

# Uni4You: A case study of a community-based University widening participation program promoting lifelong learning

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## Project Summary

Uni4You is an innovative, pre-access and widening participation strategy based at the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle (UON). Since 2013, Uni4You has supported students who often have a lived experience of educational disadvantage and are often the first in their families, and their neighbourhoods, to enrol in higher education. The project works with people in their local communities and at local UON campuses, as they make informed decisions about lifelong-learning, journey through an enabling program at UON, and transition to an undergraduate program. The project includes information sessions; workshops exploring attitudes and aspirations towards lifelong learning; preparation for study sessions; peer-learning support groups; and scaffolded psycho-social support.

The Family Action Centre has a history of making explicit the connections between research, evaluation, teaching and practice—an important foundation of praxis (Burke & Lumb, 2018)—through critical reflection, action research, and transformative practice. As part of this commitment, the research team included both researchers and Uni4You practitioners.

This research and the model of practices developed by Uni4You are underpinned by:

- The bio-psycho-social or ecological model of human interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
- Strengths-based practices in family and community work (Mathie & Cunningham, 2008).
- Transformative pedagogies (Cranton, 2011).
- Critical methodologies (Freire & Freire, 1994).

The research involved interviews with people who had participated in Uni4You activities, and community practitioners, to explore the experience of students and the best ways to support them.

The research adds to the knowledge of the strengths of, and challenges faced by, students and—if they decide to pursue higher education—ways they can be supported to successfully transition to University undergraduate studies.

## Key Points

- The students often had a strong sense of determination due to their lived experience of having dealt with multiple complex challenges simultaneously (e.g., financial difficulties, caring responsibilities, childhood trauma, domestic violence, and/or health issues).
- The students already had dreams and aspirations and required support in achieving their aspirations—not having their aspirations raised—and Uni4You allowed them to explore options and possibilities. The research challenges approaches to student equity that focus on “raising aspirations” for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Sellar, 2013, p246).
- Carer responsibilities add to the complexities and challenges of studying. At the same time, being a role model for their children often motivates them to undertake tertiary studies and they were excited to see the influence they had on their children’s schooling.
- Community practitioners (e.g., teachers, family and health professionals) have a significant impact on the journey and experience of students.
- There were many and varied measures of “success” in addition to completion of an enabling program, or enrolment into an undergraduate program. Examples of positive attrition included employment, enrolment in training programs or focusing on family commitments (see Fig 1).

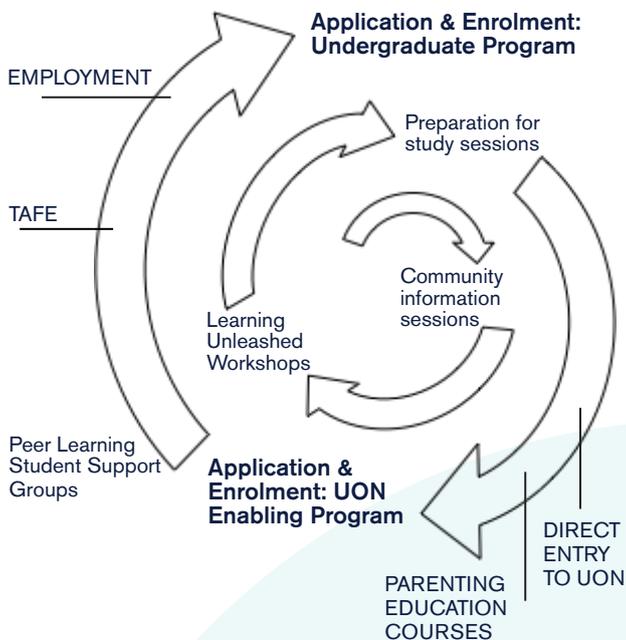


Fig 1

## Recommendations for Policy or Practice

UON adopt a model of three levels of support:

1. Universal support offered to all students that assists in the transition to university study and life (e.g., Peer Assisted Study Sessions and campus medical centres).
2. Targeted support available to students who need some extra support (e.g., student counselling services, Health and Welfare Advisers, and Indigenous Student Enabling Advisers).
3. Intensive support available to students with complex needs (e.g., Uni4You, Live Learn Grow). Intensive support, while provided to a relatively small number of students, is important to ensure equitable access by students who may otherwise be unable to succeed at University.

UON explores strategies for supporting those with carer responsibilities. Some strategies (e.g., aligning the semesters dates with NSW school terms) are relatively straightforward. Some strategies require a change in the recognition given by the University to the impact of caring responsibilities but can be introduced with little or no cost. For example, caring responsibilities could be explicitly included as an allowable adverse circumstance in the adverse circumstances policy and procedure. Some strategies (e.g., increasing the availability of casual/temporary childcare positions on campuses) would require a commitment of funds or other resources.

UON adopts a coordinated approach to building partnerships with the community sector that increases their capacity to not only promote the value of higher education and lifelong learning, but also to help provide the intensive support some students require.

## Recommendations for Future Research

UON, in evaluating pre-enabling and enabling programs, adopts a broad definition of success. By recognising positive attrition (where students do not proceed to further study because of other opportunities) and other benefits from participation in these types of programs, it is possible to obtain a more nuanced understanding of their impact and effectiveness.

An exploration of the return on investment of projects like Uni4You. The current research identified the prospect for intergenerational change (e.g., parents becoming role models who demonstrated the value they placed on education, increasing their capacity to care for their children, and becoming more confident in relation to their children's schooling).

A longitudinal study be undertaken of students involved with Uni4You to explore the long-term social and educational impacts, transitions and the challengers and enablers.

Further research be undertaken into the role of community practitioners in promoting and supporting lifelong learning, the ways in which they can unintentionally create barriers to lifelong learning, and strategies for increasing their capacity to support lifelong learning. Further exploration of these 'ripple effects', and the social return on investment (SROI) would further validate the long-term benefits and impacts of projects like Uni4You.

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