

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Grit-ability toolkit: A framework for educators supporting student success in Enabling education

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Abstract

For many students, their initial experience at university can determine whether they persist or discontinue higher education entirely. A successful start is not just beneficial; it is transformative, shaping students' confidence, motivation, and long-term engagement with learning. This study explores the key factors that contribute to student success in Enabling education, particularly for those from equity backgrounds. Using Merriam's (1998) Case Study methodology, bounded within an Enabling program, and guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the research seeks to answer the question: *From the perspective of students who successfully completed the STEPS Enabling program, what factors supported their success?* Through the experiences shared by participants, four overarching themes were constructed: Personal Agency, Resilience, Positive Mindset, and Connection. These themes encapsulate the psychological, behavioural, and social factors influencing students' ability to persist and thrive in higher education, providing valuable insights into the multiple layers that support student success. Ultimately, this paper presents the Grit-ability Toolkit and explains how educators in Enabling programs can better support equity students to achieve their academic and personal goals. These findings are based on the experiences of students who successfully completed the STEPS program and should not be interpreted as representing all Enabling students or as an explanation for student non-completion.

Keywords enabling education; student success; equity; student perspective; grit; growth mindset

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Introduction

In an era where higher education (HE) is increasingly prioritising equity and inclusion, there is a growing focus to support successful outcomes for students from equity backgrounds. These students, often under-represented in HE, face significant challenges as they navigate the university landscape. With the Australian Government's Universities Accord [Accord] (2024) highlighting the need for improved access, retention, and completion rates for equity students,

understanding the factors that support student success in Enabling education has never been more critical. Enabling programs, particularly those targeting students from regional, rural, and remote locations, low socio-economic backgrounds (SES), people with disabilities, and First Nations peoples, have emerged as essential pathways for widening participation in HE (Davis et al., 2023; Li & Jackson, 2024; O'Shea et al., 2024; Pitman & Trinidad, 2016). Although widening participation programs, such as Enabling education, have expanded opportunities, students from

equity backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented in HE. Addressing this disparity requires more than access alone; it necessitates a deeper understanding of the complex challenges these students face. This study asks: *From the perspective of students who successfully completed the STEPS Enabling program, what factors supported their success?* By investigating how Enabling programs can foster self-efficacy, confidence, and the development of academic capital, this research seeks to identify strategies that not only improve students' immediate outcomes but also offer the broader HE sector insights into supporting equity students' completion success.

Student success is variously conceptualised across higher education and cannot be adequately represented by academic performance or completion alone (Allen, 2025). A recent scoping review identified student success as a multidimensional construct encompassing persistence and academic progress, academic performance, achievement of learning objectives, satisfaction and longer-term outcomes (Vugteveen et al., 2025). For students entering through alternative pathways, success is also shaped by their educational experiences, sense of belonging, confidence and capacity to navigate the university environment (Crawford et al., 2024; Li & Jackson, 2024). Research involving students from low socioeconomic backgrounds similarly demonstrates the importance of understanding success from students' perspectives, including the personal, social and cultural resources that they draw upon (Macaulay et al., 2023). In this study, student success is defined as more than academic performance or completion. It includes the development of academic confidence, preparedness for further study, personal agency, resilience, and the social and emotional connections that support ongoing engagement and growth.

Background

Enabling programs, also known as fee free university ready (FFUR), access, foundation, bridging and pathway, serve as an attainable HE entry platform for students from equity backgrounds. These programs provide a fee-free, structured pathway designed to equip students with the academic and social skills necessary for success in HE (Hodges et al, 2013). However, the students who enrol in these programs have frequently experienced educational disadvantage or interruption, are the first in their families to attend university and manage significant personal and financial challenges (James, 2024; O'Shea, 2023; Syme et al., 2021; Weiler & Murad, 2022). Equity students, which include those from low SES backgrounds, people with disabilities, First Nations peoples, and those from regional, rural, and remote areas, often face the highest risk of university drop-out and tend to have lower completion rates compared to their traditionally represented peers (Chesters & Watson, 2016; Li et al., 2022). Recognising and supporting the multiple challenges these students face outside of their studies is paramount to their retention and success (Li & Jackson, 2024).

For students from equity backgrounds, the transition to university is not just academic, but deeply personal, requiring a transformation of their self-belief and the

development of a new 'student identity' (O'Shea et al., 2024; Seary et al., 2023). Educators and institutions play a critical role in facilitating this transformation. Enabling programs act as "incubators for change," providing a space for equity students to develop the skills and confidence necessary for HE success (James et al., 2024, p. 176). In the Enabling context, educators are recognised as "agents of change" helping students navigate their academic journey while fostering the personal growth needed for academic persistence (James et al., 2024, p. 185). The importance of supporting equity students to complete Enabling programs cannot be overstated. These programs not only help to address the academic gaps many students face but also provide the structured supports required to meet the diverse needs of this unique student body (Davis, 2023). By recognising the complexities equity students manage outside of their studies, Enabling programs can be better equipped to effectively guide these students to success and ultimately, increase equity in HE outcomes.

Literature Review

Enabling programs are recognised for providing supportive, inclusive, engaging environments (face-to-face and online) where students report a sense of belonging (Crawford, et al., 2024; Fan et al., 2024; James, 2024), transformed self-worth, and that they "matter to the institution" (Seary et al., 2023, p. 8). The Enabling education environment can empower equity students to overcome self-limiting beliefs about their academic and professional potential, leading to achievements in their studies and careers that they had not previously imagined possible (James, et al., 2026a; Stokes, 2024; Syme et al., 2021). The Accord (2024) recognises Enabling education's pivotal role in creating a more equitable and inclusive HE system in Australia; however, despite the increased recognition, there is limited data on specific tools that can support this cohort's success (Baker et al., 2020; O'Shea et al, 2024).

Enabling education cohorts differ to direct entry students commencing in HE. Approximately 50% of students in Enabling programs belong to one or more equity groups, significantly higher than equity students' 30% representation in domestic undergraduate enrolments (Liscandro et al., 2023). These equity groups include students with disabilities, students from low SES backgrounds, regional, rural and remote areas, and First Nations peoples (Australian Government, 2024). Additionally, 95% of Enabling education students report experiencing elevated levels of psychological distress (Nieuwoudt, 2023) as they strive to overcome challenges and exhibit resilience to achieve outcomes comparable to their non-equity peers (Chesters & Watson, 2016).

Enabling students commence studies imagining their "possible selves" (Delahunty, 2022, p. 14); however, challenges and barriers can often lead to their attrition (James, 2024; James et al., 2026b; Li & Jackson, 2024; O'Shea et al., 2024). Equity students struggle with managing competing priorities (Bennett et al., 2024; Devlin & Mackay, 2019), have low cultural capital and self-belief (Gale & Parker, 2017) and significant gaps in academic preparedness

(National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education [NCSEHE], 2017), making university-level studies more challenging (Tomaszewski et al., 2024). Time poverty has become one of the main reasons equity students cite for disengaging in HE (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Dollinger et al., 2025; Wladis et al., 2024), perceiving themselves as more “time poor” than non-equity students due to balancing “financial pressures, family responsibilities and/or significant hours of employment” (Devlin & Mackay, 2019, p. 6). These compounding challenges disadvantage equity students in the HE environment, negatively impacting their engagement and outcomes (James, 2025; O’Shea, 2023). While universities offer varied support services, there can be a lack of targeted support that aligns with the unique needs of students from equity backgrounds (Barnes et al., 2024; Harris et al., 2026; Macquene et al., 2022).

Given these persistent challenges and the limitations of existing support structures, it becomes essential to explore alternative frameworks that can better capture and respond to the resilience required of equity students. Duckworth’s (2007) Grit theory is defined by sustained passion and perseverance toward long-term goals, offering a valuable framework for enhancing Enabling education. Students from equity backgrounds often face systemic barriers such as limited academic preparation, financial stress, and reduced social capital, which can undermine persistence in HE (Stokes, 2024). Demonstrating grit; however, has been shown to reduce these challenges by fostering resilience and long-term motivation (Duckworth & Milkman, 2022). Research highlights that students with strong personal agency and adaptive traits which align with Grit theory (Duckworth, 2007), are more likely to succeed academically despite disadvantage (Braund et al., 2020; Kundu, 2017). Enabling programs that cultivate grit-related attributes, such as goal setting, self-regulation, and a growth mindset, can empower equity students to persist through adversity and achieve their academic goals (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020). By embedding grit principles into support structures, universities can create more inclusive environments that not only acknowledge disadvantage but actively equip students to overcome it.

While Grit (Duckworth, 2007) provides an important foundation for understanding persistence, it does not fully account for how students perceive their capacity to grow and improve. This is where Dweck’s (2006) Growth Mindset theory offers a complementary perspective, emphasising that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, strategies, and support. Students entering Enabling education, particularly from equity backgrounds, often face internalised doubts about their academic potential (James, 2024; O’Shea, 2023); however, when programs foster a growth mindset, students begin to see challenges not as indicators of inadequacy but as opportunities for growth (Sousa & Clark, 2025). This shift in perspective to nurture personal agency and resilience, requires learners to be equipped with tools to empower them to persist, despite setbacks. Developing a positive mindset can transform educational trajectories by strengthening students’ belief in their capacity to improve (Kolyda, 2023). Additionally, connection with peers, mentors, and the learning

environment, reinforces the social scaffolding necessary for a growth mindset to flourish (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). By embedding these principles, Enabling programs can cultivate a culture where equity students redefine their academic identities and unlock long-term success.

There is a growing interest in innovative pedagogical approaches that address the varied and unique needs of diverse student bodies (Davis, 2023; Lisciandro et al., 2023). If educators and programs can support equity students’ engagement and commitment (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; Healey & Healey, 2019), this will lead to improved retention and academic achievement (Allen & Nichols, 2017). Enabling programs’ curriculum is designed to encompass educational goals, and pedagogical practices that support student learning and personal growth (Dodd et al., 2021; Maclaurin et al., 2025); however, research highlights the importance of equipping students with behavioural and mindset tools that will enhance their motivation and ability to achieve success in Enabling and HE (James, Knight & Griffin, 2026; Jones & Skaggs, 2016). Combined, these studies highlight a clear gap: while Enabling programs provide important curricular and structural support, further research is needed to understand what specific factors empower student success, particularly how behavioural and mindset tools can foster equity students’ persistence and achievement in higher education.

Research Design

This study employs Merriam’s (1998) Case Study approach, with the bounded case being an Enabling program at Australia’s largest regional university, CQUniversity. Qualitative scholars argue that a case study approach provides an in depth, context sensitive exploration of students’ experiences (Cypress, 2017). Hence, this qualitative case study research design provides a transparent, step-by-step approach to support an in-depth, authentic exploration of students’ perspectives in Enabling education. Guided by case study methodology, the qualitative research procedures are described through an overview of the target population, participant recruitment strategies and a demographic summary of the participants. The participants were students who successfully completed the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at CQUniversity between 2012 and 2020. Their experiences provided valuable insights into the factors that supported persistence and success. This methodological approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the unique challenges and support systems that influence success within the specific context of Enabling education. By focusing on those who navigated the program successfully, the study highlights key enablers of student retention and success in Enabling programs. The research question that this study is responding to is: *From the perspective of students who successfully completed the STEPS Enabling program, what factors supported their success?*

Participants

The data used in this study investigated the factors that foster student success in the STEPS Enabling program at CQUniversity, Australia. The researchers mined two sets of

data for the purpose of this analysis (Ethics approval: 0000020686). The combined data set included data collected from a study on female mothers and the other focusing on male students all participating in the STEPS Enabling program. Participants were recruited via an online survey emailed to 6800 students who were enrolled in the STEPS Enabling program between 2012 and 2020 and data from 489 respondents was collected. The demographic profile of both genders was varied: age range (19 to 64 years); number of children in their care (one through to seven); marital status (married, sole parent, de facto and other). Additionally, from this participant group, 21 students (14 male and 7 female) volunteered to participate in either a semi-structured individual interview or a focus group.

Data collection tools

The online survey contained multiple choice, rank order survey questions, and open-ended questions. The interview and focus group questions were open-ended to elicit the students' perceptions of their experiences during their enrolment in an Enabling program. The survey and interview questions focused on the students' personal characteristics, support networks, and mindsets that influenced their outcomes during their Enabling studies. These were conducted either via Zoom or face-to-face for approximately 60 minutes. The recordings were transcribed using pseudonyms to de-identify the data and reduce potential bias during the analysis. The findings reported in this paper integrate survey, interview, and focus group data to reflect the perspectives of all 489 participants.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a flexible qualitative approach that emphasises researchers' active and interpretive engagement with the data. Following the six phases of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the analysis began with data familiarisation, where the researchers repeatedly read the open-ended survey responses, interview transcripts, and focus groups transcripts while engaging in reflexive notetaking. This iterative process supported ongoing reflection on meanings, patterns, and interpretations across the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that the iterative RTA process requires researchers to engage thoughtfully and reflexively with the data, recognising their role in knowledge construction. Following this phase, the researchers generated initial codes across the entire dataset by identifying patterns of meaning relevant to the research question. Codes were then organised into initial themes, which were then reviewed, refined and named to ensure they meaningfully captured participants' experiences and perspectives. Throughout the data analysis process, theme development was discussed and critically examined during research team meetings. These collaborative discussions supported reflexive engagement with the data and contributed to the trustworthiness and rigour of the analysis (Walther et al., 2017).

To maintain authenticity, and foreground participants' voices, students' original phrases are incorporated as "quotes" within the findings, preserving the richness of their lived experiences and perspectives (Armstrong et al., 2018). The data analysis process was inclusive of all three data sources, ensuring that contributions from the surveys, interviews and focus groups informed the development and refinement of the themes. This approach sought to interpret the dataset holistically, ensuring a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the factors that support student success in Enabling education.

Findings

These findings are based on the experiences of students who successfully completed the STEPS program and should not be interpreted as representing all Enabling students or as an explanation for student non-completion. The participants' perceptions indicated several factors that empower student success in Enabling education. These factors were grouped into four key themes showing the patterns of shared meaning across the data sets: 1. Personal Agency, 2. Resilience, 3. Positive Mindset, and 4. Connection. Each theme encapsulates key subthemes that highlight the psychological, behavioural, and social factors influencing students' ability to persist and thrive in Enabling education.

Personal Agency

The first theme centres on personal agency, with self-belief, confidence, and capability emerging as key subthemes that underpin and drive its development. Success in Enabling education often depends on a student's belief in their own abilities. When students feel capable and confident, they are more likely to take initiative, persist through challenges, and set realistic academic and personal goals. Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy supports this, as students who believe they can succeed are more likely to engage deeply with learning. A strong sense of self-belief enables students to take control of their learning, make proactive decisions, and embrace academic challenges as opportunities for growth.

Self-Belief

Participants described a sense of "self-pride" and self-confidence as a grit-like trait that fuelled their motivation and noticeably strengthened throughout their Enabling studies. Many reflected on the "learning curve" of university as a transformative experience, providing "personal satisfaction" and incremental growth in their "self-belief." One student stated, "I felt proud of getting stuff done, regardless of grade levels," while another described the process as proving to themselves and others "that I could do it and do it well." Importantly, improved self-belief was linked to personal progress and achievements rather than numerical grades, with each successful assessment acting as a stepping stone that motivated students to keep "pushing forward" and "striving to achieve." This growing self-belief in their academic ability ignited a newfound "passion for studying hard and achieving good results" while also supporting students to overcome "low self-esteem and

overwhelm.” Many participants noted that their evolving self-belief helped them develop self-discipline strategies, allowing them to “juggle study and family commitments” more effectively.

Confidence

Confidence to “learn new things” and maintain a “positive attitude towards study” was perceived as a key factor in academic success. Participants emphasised that growing self-confidence enabled them to “overcome obstacles” and approach challenges with resilience. This confidence was reinforced through “small successes,” with each achievement proving their ability to “bounce back” after setbacks. Many students described the STEPS program as a “transformative” experience, providing them with not only academic skills but also a newfound belief that they were “capable” and “worthy” of success. Through this journey, students cultivated a sense of personal agency, allowing them to take ownership of their education and persist in the face of challenges.

Capability

A shift in mindset toward feeling “capable of university study” was a powerful influence on student retention. Many students entered university with entrenched beliefs that they were “too dumb,” “underprepared,” or “not clever enough” for tertiary study, which resulted in “very anxious beginnings.” However, as they progressed, they recognised their growing capability: “It felt fantastic ... that I am actually capable of doing intellectual work.” The STEPS program played a crucial role in fostering this transformation by equipping students with skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, literacy, numeracy, and time management. Each academic success became another step closer to “achieving my goals,” reinforcing their belief in their own abilities.

This newfound confidence extended beyond academics, particularly for student-parents, who noted that university study helped them become a “better role model” for their children. One participant observed that their “responsible and studious behaviours” had “rubbed off on my kids,” while another credited their daughter’s improved focus at school to her own “role-modelling responsible study habits” and establishing a better “study routine” at home. For many, the shift from doubting their capabilities to embracing challenges was encapsulated in a simple but powerful growth mindset phrase learned in STEPS: “When I say I cannot do it, it’s just that I cannot do it YET.”

Resilience

The second theme centres on resilience, with perseverance, determination, and courage as the key subthemes that embody this characteristic. Overcoming barriers is a key aspect of success in Enabling programs, which often cater to students who have faced previous academic setbacks or disadvantage. Resilience enables students to push through difficulties, while perseverance ensures continued effort even when progress feels slow.

Perseverance

Students consistently emphasised that “study is hard work,” requiring “commitment at all times” and sacrifices such as choosing study over leisure and family activities. “Self-discipline,” “ongoing effort,” and “setting aside time for study” were identified as critical for “keeping up with your studies.” Many participants noticed that their “organisation” and “persistence to finish tasks” improved as they progressed in their studies. Hard work, perseverance and “clear goals” were highlighted as important influences when “faced with high-level challenges,” with one student stating, “I found math ... difficult and had many failures, but I kept working hard” and was eventually successful.

Determination

Determination was characterised by “never giving up” and “persisting through difficulty” and was recognised as one of the most influential mindsets for study success and progression. Determination required “inner strength,” “self-motivation and discipline,” and the ability to “seek out support” to overcome obstacles. Students who had previously felt “stuck in life” articulated that their “personal growth” during STEPS inspired a “determination to achieve a better future.” A determined mindset helped students stay positive, manage stress, and feel a sense of control over their future.

Students felt that perseverance helped them maintain a “sense of direction” to achieve “new goals” despite financial, emotional, and academic challenges. Perseverance was described as “staying power,” where each assessment task was a “step closer to achieving” success. One student highlighted the importance of visualising herself as a nurse to maintain motivation, using this vision to “find time to study” and work towards her career goal.

Courage

Courage emerged as a fundamental force influencing students to take the initial step to enrol in university and persist despite challenges. Participants described courage as an “underlying driving force” that enabled them to make significant lifestyle adjustments, take academic risks, and step beyond their comfort zones. Courage encouraged students to be more “curious,” “take risks,” and remain “open-minded” in academic areas where they lacked confidence. Positive reinforcement from university staff played a key role in developing courage, with students highlighting how encouraging feedback motivated them to “try again” after experiencing setbacks. Ultimately, participants perceived that courage and resilience were necessary to “get involved,” “try new things,” and take a “leap of faith” to remain committed to their studies.

Positive Mindset

The third theme focuses on cultivating a positive mindset, with optimism and fulfilment emerging as key subthemes that demonstrate how this mindset can be developed. A positive outlook fosters motivation and helps students see

challenges as opportunities for growth. Feeling fulfilled in their studies reinforces engagement and strengthens students' commitment to completing their educational goals.

Optimism

Optimism emerged as a crucial factor for academic success, with many participants emphasising how a positive outlook helped them navigate challenges throughout their studies. A hopeful mindset was described as essential for managing the “ups and downs” of university life, particularly when dealing with assessment setbacks or moments of self-doubt. For these students, optimism was intertwined with resilience, viewing setbacks not as failures, but as “opportunities to improve.” Many students reflected on how Enabling education had helped them shift from negative thoughts to more hopeful perspectives, building their belief in their ability to succeed. Optimism allowed them to push through difficult moments, as students noted that it helped them “convince yourself that you have the ability to do university education.” This mindset was particularly reinforced by the sense of “belonging” that developed during group classes, with students noting that their connection with peers instilled a positive, supportive environment that nurtured their confidence and perseverance.

Fulfilment

The sense of fulfilment experienced throughout their studies provided a significant motivational boost for non-traditional students. Many participants described their academic journey as an “enriching experience,” contributing to both personal development and the achievement of broader life goals. The STEPS program was seen as a pivotal opportunity for growth, allowing students to explore their potential and “dream all sorts of possibilities.” Students felt a profound sense of pride in their accomplishments, with many stating that completing the program fostered a newfound self-confidence and the motivation to pursue further academic and personal goals. The sense of pride in their achievements, like telling others, “I go to university,” became a source of personal fulfilment, reinforcing their commitment to continue their studies and overcome future challenges.

Connection

The final theme focuses on connection, with relationships with university staff, student peers, family, and friends emerging as the key subthemes that sustain it. A strong support network plays a crucial role in student success, offering both emotional encouragement and practical assistance. These findings suggest that connection and support were instrumental in helping students persist despite the challenges they faced.

University Staff

University staff were identified by over half of the students as the most significant external support that influenced their success. For many students, university staff were more than just academic figures, they were mentors, guides, and even friends. One student shared, “the staff were the reason I stayed enrolled,” highlighting the personal connection and

motivation they provided. Another described staff as “mentors” who “helped me believe in myself,” which significantly impacted their “ability to keep going.” Students appreciated the “caring environment” created by STEPS staff, which “flowed onto students’ relationships,” fostering a supportive atmosphere for personal and academic growth. One student relayed how they were “struggling with IT systems” and “ready to quit” until a STEPS administration staff member took the time to help them navigate the challenge. These interactions were crucial in creating a sense of belonging, with many students commenting that positive and caring staff support was integral to their academic success. As one participant put it, “It was when everything else seemed to be crumbling that staff gave me the guidance I needed,” whether it was adjusting workloads, helping understand course material, or offering “inspirational chats to keep going.”

Student Peers

The support from student peers was equally influential in helping non-traditional students navigate the academic, social, and emotional challenges of university life. Students described their “student network” as “highly valued,” with peers often feeling like “people in the same boat” who “understood my new world.” This shared understanding played a crucial role in fostering a collaborative environment where students “worked together to achieve success.” Many participants mentioned that they had formed lasting friendships during the STEPS program, with some noting, “I still go to my friends from STEPS for advice.” “Study buddies and support groups” were particularly valued for academic support, enabling students to consolidate their knowledge and skills. The connection with peers was key to retention, with one student commenting, “The peer network was critical ... they truly understand and relate to what you are going through.” These relationships extended beyond the Enabling phase, continuing to provide emotional and academic support throughout their university journey.

Family and Friends

For many non-traditional students, the support of family and friends was an essential factor in their ability to persist with their studies. Participants shared how “positive relationships with family and friends” played a significant role in helping them stay enrolled and continue their academic journey. One student noted that “friends and neighbours were just as supportive, if not more than family relatives,” emphasising the importance of these external networks in providing both emotional and practical support. This was especially true for first-generation university students, who found that the encouragement of family and friends was a powerful motivator. As one participant reflected, “My family’s support has helped me overcome so many obstacles, financial, academic, and personal, just to stay enrolled.” The participants explained that this support network helped mitigate feelings of isolation and stress, offering the emotional encouragement needed to manage the demands of university life. The practical assistance provided by family and friends often made the difference between persisting

with studies or dropping out, as their support enabled students to overcome the many challenges they faced. However, there were instances where the students shared that they were not fortunate to have a strong familial support and often had to rely on friends and peers for this support.

Discussion

In response to the research question, *From the perspective of students who successfully completed the STEPS Enabling program, what factors supported their success?* the findings indicate that Grit (Duckworth, 2007) and a Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006) are foundational characteristics that students rely on to navigate and succeed in their early HE journey. This discussion shows that these characteristics underpin the four overarching themes identified in the study: Personal Agency, Resilience, Positive Mindset, and Connection, demonstrating how they collectively strengthen students' self-efficacy and enhance their capacity to take ownership of their learning and achieve academic success.

Grit and Growth Mindset: Key Drivers of Student Success

Students identified five grit-like traits that most influenced their success: courage to take risks, hard work, optimism to overcome obstacles, perseverance toward goals, and self-belief. Many equity students enter university with doubts about their ability to succeed (O'Shea et al., 2024; Seary & Willans, 2020; Syme et al., 2021). Research shows that these traits, combined with a growth mindset, the belief that abilities can be developed through effort and strategy (Dweck, 2006), positively influence academic achievement, resilience, and persistence (Barbouta et al., 2023; Duckworth, 2007). Understanding how students' disabilities, diverse backgrounds and cultural contexts shape their development enables educators to provide more targeted support (Dargusch et al., 2026; Harris et al., 2026; Howard & Cogswell, 2018; O'Shea et al., 2024). Neuroscience suggests that grit and growth mindset are both "malleable and teachable" (Hwang & Nam, 2021, p. 77) and embedding these traits into students' approaches can strengthen self-efficacy, foster adaptive strategies, and enhance academic persistence (Lan & Moscardino, 2019; Whipple & Dimitrova-Grajzl, 2024). Together, cultivating grit and a growth mindset equips Enabling students to navigate challenges, build confidence, and achieve success in higher education.

The Role of Support Networks in Student Success

Students identified three key support networks that contributed to their academic success: university staff, student peers, family and friends. Supportive environments play a crucial role in student success, particularly for non-traditional students (Allen, 2025; Hattam et al., 2024). Educators who create inclusive learning spaces that foster interaction between students and staff help build strong support systems that promote successful academic outcomes

(Baker et al., 2020; Seary et al., 2023). Motta and Bennett (2018) describe this approach as a *pedagogy of care*, where educators adopt relational teaching methods that foster belonging and well-being. By understanding the external pressures Enabling students face, educators can better support their transition from Enabling education into HE (Li & Jackson, 2024). For these students, "a sense of belonging within this new educational space" (James et al., 2022, p. 17) is fundamental to feeling accepted and remaining engaged in their studies (Larsen & James, 2022, p. 5). O'Shea (2023) highlights that a strong sense of belonging is critical for equity students' well-being and academic retention. Motta and Bennett's (2018) *pedagogy of care* further emphasises that educators should adopt a "relational approach" to help students reframe negative self-perceptions and build confidence in their academic abilities (Seary et al., 2023, p. 10).

Student-to-student peer interactions also significantly impact academic success, manifesting through study groups, collaborative learning, and peer discussions (Ali & Mirza, 2020; Li & Jackson, 2024). Educators can play a key role in facilitating peer connections through structured activities and group work (Marangell et al., 2018; Seary & Willans, 2020), which is critical for Enabling students as they often enter university with limited personal networks for academic support (Dodd et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2018). Fortunately, these networks evolve within the educational setting, expanding students' social capital and subsequently positively influencing their achievements (Dost & Mazzoli-Smith, 2023; Pires & Chapin, 2022; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Strengthening peer connections is crucial to address systemic inequities and enhance equity student retention.

Developing Positive Mindsets for Academic Growth

Participants identified five mindsets that influenced their learning journey: determination, confidence, capability, positivity, and fulfilment. Many non-traditional students begin their studies with a deficit mindset, doubting their academic potential (Davis, 2023; James & Walters, 2020; Nieuwoudt, 2023). The challenge for educators is to shift these perceptions and empower students with mindsets and strategies for successful academic transitions (Seary et al., 2023). Research indicates that a determined mindset strongly influences academic achievement, acting as a key motivator for student engagement and performance (Lan & Moscardino, 2019; Rege et al., 2021). Educators can foster this by encouraging students to "push through failure," develop resilience, and reframe their perceptions of their academic abilities (Larsen & James, 2022, p. 3). Strengthening self-efficacy enables students to replace negative thought patterns with optimism, allowing them to view challenges as opportunities for growth (Dweck & Yeager, 2019; James & Walters, 2020).

Introducing the Grit-ability Toolkit

A "whole-of-student, whole-of-institution approach" that is integrated across the student lifecycle is crucial for improving retention and completion rates for diverse

student cohorts (Kift, 2023, p. 132). This study presents a framework that encapsulates the key characteristics that support equity students' success in Enabling education. Termed the Grit-ability Toolkit, this framework emphasises the need for educators to provide opportunities for students to actively cultivate personal agency, resilience, a positive mindset, and connections (see Figure 1).

The concept of grit-ability (Braund et al., 2020) suggests that developing these characteristics helps students navigate the complexities of HE and remain engaged in their studies.

By embedding these principles into Enabling programs, educators can enhance students' self-efficacy and develop foundational skills for achieving long-term academic success. The framework aligns with Bandura's (1977) four sources of efficacy, *mastery experiences*, *vicarious learning*, *psychological resilience*, and *peer support*, ensuring that students develop confidence, persistence, and adaptability in their academic journey.

Figure 1
Grit-ability Toolkit



Framework in Praxis

This toolkit forms a powerful framework for praxis in Enabling education, where many students enter university facing social, academic, and emotional barriers. Table 1 shows how each element might look in action:

Table 1
Framework in Praxis

Personal Agency in Practice	- Using mastery experiences, educators can design scaffolded learning tasks that allow students to experience early success, building confidence (Bandura, 1977). - Incorporating growth mindset theory, students are given choices in assessments or learning pathways, strengthening their intrinsic motivation (Dweck, 2006).
Resilience and Perseverance in Practice	- Reinforcing Grit theory, educators share stories of their own academic setbacks and challenges to normalise struggle as part of learning (Duckworth, 2007). - Educators initiate group activities and reflective journals to help students recognise their growth over time (Dweck, 2006).
Positive Mindset and Emotional Wellbeing in Practice	- Educators shape learning experiences to nurture a growth mindset and psychological safety by incorporating process-based feedback ("You worked hard to complete this") instead of fixed labels ("You're smart"), aligned with Dweck's (2006) Growth Mindset theory. - Wellbeing activities are integrated into Enabling practices underpinned by Growth Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006). Activities might include mindfulness sessions, access to counselors, gratitude exercises, and stress management techniques to support ongoing psychological wellbeing.
Connection through Support Systems in Practice	- Establish peer mentoring programs to allow students to learn through vicarious experiences, seeing others like themselves succeed. - Educators build a culture of connection and a sense of belonging through setting up group check-ins, study buddies, and creating Enabling education community spaces.

Implications for Practice

The findings highlight that educators play a critical role in creating the conditions through which Enabling students can develop their “grit-ability”. Rather than assuming that students either possess or lack resilience, educators should deliberately cultivate personal agency, resilience, positive mindsets, and connection through their pedagogical practices. This includes designing achievable early learning tasks that provide mastery experiences, giving strengths-based and timely feedback, explicitly teaching strategies for responding to setbacks, and helping students recognise their developing academic capability. Regular educator contact, structured peer interaction and relational pedagogies of care can further strengthen students’ sense of belonging and willingness to seek support. Importantly, grit should not be positioned as an expectation that students simply persevere despite inequitable conditions. Educators must remain attentive to the structural, financial and personal barriers affecting participation and respond with flexibility, inclusive curriculum design and proactive referrals to support services. The Grit-ability Toolkit therefore offers educators a practical framework for embedding academic, psychological and relational support throughout the student learning journey.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, several factors should be considered when interpreting the results. The findings are based on a secondary analysis of two existing datasets from a single Enabling program at a regional Australian university. Although the integration of these datasets enabled analysis across a large and diverse participant group, the original studies were not specifically designed to inform the development of the Grit-ability Toolkit. Further, the analysis was limited to students who successfully completed STEPS. While their perspectives offer valuable insights into the factors that supported persistence and success, they do not capture the experiences of students who withdrew or did not complete, whose challenges and support requirements may differ. The findings therefore are best understood as context-specific and transferrable to similar settings, rather than broadly generalisable. Further research is needed to evaluate and refine the Toolkit across diverse institutional contexts and including students with a wider range of educational outcomes.

Conclusion

This research draws upon Duckworth’s (2007) Grit theory to highlight the resilience and perseverance demonstrated by students in Enabling education, alongside Dweck’s (2006) Growth Mindset theory to explore the role of personal agency in shaping Enabling students’ academic journey. Students from equity backgrounds often encounter significant challenges that could derail their studies; however, their resilience and perseverance can strengthen their self-efficacy, reinforcing a determination to persist. A positive mindset, underpinned by psychological wellbeing

(Bandura, 1977; Dweck, 2006), plays a crucial role in helping Enabling students approach obstacles with optimism and adaptability. Additionally, connection and support systems, grounded in staff, student and peer support, serve as a vital pillar of success, offering encouragement, shared experiences, and collective resilience. This study revealed that Enabling students can exhibit remarkable grit-ability (Braund et al., 2020), demonstrating self-belief, resilience and determination to overcome adversity, and optimism to pursue long-term aspirations. Students who complete Enabling demonstrate a deep commitment to a better future, fuelled not only by personal drive but also by the strength of their support networks. Ultimately, their success is shaped by a powerful toolkit of grit, agency, resilience, mindset, and connection, which all play a role in transforming challenges into steps towards success.

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