

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘My ATAR felt irrelevant’: What an enabling program can offer low-rank ATAR students

Brendan Ritchie¹  and Lydia Edwards¹ 

¹ Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, Australia

Corresponding author: Brendan Ritchie, brendan.ritchie@ecu.edu.au

Received 27 Aug 2025 Accepted 13 May 2026 Published online 24 July 2026

Pages 1-9

Abstract

Traditional academic enabling programs are designed as semester-long or year-long pathways into undergraduate study for non-ATAR students. While there is significant literature exploring these programs and their students, limited research exists in relation to the potential benefit of an enabling program on a regular ATAR cohort. In 2020, a four-week accelerated enabling program (titled UniPrep Accelerate) was designed at Edith Cowan University to offer a unique cohort of COVID-disrupted low-ranked ATAR students a rapid pathway into undergraduate study. A survey of three Accelerate intakes (2021, 2022, and 2023) examined the students’ experiences within this course, perspectives on their previous studies, and their success within their subsequent undergraduate programs. The findings indicate that Accelerate students not only achieve high success rates in their undergraduate studies but also demonstrate significant gains in academic skills, confidence, institutional familiarity, and an ability to recontextualise their previous ATAR experiences. This study explores the outcomes of offering an enabling pathway to non-traditional enabling students, highlighting the potential for a broader application of this pedagogy within a variety of higher education frameworks.

Keywords enabling education; pathway program; ATAR; orientation

How to cite Ritchie, B., & Edwards, L. (2026). ‘My ATAR felt irrelevant’: What an enabling program can offer low-rank ATAR students. *Journal of Pathways Education and Research*, 1(1), 1-9.

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Introduction

Academic enabling programs exist in a variety of forms within Australian universities, striving toward the broad goal of providing a non-traditional pathway for students to enter and succeed at university (Relf et al., 2017). The enabling cohort is typically diverse, incorporating first-in-family students, recent school leavers, mature-aged students, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Differing levels of prior education and support mean that enabling programs must be carefully scaffolded, particularly considering the heightened emotional and academic support that is often needed by their students (Jones et al., 2016; Lisciandro et al., 2023; Nelson et al., 2014; Olds et al., 2020; Relf et al., 2017). While historically, enabling

programs are based on a standard full semester duration (or longer), abbreviated versions are not a new addition to the sector. For example, Edith Cowan University’s (ECU) UniPrep program is offered as a condensed 8-week summer course, allowing successful students the opportunity to commence study in Semester 1 of the same calendar year. While the disruptions of COVID-19 on school leavers saw a significant increase in enrolments for this UniPrep summer course in 2020, there was a concern that there may be a cohort of students caught between the traditional ATAR pathway and existing enabling offerings. Categorised as low-rank ATAR students, this cohort had not expected to require an enabling pathway into university, thus not enrolling in a summer program, yet, as a reflection of a disrupted

final year of high school, found that their ATAR score was too low for entry into their chosen undergraduate pathway. Predicting this occurrence, ECU devised an abbreviated enabling course titled UniPrep Accelerate, offered exclusively to low-ranked ATAR students across a four-week period for the first time in January 2021. Students were required to spend three full days on campus each week (it was felt that, in line with the usual summer session, the option of online study would present additional challenges and should not be offered for this cohort). The rationale for this was the need to deliver a course that concluded in time for graduating students to commence their undergraduate studies within the normal academic calendar. Thus, the Accelerate course marked a departure from traditional enabling offerings at ECU (and many other universities) due to its condensed delivery model and non-traditional enabling cohort.

The success of UniPrep Accelerate from a retention, completion, and preparatory perspective, alongside the experiences captured in this survey, poses relevant questions about the structure and target of enabling programs in the future. The experiences of Accelerate students in their undergraduate study also offer insights into notions of belonging, connection, and orientation as applied to tertiary studies, arguing that there may be a rationale to incorporate an intensive course into broader university contexts. While the body of literature on enabling education is strong and continually developing, scholarship on the effectiveness of accelerated pathway delivery in a tertiary institution is in its infancy. Plenty has been written recently about accelerated options for high school and specific intensive degree and diploma-level courses, especially focusing on ethnic diversity and identity (most recently, Yadavalli et al., 2024), particularly since COVID-19. In the enabling context, Goode et al. (2024) have discussed the impact of immersive scheduling on pathway students in an Australian university, but no research to date has considered in depth the unique situation of these low-rank ATAR students and how they can be effectively accommodated within an accelerated enabling program. Therefore, this study covers new ground in its discussion of an enabling offering that was created to boost confidence, resilience, and retention of promising students in the lingering wake of a global pandemic.

Developing a new accelerated enabling offering

Rather than a simple shift to online learning, the COVID-19 pandemic required universities to alter their approach to a range of administrative, pastoral, and pedagogical practices in significant and defining ways. At ECU, it also created a new cohort of enabling students requiring a pathway into undergraduate study and the skills to succeed once they arrived. The Accelerate course runs for half the length of the standard summer program, meaning that the curriculum was substantially redesigned to allow for both accelerated completion and consideration of the

additional support typically needed by pathways students. It must also take into account the near-miss status of these ATAR students, understanding that most of the cohort will be starting with increased academic capabilities compared to regular and summer UniPrep intakes. To that end, each unit offered runs over a whole day per week, with students effectively completing one unit a week. This timetable also allows for an eight-hour period that is bookended – much like a school day – and therefore maintains some familiar consistency for students who have only just left school and who may be reeling after their recent setback of a near-miss ATAR score (Lisciandro et al., 2023). Designing such a course presents many challenges for staff who, along with their students, are faced with the additional pressure of a four-week timeframe to impart the skills needed to start a new degree the following month. As Jarvis points out, ideally, “the enabling program [has] emerged as a ‘safe space’ where risk could be unpacked and managed and where they could ‘try out’ university” (2021, p. 26). Accelerate aims to be a ‘safe space’ in line with ECU’s other enabling pathways; however, the idea of being able to gradually ‘rehearse’ university is not necessarily realistic for this cohort of students.

The course consists of accelerated versions of three existing UniPrep unit offerings: Academic Writing, Learning Skills, and Humanities. Key skills, concepts, and techniques are drawn from each standard unit and adapted to be suitable for a fast-tracked delivery. These include time management, presentation skills, critical thinking, note-taking and note-making, essay writing, researching and referencing, and professional communication. Choice aspects of discipline-specific content within the Humanities are also offered, incorporating ethics, epistemology, fake news, politics, and Aboriginal perspectives. These form the essay questions for two key assessments, the Essay Plan (submitted via Academic Writing) and the Research Essay (submitted through the Humanities unit). This means that content from each is embedded in all tutorials and assignments, creating connections and emphasising unit relevance to students. As a result, students are given clear pathways and outcomes to reflect on in their final oral presentation (Learning Skills), applying critical reflection to their learning experiences across all three units. It was understood that this cohort of students may not need as much scaffolded academic support as traditional enabling cohorts; therefore, an emphasis is placed upon developing rigorous and adaptable transdisciplinary skills in preparation for undergraduate study.

Alongside the curriculum, the Accelerate course also guides students through various physical and virtual university spaces as part of their four-week journey. Students are taken on the type of campus tour that may normally feature within a traditional orientation experience. In Learning Skills, they familiarise themselves with a range of key online spaces including the student portal, the library search engine, and the university’s learning management system. Students are also required to engage with staff from various areas of the university, stretching them beyond simply interacting with their tutors, to other staff such as

learning advisors, library staff, student support, and career advisors. In some instances, these staff visit students within the framework of their tutorials; in other scenarios, students are tasked with seeking them out autonomously, demonstrating the help-seeking behaviour considered a vital trait for student success within the UniPrep course.

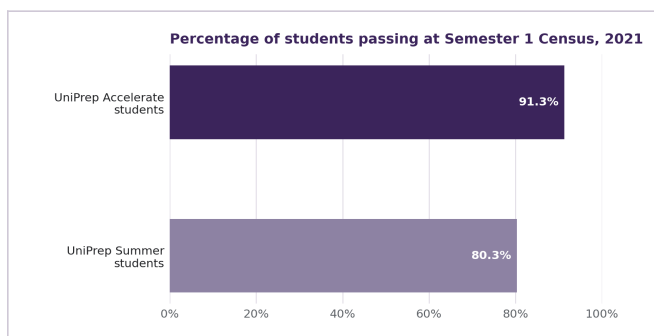
Success rates of Accelerate students in undergraduate studies

There is significant literature available to confirm that undergraduate success rates, retention rates, and GPAs for enabling students regularly exceed those of students who enter through a traditional ATAR pathway (Syme et al., 2022). Studies often celebrate this success by highlighting the unique and challenging characteristics of enabling students in comparison to those who enter through a traditional ATAR pathway. Most recently, research by Bennett and Burke (2024) has focused on ‘disengaged’ students, exploring how enabling pedagogy can navigate socio-cultural disparities and negative educational structures. Disengagement is a key feature of Accelerate students after such a near-miss ATAR outcome. Research by Syme et al. has suggested that across the student body, enabling programs must therefore facilitate “agency to overcome oppressive educational systems that limit their belief in their own academic and professional capacities” (2022, p. 2427).

UniPrep Accelerate students continued this positive trend, frequently recording higher success rates than non-enabling peers in their first semester of undergraduate study. However, undergraduate results also confirm that these success rates exceed those of regular enabling cohorts. For example, success rates for the first cohort of Accelerate students (2021), as measured in their first semester of undergraduate study, were above 90%, surpassing those of regular summer and semester enabling cohorts and students commencing through traditional ATAR pathways. The attrition rate was close to 5% in 2021 (compared to 19% in the general summer course).

Figure 1

Success (pass) rate in undergraduate study at ECU



Looking at a specific undergraduate cohort, 100% of the Accelerate students entering a Bachelor of Education in 2021 passed their first semester of undergraduate study, surpassing the success rate of students from all other entry pathways. To summarise, students who were required to complete an

accelerated enabling program due to a low ATAR performed better than many other comparable cohorts upon commencing their undergraduate studies. The success of these students places an important lens on the curriculum and delivery of the Accelerate course. The following section will consider what students take away from the course that enables them to progress so successfully from the disappointment of a low ATAR to confidently navigating the challenges of undergraduate study.

Method

In 2024, an online survey was conducted (ethics approval number 2022-03225) to evaluate student experiences in Accelerate and how this pathway into undergraduate study has shaped their university journey. During this study, students from three Accelerate intakes (2021, 2022, and 2023) were contacted. These students were currently engaged in undergraduate study within a range of courses at ECU (78% of the 2021 Accelerate students were enrolled in undergraduate study in semester 1, 2022). Some within the 2021 cohort were close to completing their studies at the time of the survey, whereas others within the 2023 cohort were still in their first year of undergraduate study. Students were asked a range of questions grouped under broader themes such as confidence, preparation, entry pathway, belonging, connection to peers, and attitudes toward ATAR. Questions were devised to capture both quantitative and qualitative responses, and students were informed that these responses would remain anonymous. Results were collated and examined alongside data capturing the status of the 2021 UniPrep cohort in relation to undergraduate progression.

The survey included in this research had a 10% response rate. In examining the responses, quantitative results were analysed first to identify statistical trends within the thematic areas. Following this, responses from 8 students to open-ended questions were grouped into categories based on their content and focus. Many of these responses aligned with the initial survey themes, such as confidence or preparation; however, others, such as campus familiarity, were identified as independent of these themes. When seeking to identify some possible reasons behind the success of Accelerate graduates within their undergraduate studies, several threads were identified from the survey responses. These areas—perspectives on ATAR, confidence, preparation to study, and peer connection and belonging—will be explored in the following sections.

Student perspectives on ATAR

Enabling literature suggests that a barrier exists for many enabling students in relation to the legacy of previous educational experiences (Syme et al., 2022). Accelerate students share with many other enabling peers the disadvantage of the recency of their disappointing score, with lingering regret featuring as a palpable barrier (Potter, 2012). As ATAR ranking is

such a specific characteristic in the Accelerate cohort, this survey approached the topic of student perspectives on ATAR directly. Students were asked how relevant their ATAR score felt upon completion of Accelerate, then upon commencement of their undergraduate degree. For some students, the disappointment of their ATAR was immediately reframed upon completion of Accelerate. One student stated: ‘After this course my ATAR score didn’t matter to me at all,’ and another reiterated that their ATAR was ‘not relevant at all. I didn’t feel like my ATAR mattered after finishing Accelerate.’ Implied in these comments is the reality that these students had found another pathway into undergraduate study; that is, it is logical to feel that an ATAR no longer matters when it is no longer the determining factor for entry to study. However, students also mentioned the specific deficiencies of their ATAR experiences when framed within the context of their new understanding of the university environment. One student articulated that ‘the UniPrep Accelerate course was really good in filling out the gaps that high school failed to fill.’

Other students spoke of the legacy of Accelerate in their undergraduate journeys, again making comparisons with peers who entered via a traditional ATAR pathway. When asked whether their journey would have been any different if they had gained direct entry via ATAR, the majority of students indicated yes. The following response captured the common sentiments of many students: ‘My ATAR felt irrelevant as UniPrep Accelerate showed me that I was capable of studying at a university level regardless of that initial mark.’ Only two students surveyed went against this trend, indicating that their journeys would have been similar, but they did acknowledge the benefits of some of the skills learned in Accelerate, such as referencing.

The ability to swiftly overcome the obstacle of a low ATAR and find a pathway into undergraduate study was an intended outcome of the Accelerate course. However, in many respects, the indirect outcome of students being able to reframe notions of inadequacy and disappointment related to their ATAR ranking and emerge with increased levels of confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience feels of greater significance. Such traits can be powerful drivers of student success in undergraduate study (Cassidy, 2015; Etherton et al., 2022; Lisciandro et al., 2016). Considered within the broader context of an educational journey stretching more than ten years, from high school through to undergraduate graduation and beyond, the impact of a four-week enabling course may have a significant and defining legacy.

Confidence

All students surveyed across the three years indicated a boost in confidence upon completion of Accelerate. Increasing students’ levels of confidence and self-efficacy is considered a pillar of broader enabling pedagogy. Atherton states, “[B]uilding confidence in students in early stages optimises their academic success. It also provides for a smooth transition into the first year of undergraduate study and thus

improves academic outcomes” (2015, p. 81). A significant proportion of students entering enabling courses have had negative educational experiences in the past, resulting in diminished self-belief (Syme et al., 2022). Effective enabling pedagogy seeks to reframe these experiences and build resilience, help-seeking behaviour, and self-efficacy, so that students can navigate any current and future challenges to their studies and avoid lowering their individual expectations of success.

The message that is delivered alongside a low ATAR outcome is that a student isn’t yet worthy of undergraduate admission, inevitably affecting confidence. This message isn’t accompanied by contextual information acknowledging potential factors such as family issues, mental health challenges, pandemic disruptions and so on. An ATAR is blunt and numerical, leaving it up to the student to contextualise and evaluate, hopefully alongside peers, school mentors, and family. It is not, in any respect, a measure of the ‘whole student’. Harvey and Burnheim conclude that “students’ ATAR-measured school performance is a useful but insufficient predictor of success and retention in further study” (2013, p. 36). A study by Baik et al. confirmed that although universities are increasingly aware of the augmented support needed for those with low ATAR scores, those students are still “less prepared, less able to cope with study, less academically engaged than their peers, and are at greater risk of attrition” (2019, p. 526). While it is positive that many options, such as Accelerate, exist for these students to enter university, rebuilding levels of confidence and self-efficacy continues to be a challenge.

Standard enabling offerings look to address this challenge over the course of a whole semester (Crawford, 2014); however, the Accelerate course had only four weeks to work with. Rather than an obstacle to increasing confidence, it is possible that the condensed delivery and completion may actually assist with this challenge. Within the first week of Accelerate, students are already completing and submitting low-weight, formative assignments. As these are marked and returned, students receive an immediate increase in confidence and some welcome affirmation of their capability within a tertiary institution. Obviously, these increases in confidence and affirmation may be limited to students who succeed in these assessments; however, the in-class nature of the tasks, alongside the support offered in development and completion, means success rates are high. One surveyed student described Accelerate as a ‘quick catching-up course’, reinforcing positive notions of upskilling and achievement within a condensed time period. Within this process, students also discover that the methods of assessment at university are likely to differ from those experienced during high school. Tutors often play a central role in this reframing, as expressed by one student: ‘During my UniPrep Accelerate course, my ATAR scores didn’t matter, as my tutors told me how different university assignment, marking, and study is different to that of traditional high schooling.’

As Accelerate students progress through the course, they continue to complete a range of formative and, eventually, summative assessments, often submitting these during class time under the guidance of tutors. Successes continue the process of rebuilding confidence and, when students are challenged by assessments and results, feedback can often be discussed and contextualised immediately by the tutor, providing clarity and a way forward into the next assessment. Overall, there was a general sense of positivity from students about the grades they were receiving. When students were asked how they felt about their scores at the conclusion of the Accelerate course, 100% indicated that they were either satisfied or pleasantly surprised.

Thus, providing students with the opportunity to swiftly reframe notions of inferiority that arrive with a diminished ATAR can be seen to have a positive impact on confidence levels in undergraduate study. Several students also mentioned the positive aspect of shifting directly from ATAR into Accelerate: 'I felt more prepared as I didn't pause my learning.'

Preparation to study

Connected to the notion of confidence, feelings of preparedness for university were a prevalent feature within survey responses. Noteworthy here were the comparisons drawn to undergraduate peers who entered their courses without undertaking an enabling pathway such as Accelerate. In articulating *how* they felt more prepared, many Accelerate students mentioned the adoption of the academic skills and knowledge required at university, such as researching, referencing, and academic writing: 'Many of my peers that didn't complete an Accelerate course spend a significant amount of time trying to acquire the skills Accelerate taught me. Whilst I completed Accelerate, I felt behind; upon completion and throughout my degree, I felt ahead and more prepared.' Another student mentioned the specific benefits of understanding referencing when many of their fellow students did not: 'coming in with knowledge of how to reference both in text and end text was the most beneficial part, where many of my classmates struggled with this when I started my degree but I could focus on the content and didn't have to worry about learning how to do so putting me ahead of my peers.' Being able to focus on the undergraduate curriculum rather than broader university skills, expectations, and processes was a common theme within survey responses.

Gaps in existing high school knowledge were also mentioned by students in relation to the broader topic of undergraduate preparation. One student revealed that they 'didn't learn how to write academic essays in high school, so the UniPrep Accelerate course allowed me to learn that in advance before starting my degree.' Another stated: '[T]he university environment is very different to secondary school in a way that my high school did not prepare me for.' Another went on to consider their ATAR knowledge as a whole, stating that 'What I learnt through my ATAR has had no use for me after high school.' Others still placed value on

their ATAR experience within the context of Accelerate: 'A higher ATAR made the whole process easier, but I was happy to have completed the Accelerate program and feel I would have been overwhelmed if I had not done it.'

Themes of organisation and soft skills (such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability) were also noted alongside more specific academic knowledge. Several students mentioned feeling more organised when commencing undergraduate study as a result of the broader tools and advice offered throughout Accelerate. One mentioned the benefits of learning 'techniques that enabled me to feel more organised and helped me to understand my assignments and complete them to a better standard.' Another stated: 'UniPrep Accelerate was a strange change from high school, but I was also given tools to manage that transition.' This student continued on to say how these tools were transferable within their undergraduate journey, assisting in the common occurrence of a shift in major: 'I then commenced an undergraduate degree and decided to switch, and both of those courses felt a lot easier thanks to what I learnt during Accelerate.' The assessment planner that also forms the basis of one of the low-weight assessments mentioned earlier was cited by another as being relevant right throughout their undergraduate journey: 'Almost 4 years later I still make one at the beginning of each semester for the upcoming semesters keeps me on track.'

Students also mentioned familiarity with campus as an additional benefit from their time in Accelerate. Students expressed being 'more prepared in terms of academic writing and referencing and also just getting to know the campus better,' and that 'Accelerate helped me become familiar with the university way of teaching as well as finding my way around the campus.' Notions of familiarity with the campus and institution will be explored further in the following section.

It should be acknowledged that these comparisons are likely made in relation to ATAR-entry peers rather than to students who may have entered the course through a conventional enabling course at ECU. However, rather than diminishing the impact of Accelerate, these comparisons remain relevant due to the similarity between Accelerate students and ATAR-entry students. Overall, bringing these increased levels of preparation and confidence into undergraduate study appeared to help Accelerate students dispel any lingering feelings of inadequacy, making them feel as if they belonged alongside their high-scoring ATAR peers.

Peer connection and belonging

As discussed, the Accelerate course was structured with an intensive on-campus delivery pattern. An additional aim for this was to foster a sense of collegiality between students that would enhance their likelihood of success, both within the course and moving into their undergraduate studies. There is significant literature confirming the positive correlation between students who develop

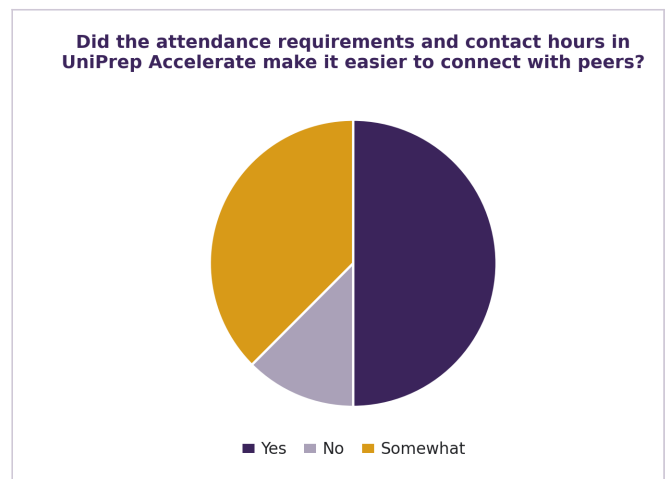
relationships with university peers and their overall academic success (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017). In 2020, van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman defined a sense of belonging amongst students at Macquarie University as overwhelmingly people-oriented, including opportunities to interact with other students whilst feeling respected and accepted on campus. While this does not necessarily equate with academic success, it indicates the holistic importance of the university experience. Yet, in 2005, Wilcox et al. went so far as to suggest that to ensure good levels of retention, equal emphasis must be placed on “successful integration into the social world of the university as into the academic world” (p. 707). Cocks and Stokes (2013) reiterate this in their exploration of an Australian Foundation Studies program where students were supported to grow peer networks to avoid repeating previously negative academic, social, and educational experiences.

The majority of students participating in this survey did indicate that the on-campus requirements of the course made it easier to connect with their peers, as indicated by Figure 2. However, when asked whether they had maintained contact with any of their peers from Accelerate, 75% of the students surveyed indicated that this was not the case. It is important to acknowledge that enabling students can venture into any number of pathways upon entering their undergraduate degree. While maintaining a connection with an enabling peer is not impossible when taking separate undergraduate pathways, it does increase the challenge. One student acknowledged this by saying: ‘I think it would be good to have classes of people going into similar degrees or something similar as when Accelerate ended I fell out with most of the people I met as they all did different courses.’ There are some national enabling programs that look to address this by offering discipline-specific enabling pathways; however, this was not considered feasible given the size and delivery pattern within Accelerate. It should also be stated that while an intensive delivery pattern does increase the contact students have with each other, it may also reduce the social time that becomes available within a more traditional academic calendar.

So, whilst Accelerate did provide a platform for student connection during the intensive four-week period, these connections were not maintained during the broader undergraduate journey. This raises several questions about the relationship between connection and student success. The general assumption is that students who make peer connections have a higher academic success rate than others (Berthelon et al., 2019); however, the Accelerate cohorts demonstrate academic success both within the Accelerate course and early into their undergraduate studies, without expressing this peer connection. As Bronkema and Bowman (2019) concur in relation to undergraduate friendships, “campus friendships may promote academic success, but the exact conditions in which this occurs are unclear” (p. 272).

Figure 2

Peer connection during UniPrep Accelerate



This study did not evaluate student connections established with other commencing undergraduate students, so it is possible that Accelerate students still built peer connections early in their undergraduate degrees, and that these relationships had a positive impact on their early academic success. Without the scope to confirm a trend in either direction, this study may instead offer more insights into notions of belonging.

The majority of students surveyed did indicate they felt a sense of belonging at the conclusion of Accelerate, despite not building any lasting connections with peers. Within the context of a course designed for low-rank ATAR students, the notion of belonging may be more closely aligned with the feelings of competence and aptitude mentioned in the previous section. If a student feels prepared and confident as they commence undergraduate study, then there may be less chance of them feeling as though they do not belong at university more broadly. When asked how their undergraduate journey may have been different if they had entered directly via ATAR, one student mentioned: ‘I think I would have felt a bit lost and overwhelmed so I’m happy to have had the experience and know what to expect from studying at uni,’ and another: ‘I probably would have failed or intensely struggled throughout my first year ... especially as a new student to university.’

However, there are likely some additional threads that are contributing to this feeling within the students surveyed. As mentioned, the Accelerate course actively fosters interaction between students and broader university staff, while also increasing familiarity with physical and virtual university spaces. Then there are the impromptu interactions related to campus facilities such as cafes, gyms, and student lounges that enable students to develop a familiarity with the campus, but also shift their view of themselves from school leavers or low-rank ATAR students to university students. Within the survey, one student referred to their familiarity with these aspects as knowing ‘how uni works,’ while another stated that their time in Accelerate gave them the ability to navigate the ‘university experience’. These are simple descriptions

but encapsulate much of the existing literature on the importance of belonging within enabling contexts. Chesters and Watson (2016) mention the positive relationship between levels of familiarity and retention for on-campus enabling students. A report by Lomax-Smith et al. (2011) confirmed the importance of enabling courses in helping students adjust to university environments. More recently, James et al. (2022) described the challenge – but huge importance – of replicating that sense of connection and belonging when enabling students were forced online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In many ways, the Accelerate course offers students an extended orientation as part of their academic journey, and one could argue that both processes are strongly implicated in the success of these students upon entry onto their undergraduate pathways. As Goode and Clark (2013) have discussed, there are challenges that arise when incorporating a meaningful ‘Week 0’ or orientation session into enabling programs, particularly commenting that “the more ‘serious’ and ‘academic’ nature of coursework and assessments remained confronting for many students” (p. 47) after the lighter tone of orientation. A significant benefit for Accelerate is that, as suggested earlier, its short duration means that many of the aspects covered in traditional orientations – campus organisation, support, transport – can be discussed and revisited more than once over the four-week period, as students look forward to commencing their first semester very shortly thereafter. Feedback from an Accelerate student stating how helpful it had been to ‘learn how to use and navigate around all the different platforms that ECU uses’ would suggest the benefit of this ongoing sense of orientation for their future studies.

Discussion

The Accelerate cohorts in this study demonstrate high success, as reflected in their completion rates in this enabling course and, for many, in their undergraduate program of study. This suggests that a low-rank ATAR score is not always an accurate predictor of undergraduate success. This is an observation already present within certain enabling literature (McNaught & McIntyre, 2011; Pilcher & Torii, 2018; Potter, 2012), but noteworthy here due to the abbreviated nature of this enabling offering. That is, perhaps the significant benefits of an enabling pathway are not limited to traditional semester or year-long delivery modes. Rather than diminish the validity of the ATAR pathway, this may suggest that some, or all, of the benefits of an enabling course may have an application beyond that of traditional cohorts. Perhaps a broader range of students could benefit from a course such as Accelerate, not for the pathway that it offers, but rather the skills, knowledge, and confidence it can promote. As articulated by one student surveyed: ‘I truly think it should be a mandatory part of university entry.’

In exploring the factors contributing to the success of Accelerate students, themes of preparation and confidence both emerged strongly from survey

responses. In relation to what constitutes effective preparation for undergraduate challenges, students mentioned the benefit of learning new academic skills such as research and referencing, alongside broader organisational techniques and guidance. Students often framed their comments in relation to how they felt prior to completing Accelerate, and also in comparison to other non-enabling undergraduate peers. This suggests that there may be gaps in key knowledge when students transition from high school to undergraduate study, bridged for Accelerate students, but for others remaining open during the initial stages of undergraduate study. Again, as universities place such a strong focus on retention and success in first-year undergraduate cohorts, the outcomes of this study should be of relevance.

Students recorded a marked increase in confidence upon completion of Accelerate. Implicated in this increase was the opportunity to swiftly shift focus to the assessment challenges within the course. Students noted both a change in the nature of the assessments they were faced with and an overall positivity with the grades they were receiving throughout. Overall, the successful completion of a course, even one of this duration, seemed to offer students a platform to reframe any notions of deficit resulting from their ATAR experience, then move forward with confidence within their undergraduate pathways. A lack of surprise or the unknown once commencing this pathway may have also been implicated in their ability to maintain these levels of confidence.

The ability to connect with peers does not appear to be a significant factor for students within Accelerate. The course was short in duration, and only a small percentage of students surveyed reported maintaining a peer connection originating from their time in Accelerate. Despite this lack of peer connection, most students did indicate an increased sense of belonging to the university community at the conclusion of Accelerate. Notions of confidence may be implicated in this trend, alongside an increased familiarity with university spaces (both physical and virtual) and processes. This type of familiarity can be built during traditional student orientation frameworks, but perhaps the intensive, on-campus nature of a course such as Accelerate offers an example of how this can be taken a step further, with the potential for significant results for students.

Conclusion

This study has explored the experiences of a unique cohort of low-rank ATAR students within an accelerated enabling pathway at ECU, Western Australia. Utilising three years of feedback from a specially designed survey, we have examined student success, confidence, preparedness, attitudes, and sense of belonging within the program. Findings acknowledge the post-pandemic need for this type of offering alongside standardised pathways programs but also signal the reasons to draw on this model to create a pathway that takes advantage of an accelerated enabling program as opposed to normal, semester-long or even summer variants. This research

also adds to the body of literature concerning the effectiveness of ATAR as an indicator of future tertiary success. While we do not directly critique ATAR as a framework, we reconsider its dominance as a benchmark for all students, reflecting on the stigma and lessened confidence that low ATAR scores can create within the enabling sphere.

This research is based on a specific academic enabling course, meaning that the opportunity to contextualise the information and outcomes was somewhat limited. University entry pathways are a fluid and institutionally specific area, meaning that longitudinal research on topics related to ATAR, enabling, and undergraduate success can be difficult to initiate. Further study of entry pathways and student orientation might consider whether the attributes of an accelerated enabling course could be applied more broadly to cohorts who do not require an entry pathway but may benefit from the guidance, orientation, and support offered in such courses prior to commencing their undergraduate studies.

Declarations

Acknowledgements. None.

Funding. The work received no specific funding.

Conflict of interest. No conflicts of interest exist.

Ethics approval. The study received Edith Cowan University ethics approval (2022-03225).

Author contributions. Dr Brendan Ritchie: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Investigation; Formal analysis; Writing - original draft; Writing - review and editing. Dr Lydia Edwards: Writing - original draft; Writing - review and editing.

Data availability. Raw data are not publicly available under the parameters of ethics approval (2022-03225).

Generative AI disclosure. No generative AI tools were used in this article.

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Author biographies

Dr Brendan Ritchie is a Lecturer at Edith Cowan University. His research focuses on student success outcomes in pathway and undergraduate programs, alongside an exploration of bildungsroman narratives within contemporary literature. In 2024, Brendan's approach to university pedagogy was recognised by an Australian Award for University Teaching.

Dr Lydia Edwards is a Lecturer at Edith Cowan University, working within the areas of enabling education and costume design. Her research focuses on accessibility within academia and pedagogy, tertiary approaches to humanities teaching, and the history of western dress and material culture.

