universities when planning, designing, implementing, and reviewing ISEPs in their institutions.

## 5.3 A confident pathway to university

A final aim of this project was to assess if ISEPs adequately prepare students for the transition to undergraduate study. Survey Likert-scale responses indicated high levels of enjoyment and satisfaction with the ISEP, alongside strong perceptions of preparedness for university. A significant finding from the qualitative data in this project was student and educator recognition of the role that ISEPs play as a confident pathway to university in

senior school. Student survey responses showed that focus and teaching of academic skills and knowledge was positively supporting student success in undergraduate study. As synthesised in the superordinate theme of “university acculturation and preparedness”, qualitive responses confirmed that alongside the development of academic skills, familiarity with university systems and clarity around academic standards built confidence and prepared students for success in their undergraduate studies. Students described the program as a preview of university and emphasised the value of foundational knowledge. Students recognised that the confidence gained in the ISEPs “humanising the university” (SS 48), made it feel like higher education was “not something to be frightened of” (SS 51). These comments suggested that ISEPs built self-efficacy and developed students’ sense of belonging at university, supporting wellbeing and flourishing during the transition to university. Students’ satisfaction with the ISEP was positively associated with measures of resilience and wellbeing, and their narratives reflected experiences of thriving socially and emotionally in higher education.

When returning to the previously identified “broader” markers of success—sense of belonging and self-efficacy—the findings across all data sets demonstrate that ISEP graduates exhibit these markers, hence the final superordinate theme of “socio-emotional journey and wellbeing”. While these “wellbeing” markers deviate from dominant institutional and government neoliberal metrics of student success, these broader markers capture “personal, socio-cultural, and structural” dimensions of achievement (Baker et al., 2020; Maclaurin et al., 2024; Rubin et al., 2022, p. 4). The superordinate theme of “socio-emotional journey and wellbeing” showed how the ISEP changed student perceptions of university, as they gained both a sense of belonging and built self-efficacy. Students shared how completing the ISEP made them believe they could succeed at university because the knowledge and expectations set by the programs was congruent with actual university experience. Notably, there was no significant differences in the Likert ratings between students from equity (including neurodivergent) and non-equity groups. This data suggests ISEPs meet diverse student needs and equip students with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to participate in university. Similar to post-secondary enabling programs (Crawford, 2014; Syme et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2020), project findings suggest ISEPs deliver broader benefits including transformative learning opportunities, enhanced self-confidence, and self-belief, which can also impact quantitative student success and retention.

ISEPs effectively provide a confident pathway to university for students who do not have access to, or are not thriving in, the ATAR system, particularly those from equity and disadvantaged backgrounds. This project provides critical evidence at a time when the Australian Government is calling for more students, particularly those who have been historically underrepresented, to enter higher education through nuanced, responsive pathways, and when the sector is seeking greater transparency on ISEP effectiveness and success. The data shared in this report shows that these students achieve success comparable to their post-secondary enabling peers and additionally report strong wellbeing and resilience. The findings show ISEPs build self-efficacy and a sense of belonging for students previously facing educational struggles with, or access to, ATAR, and foster confidence in their ability to succeed at university. As one educator stated:

> I don't understand why all schools don't have the opportunity for it [ISEPs], because I've just found it to be so enlightening in regards to how kids can learn in regards to preparation. These courses for university preparation are just amazing. (EI001)

In summary: ISEPs are not “alternative”; they are an effective pathway to university, and like the students enrolled within, are “good enough”.

# 6. Conclusion

This project provides the first comprehensive, cross-institutional benchmarking and analysis of ISEPs in Australia, offering critical insights into their structure, purpose, and impact. The findings demonstrate that ISEPs are academically rigorous, aligned with broader enabling education principles, and responsive to the diverse needs of senior secondary students, particularly those from equity cohorts. Through strong university-school partnerships, scaffolded curriculum, academic skill development and assessment, and acculturation to university systems and expectations, these programs create accessible pathways to higher education for students who may not thrive in traditional ATAR-based systems.

Quantitative data revealed high completion and success rates within ISEPs and comparable retention outcomes at undergraduate level, underscoring their effectiveness as a preparatory pathway. Quantitative data also demonstrated that students from equity groups who completed an ISEP had similar undergraduate retention rates to those who were not in an equity group. This suggests that ISEPs effectively prepare students for the transition to higher education, mitigating some of the disadvantages students from equity groups typically face in first-year university. Qualitative findings highlighted the transformative socio-emotional benefits for students who had struggled in, or not had access to, ATAR; these included increased confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging, alongside the development of essential academic literacies. By offering a rigorous, university-recognised pathway within senior schooling, ISEPs dismantle structural barriers and create opportunities for students, such as those from equity groups, who might otherwise be excluded from higher education. Educator perspectives reinforced the value of these programs in dismantling systemic barriers, building academic skills and confidence and fostering aspiration. Educators additionally identified structural challenges with program implementation in the school system that require ongoing support and contextual flexibility.

Despite ISEP strengths and successes, the project identified areas for improvement, including the need for consistent data tracking across institutions, enhanced transition support into later years of undergraduate study, and further research into expanded measures of success beyond grades and retention. Recommendations call for sector-wide collaboration to standardise learning outcomes, strengthen partnerships with further educator support, and refine pedagogical approaches tailored to high school contexts, while maintaining flexibility to meet local needs. It should also be recognised that students may complete ISEPs for reasons beyond university entry, such as proving their capability, earning senior secondary credits, exploring university as a fit, or building confidence for future opportunities. Even if they choose not to attend university, this “positive attrition” leaves students with greater agency, informed decision-making, and expanded career and study prospects.

In alignment with the ambitions of the Australian Universities Accord, ISEPs represent a key mechanism for widening participation and addressing educational inequity. By embedding rigorous, supportive pathways within senior schooling, these programs not only prepare students academically but also empower them socially and emotionally to succeed in higher education. Continued investment, research, and policy recognition will be essential to sustain and scale these initiatives, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have equitable access to university and the opportunity to flourish.

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# 8. Appendices

## 8.1 Appendix A

More information is provided below regarding the Brief Resilience Scale, short version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, and Sense of Belonging Index used in the student survey.

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS): Students' resilience was assessed with the six-item BRS. Participants provide responses on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree), where higher scores represent higher levels of resilience (Smith et al., 2008). The scores of the six items were added and then divided by six to determine the overall BRS score. The overall BRS scores range from one to five, with a score of 1.00 – 2.99 indicating low resilience, 3.00 – 4.30 normal resilience, and 4.31 – 5.00 high resilience. Internal reliability of this scale has been shown to be high, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .71 to .91 (Smith et al., 2008; Özer & Şahin Altun, 2024; Hidalgo-Rasmussen, & Gonzalez-Betanzos, 2019; Fung, 2020).

Short version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS): The SWEMWBS was used to assess students' mental wellbeing. Participants provide responses on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one (none of the time) to five (all of the time). The SWEMWBS is scored by summing the scores of the seven items, with higher scores indicating higher positive mental wellbeing. The SWEMWBS has high internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .83 to .90 (Rogers et al., 2018; Ng Fat et al., 2017; Vaingankar et al., 2017).

Sense of Belonging Index: Students' sense of belonging was assessed using a five-item adapted version of the Sense of Belonging Index originally developed for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2003. In the adapted version of the index, the word "school" was replaced with "university" for use in higher education rather than secondary school, and a five-point instead of four-point Likert scale was used (Pedler et al., 2022). This allows the inclusion of a neutral option between "agree" and "disagree", with the Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The index is scored by summing the scores of the items, with lower scores on the Sense of Belonging Index denoting greater sense of belonging. The adapted Sense of Belonging Index was used at an Australian university with 578 participants, with a Cronbach's alpha 0.859 (Pedler et al., 2022).