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'Hardworking, determined and happy': First-year students' understanding and experience of success

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While all agree student success in higher education is important, there is less agreement on what it means to be a successful student. Student success is often measured by institutional reports of grades, student retention and qualification completion. More recently, broader definitions have emerged, however these do not incorporate student perceptions of success. The current study addresses this gap by exploring how first-year students talk about their success. Drawing from weekly interviews of students at an Australian regional university, the data are analysed through the lens of a conceptual framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). The findings demonstrate that success is inextricably linked with student engagement as well as other dimensions of the student experience. As expected, students assess their success extrinsically with institutional measures such as grades and feedback. In addition, their behavioural engagement was seen as a more immediate measure of their success, while happiness and satisfaction were necessary for some students to feel successful. Perceptions of success have important consequences for students in terms of positive emotions, and increased self-efficacy and course belonging. Success for these students has multiple dimensions. These findings give rise to suggestions for a staged approach to supporting first-year student success. However, the student experience is complex and multifaceted and further research is needed with different student cohorts who may define and experience success in other ways.

Keywords: student success, student engagement, first-year experience

Introduction

The success of students in higher education is critical - to students, to the university and to society. Yet, conceptualisations of student success are complicated by the ambiguity of the term (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). What one person values as successful may not resonate with others. Understanding student success is an important piece of the engagement and retention puzzle (Tinto, 1993). The dominant view of student success focusses on measures of academic achievement, student retention and qualification completion (for a review, see York et al., 2015). This is a valid but limited way of defining success. First, framing success from an institutional perspective overlooks the value of other student behaviours and experiences (Kinzie, 2012). Second, it contributes to the deficit narrative of attrition; recent research argues that students who withdraw from their degrees early can still have successful employment outcomes (Schnepf, 2017). Finally, it assumes that all students experience success in the same way. What it means to be successful may be an evolving concept (Wood & Breyer, 2017), associated with ongoing transition phases experienced by students during their student journey (Gale & Parker, 2014). The current project extends our understanding of student success through the voices of first-year students at an Australian regional university.

Current perspectives on student success

Despite an abundance of literature on student success in higher education, the student voice is mostly absent, with only two recent studies found on first-year student perspectives of success. First, Naylor's (2017) Australian study asked first-year health students to rate the importance of qualities that contribute to student success. Based on Coates, Kelly and Naylor's (2016) framework identifying nine qualities of student success, the research found that students most highly value completion, achievement and belonging.

Second, a chapter in a recent book on success in higher education reported on a student-led study in which students talked about what success meant to them (Hannon, Smith, & Lã, 2017). As well as academic outcomes, these students' view of success included balancing family commitments and feeling happy. These two studies suggest that, for students, success is not exclusively measured by academic outcomes but also has emotional dimensions.

Other theorists have also suggested more nuanced views of student success. Coates et al. (2016) and Wood and Breyer (2017) argue that incorporating student perspectives as stakeholders is critical to developing a view of success beyond completion, to see student behaviours and experiences as immediate aspects of success. This more immediate view is also evident in Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek's (2006) definition:

...academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance. (p. 7)

This definition, from an extensive literature review, views behavioural engagement and positive emotions as entwined with academic outcomes as dimensions of success. Tinto (2012) also sees in-class involvement as critical to the experience of success. However, York et al. (2015) disagree. Following their more recent literature review, they concluded that while Kuh et al.'s (2006) definition was predominantly robust, there was one caveat: engaging in educationally purposeful activities is not a defining characteristic of success, it is a mediating variable – a factor that leads to success. This unresolved question lacks the student voice – do students feel their engagement is a dimension of success or do they see it solely as a means of achieving success?

Schreiner's (2010) work on thriving also widens the definition of success to include positive everyday experiences. Her conceptual frame of thriving comprises five key constructs

- engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship and social connectedness. While the theoretical link between thriving and success is not articulated, the two are used almost interchangeably. In her study with American college students Schreiner (2010) concluded ‘thriving college students are not only academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college’ (p. 4). This more comprehensive definition of a successful student incorporates the elements identified above: academic outcomes, belonging (Naylor, 2017), engagement in learning behaviours (Kuh et al., 2006), and finally emotional wellbeing (Hannon et al., 2017). Success then is what happens every day at university.

Using data from a longitudinal study of first-year students we add the student voice to this debate over the meaning of success. Our work is informed by Kahu’s (2013) conceptual framework of student engagement depicting the complexity of the student experience. This framework was subsequently modified to include the educational interface as shown in Figure 1 (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Occurring within this dynamic educational interface, the student experience, including engagement, results from the interaction of a complex array of student and institutional influences. The dimensions of success reviewed above are all evident in the framework: institutional measures of academic achievement and retention as outcomes; behavioural engagement, belonging, and wellbeing as elements of experience within the educational interface. The psychosocial factors of belonging, emotions, wellbeing and self-efficacy increase engagement which leads to positive academic and social outcomes. The bi-directional arrows highlight this is a cyclical process. The research question underpinning the current study is: **what kind of** experiences do students feel are

measures of their success? While York et al. (2015) suggest success is an outcome, to what extent do other more immediate dimensions influence students' measurement of success?

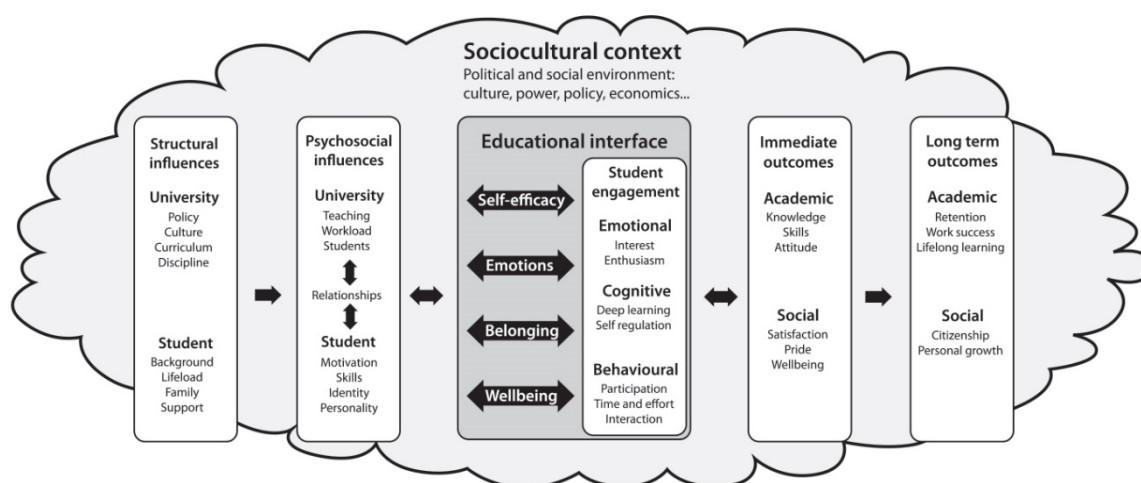


Figure 1. Refined conceptual framework of student engagement incorporating the educational interface (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, p. 7)

Critically, the framework highlights that individual student experiences differ depending on various institutional and student factors as well as the broader socio-cultural context. This raises the possibility that students may also have different understandings and experiences of success. Wood and Breyer (2017) suggest success may vary throughout the phases of higher education as students transition to university, then to higher level thinking, and finally to life after higher education (Gale & Parker, 2014). The experiences of first-year students have been of significant interest in recent years with Kift (2015) arguing that, for these students, success can be experienced as adjusting, thriving and surviving. Nelson, Duncan and Clark (2009) agree, suggesting that addressing social dimensions of first-year students' experiences as well as academic dimensions is important to student success. This would suggest that belonging as a possible dimension of success may be of particular importance for first-year students.

However, despite the large body of literature on the first-year student experience we were unable to find research that explicitly asked first-year students what they thought constituted success at university. Therefore, our investigation explored what success looks like for first-year students and how they measure that success. In particular, we were interested to see if behavioural engagement, social integration or well-being feature strongly in students' accounts. The present study therefore contributes to the debate around the conceptualisation of student success by foregrounding the students' voices.

Method

This paper is part of a larger qualitative study empirically investigating student engagement and the experiences of 19 students (11 female, 8 male) during their first year at an Australian regional university. All were 17 years old at the start, full-time, campus-based and enrolled in a range of disciplines including health, business, psychology, journalism, creative arts, computing and law. Eleven participants were the first in their family to attend university.

All students who accepted an early offer of enrolment were invited to take part, enabling the researchers to conduct one-hour pre-semester interviews about expectations and perceptions of university. Following this, 18 participants committed to weekly 15-minute interviews during their first two semesters (on average each student had 20 interviews). These interviews were semi-structured to enable students to talk about experiences that were relevant and important to them personally. There was no conflict of interest as the researchers had no other direct contact or roles associated with the participants. All the interviews were conducted by the first author.

The experiences of the students were explored thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A three-phase qualitative data analysis approach (Maxwell, 2013) ensured integrity of thematic

development through exploring meaning within the data in regards to the phenomena of student success (Boyatzis, 1998). An initial ‘organisational’ phase coded the wider dataset deductively using the framework of student engagement, while remaining open to other themes and ideas in the data. Success was identified as a theoretically interesting theme at this stage. At times we had explicitly asked questions about success and at other times participants talked about feeling successful. This data subset, a relatively small proportion of the wider dataset, then underwent a ‘substantive’ analysis phase of coding and inductive theme development. Relevant raw data was identified by the researchers, coded and thematically refined through on-going discussions. We were aware that our initial coding was determined by our pre-existing views on the meaning of success, so during this second phase, as new inductive themes arose, we returned to the wider dataset to ensure we had not missed relevant data. A final ‘theoretical’ phase of analysis framed themes and findings within other theory.

Findings

The key findings are presented here with illustrative quotes from participants. While institutional measures in the form of grades were a key indicator for students to measure success, they are not the only measures. Time management was a critical early measure of success while later in the semester, students describe success in relation to behavioural engagement and academic outcomes. Finally, psychosocial experiences such as happiness, self-efficacy and belonging were also linked with success for some students. The findings highlight that measures of success are individual.

Early perceptions of success

An earlier analysis of the first set of interviews found that the students view of themselves as successful was based on established learning behaviours and past grades (Kahu, Nelson, & Picton, 2016). However, they saw university as a new learning environment with different expectations and were unsure if their past behaviours would still be successful. Early in the semester new students have no external measure of their ability to meet university expectations, making it an uncertain time. Heidi explains:

I've handed in three assignments, but I haven't got them back yet. I guess when I get them back, that would give me a rough estimate of how well I've gone. It's either hit and miss kind of thing, you don't really know. Because I'm sure what I've done for school would've been great, but it's uni, so it's a different level. So I don't know what it's going to be.

Without external measures, the students looked to their learning behaviours, particularly their ability to meet deadlines, as a more immediate measure and experience of success. For example, when asked 'Are you successful at uni?' Mia responded:

Yes. I haven't got too many results back but I seem to be, I feel like I'm relatively on top of everything.

That she is not yet certain of her success is evident in her hesitant language: 'I seem to be' and 'I feel like'. Most of the students focussed on managing workload as their early self-measure of success with only the occasional mention of the quality of their work. Heidi was one exception who, as well as emphasising time management, hesitantly describes her work as of a sufficient standard: 'I'm surprised that I've managed not to fall major behind in heaps of my subjects, and getting assignments done and in on time, I guess, to a kind of quality.' In the early weeks the students were waiting for grades to confirm that early self-assessment as

Alex explains: ‘I’ve gotten all my assignments in on time and, although I haven’t got the results back for them yet ...once I get them back I’ll probably be able to tell.’

For a few students, an early institutional measure of success was staff feedback on their work prior to submission. Alison describes the experience:

So first uni assessment done. I met with the course coordinator yesterday, and he went over it and he said that my academic style is good, and I only had a few small changes, so I’ve done all that and I’m ready to hand it in. I’m excited because it’s my first one done and he says it’s good, like considering I wrote it so fast. I was pretty happy with myself, like I can do this – a bit of reassurance, like I can actually be a uni student successfully, I’m not just pretending.

The positive effects of that early external measure of success are evident – she is excited, happy and reassured. As discussed later, those positive emotions are an important dimension of success for the students. Early feedback is critical for students to evaluate their learning behaviours, build their self-efficacy and start to develop their identity as a successful university student.

Academic outcomes

Grades were seen by students as a clear and reliable measure of their performance at university and for some students, this institutional measurement was the most important indicator of their success:

John: Probably for success, probably just go off the grades really.

There are levels of success as measured by grades however and so what one student considers a successful grade may not be the same as another. For Peter the highest grade was the epitome of success: ‘Two high distinctions. If that’s not success then I don’t know what is.’

In addition, for some students, a successful grade was defined in comparison to other

students. For Matthew, passing was successful, but being above average was more successful and therefore more satisfying:

Getting above the average mark. You can be successful if you pass it which I would have been okay with, but the fact that I got above the average made me feel good about myself, it made me feel successful...now that I got a mark back I think I'm a bit more successful than I thought I was.

Matthew's comment also illustrates that students have perceptions of their success prior to getting work marked; the grade validated his perception and confirmed a higher level of success. Grades for students then are both a standalone measure of success and a tool to confirm their behavioural engagement as sufficient in this new learning environment: 'I've been getting good grades, so obviously I am doing something right' (Isaac). Heidi explains this process and the relief students experience on receiving that early confirmation:

Finishing assessments, getting them done and getting the marks back. It's always good, like that was a relief to get them back my last two just to know where you're sitting and if what you've done is right and required for the uni standards.

Not all the students felt successful as measured by their grades. For Zara, success was relative to her own past performance. She managed her lack of success by downplaying the importance of grades:

I am just used to doing better. I just like, I don't care, it's not that important. It's only a number. So, what you gonna do?

In terms of outcomes, the students rarely mentioned the acquisition of knowledge or skills as a measure of success. In the following extract Mia starts to argue that the goal for some students might be learning, but she then concludes that grades are a measure of learning and so failing grades indicate being unsuccessful:

Unenthusiastic, just not willing to try. If they fail their subjects, that's not usually what they came to Uni for, but if what they came to Uni is just to learn, then I suppose that's good, but if you fail then you probably haven't learned much. So yeah, failing would be unsuccessful.

Matthew was studying journalism and when asked what success meant, he first identified grades, but then added that developing skills was part of his success:

It's also understanding it and getting along with people, like with the course I'm in, you can't be good at it if you don't talk to people and don't get along with people. So having a lot of confidence in speaking to random people, it's pretty big.

In the early weeks of the second semester, students were asked to reflect upon what their first semester grades meant to them. When Elisabeth was asked what her grades meant to her, she responded:

I think it means I did well in that semester but that's not really going to dictate too much how I do well in this semester unless I put the same effort in as I did last semester. So I'm sort of just trying to be very - not downplay it but not make myself too overly confident that I won't work as hard this semester.

While she sees her grades as successful, she clearly links her success to the effort that she has put into her study and recognises the need to sustain that effort if she wants to sustain those grades.

For most students, grades were a critical measure of success, engendering a sense of pride, satisfaction and self-efficacy as discussed later. Importantly, grades also confirmed they were doing the 'right' things at university so it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the students extended their definition of success to incorporate measures of behavioural engagement.

Behavioural engagement

As discussed above, early measures of successful behavioural engagement centred narrowly on getting the work done on time. As the semester progressed, the students learned more about university and a wider range of behaviours were included in their understanding of a successful student. For example:

Elisabeth: I think the most successful student is someone who puts a lot of time and effort into their studies.

Taking an active role in one's learning was important to how students experienced and measured success. Preparation, participation, time management and effort were all discussed as successful behaviours. Alison describes a stepped process – preparation, participation then revisiting the material after class. She describes these as generic behaviours that she has been told are the right ones, but adds that you also need to understand what works for you:

Shows up on time and is prepared for class, so they have got writing materials... I think sitting in the middle where you can see the board properly and knowing your learning capabilities. I think it's very much to do with the things people tell you, like come prepared and stuff. Someone who listens and takes a lot away from the class and reads over their notes again. I think it's just making sure you do the step by step stuff.

Having effective time management, in particular starting assessment tasks early, was seen as characteristic of a successful student. This was important because it indicated effort – and working hard to do one's best was a measure of success. However, while the students could and did describe successful behavioural engagement, they did not always feel they were meeting that standard of success as in Heidi's case:

You're being diligent with it and using your time effectively with it. So, you know, you're

starting it early so that you can put drafts in and you can edit it over and over again to

produce the best possible work you can - not like me, who might do one edit, if I'm lucky, before I hand it in.

Standards of success for behavioural engagement, as with academic grades, were dependent on the goals and motivations of the individual student. Rose describes herself as successful because she is attending class and putting in some effort:

Yeah overall I think I'm successful and I'm going here and I'm going to my lectures and my tutorials, so I do think I am being successful and I could be a lot worse off. But I am putting some sort of effort in so I do feel successful. Maybe not as much as I want to be, but I am. I've just got to remind myself that I am.

For Melanie, grades are not enough and she explains the most important measure of success for her is knowing she has tried her best:

Achieving good marks and - not even actually - not always achieving good marks. Just knowing that I've put in 100%. That satisfaction. Because if I know I haven't tried hard, then I'm not going to be happy. Then I would be like well, that was pointless.

Felix also makes the point that success is personal and for him passing grades are central:

For me personally I'd have to pass the classes to view that as a success. But I know some people just find it really hard to come to the classes and so yeah just attending is a success for them, but personally no, not for me.

The behavioural characteristics of a successful student gave the participants a means to judge their success more immediately and independently of grades. However, successful behavioural engagement is both prescribed, as in the students are told and understand the processes that are required of them, but also individual, as in it depends on their own personal standards of success.

Success in the educational interface

While the students talked mostly about grades as an outcome measure of success and behavioural engagement including time management as a more immediate measure of success, they also linked success to other aspects of their experience including positive emotions, self-efficacy and course belonging. For some students, feeling positive and happy was necessary for success. Matthew for example includes ‘not being miserable’ as part of success: ‘I mean not sitting around and moping around class and being miserable the entire time, it’s not going to get you anywhere.’ For Isaac too, success combined behavioural engagement with happiness, describing the characteristics of a successful student as: ‘hard-working, determined, happy’.

Sienna also saw happiness essential to success, but she did not enjoy study. Her social life promoted happiness and so success for Sienna meant balancing the two, illustrating again that perceptions of success are individual:

I can't study all the time. It's boring. It's draining. I have to go out and socialise. That's who I am. If you can balance those two then you're successful because you're happy. Happiness is also success.

Positive emotions were also discussed as an outcome of academic success – good grades promoted satisfaction and happiness. Peter for example talks about how grades made him happy and rewarded his hard work: ‘My two High Distinctions and Distinction are great. Absolutely loving it knowing that I am succeeding for the work that I am putting in’. Alison puts the pieces of the puzzle together and describes three dimensions of success: behavioural self-assessment, institutional results and happiness:

I think if you can honestly say like I’ve done a really good job and I tried my hardest, and maybe I could improve here but I’ve done really well and you’re happy with your result, then that’s successful.

Another part of the process of success is the resultant self-efficacy. Success promotes positive emotions of satisfaction and pride, and increases the students' belief in themselves as capable of university study. This self-efficacy is critical for future performance as Felix explains:

At the moment, just getting assignments in, finishing readings and knowing that I've still got that positive outlook of, 'Hey, I can keep doing this', not, 'I don't really know this is for me. I want to drop it'.

Felix's behavioural engagement is a measure of his success but part of that success is his emotional response – his positive outlook and his self-efficacy looking forward. Felix also links success and belonging: students feel they are in the right course when they are successful. For Peter, belonging and success are indivisible: self-efficacy from success contributes to his sense of belonging in the course, and equally if he didn't belong then he would not be as successful:

Knowing I'm succeeding is my belonging. In fact, if I didn't belong in it, it wouldn't obviously I wouldn't be succeeding as well as I am. That's my way of seeing it anyway.

Alex also talked about how her success in the course made her feel: 'I feel like I belong in the course. I find it very easy to understand and interesting. So, yeah, I feel like I am in the right course'.

Most of the participants in this research felt that they were successful, but some felt that, as measured by grades and behavioural engagement, they were not as successful as they either wanted to be or felt they could be. For example, when asked if she had been successful at university, Claire responded: 'I just haven't been motivated. I don't know. I just don't really care...I just keep thinking about other things I could do'. Zara also struggled to feel

successful. She defined success broadly and her own struggles meant she could not see how students could be successful:

I don't know if there really is such thing...I think a successful student is the one who is financially stable and someone who can manage their time between work, home and school or uni and all round have their life together and I haven't met that person yet so don't believe it exists.

Together, these findings highlight that for these first-year students, success is complex and multifaceted; it is more than passing a course or getting a good grade. Being successful is not just good grades, it is also behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement, as well as building relationships with staff. Sienna illustrates that complexity:

Success is – oh my God, that's a hard question, isn't it? Success is staying motivated. Success is handing in assignments on time and working on them throughout the time given. Just little bits. I think that's actually success because you're not waiting for the last minute. Success is also engaging in the lectures and the tutorials and wanting to go to them and being excited to go to them. I think that is success. Success physically is getting good marks. Success is also having the ability to actually trust your tutor or your lecturer, and talk to them, and make sure that you do understand what's going on in the course, and not being afraid to ask questions.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore student views of success in their first year of university study. The findings illustrate that while institutional measures such as feedback and grades are critical measures of success, students also experience success in more nuanced and immediate ways. This supports Kuh et al.'s (2006) multifaceted definition of success incorporating academic achievement, behavioural engagement and satisfaction. Our findings add to the literature by illustrating how those different facets can build on each other to create success cycles.

At the start of the semester the students were unsure if they were successful. As Gale and Parker (2014) point out, the first phase of the university experience is learning to become an effective student. In those early weeks staying on top of workload was often the only measure available to students to indicate whether they were effective. Some students received early formative feedback on their work; an invaluable extrinsic measure of success that validated the quality of their work. This is the beginning of the students' development as self-regulated learners: 'metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process' (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 329). Effective formative feedback is critical to this process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and the findings here highlight the need for staff to intentionally plan to review students' early work. New students developing an early sense of themselves as successful and thus experiencing positive emotions about their capabilities is critical to Schreiner's (2010) idea of thriving for success.

Beyond those early weeks of uncertainty, three measures of success were used by the students: grades, behavioural engagement and positive emotions. These experiences and measures were inextricably linked, influencing each other in cycles of engagement and success. Grades were the most important part of those cycles, seen as a critical institutional measures of success for the students, an unsurprising finding that parallels dominant views of success (Kuh et al., 2006; Naylor, 2017; York et al., 2015). The findings highlight that perceptions of successful grades depend on individual factors such as motivations, goals and learner identity; the minimum for success might be a passing grade for one student but a high distinction for another. Similarly, for some students success was relative and they felt more successful when they knew they had performed better than other students. These individual variations support Kahu and Nelson's (2017) concept of an educational interface where all

aspects of the student experience, including perceptions of success, are a dynamic interaction between institution and student.

The second part of the cycle was behavioural engagement. As the semester progressed the students were able to measure and experience success in more immediate terms. Grades allowed them to reflect upon their study techniques and to improve their learning behaviours as they continue to develop as self-regulated learners (Zimmerman, 1989). York et al. (2015) argue that behavioural engagement is not a dimension of success but rather a mediating factor that influences success, but for these students it was both: they saw how actions influenced grades, but they also felt that if they were preparing for, attending, and participating in class, and working hard on assignment tasks in a timely manner then they were a successful student. This supports the inclusion of engagement in educationally purposeful activities as a dimension of success (Kuh et al., 2006; Schreiner, 2010). The successful behaviours the students identified align with what is seen as effective behavioural engagement - involvement, attendance and effort (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). However, as when success was measured by grades, there were individual variations in what was considered an acceptable level of behaviour to be termed successful, with some students only feeling successful if they knew they had done the best that they could.

The third part of the success cycle is the positive psychosocial consequences of that success in terms of satisfaction, self-efficacy and belonging. Outcome emotions such as pride and satisfaction lead to increases in self-efficacy which then leads to greater engagement on the next task (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015). This positive spiral is illustrated by the bi-directional arrows the centre of the framework of student engagement shown in Figure 1 (Kahu & Nelson, 2017).

The findings in this study on belonging and success suggest the need to more carefully distinguish between different types of belonging. In contrast to Naylor's (2017) research where belonging was rated as important to success, the students in this study did not discuss friendships or social aspects of their experience in relation to success. Instead, success was interpreted almost exclusively as academic success. Where students did talk about belonging as a dimension of their success, they defined belonging as being in the right course rather than their relationships with staff or students. This type of belonging is important and warrants further exploration, with the findings in the present study suggesting a bi-directional link with success – a student who feels they are in the right course is likely to engage more fully in their classes and therefore gain good grades. Equally, experiencing good grades may reassure students that they have chosen the right course and thus instil a sense of belonging.

The success process or cycle is, of course, not always positive. Some students in this research, while able to define success and explain what success looks like, were not experiencing success for themselves. While more research is needed to specifically explore perceptions of success with students who are struggling or who withdraw, the findings here suggest students can feel unsuccessful in terms of grades and/or behavioural engagement. For instance, a student may feel unsuccessful because their grades do not meet their expectations or because they know they are not putting in time and effort. Lifeload, defined as relationships, work and leisure activities, can also be an important influence on student engagement (Kahu, 2013). In the current study, at least one student felt unsuccessful because of difficulties balancing their wider lifeload. One dimension of lifeload that is particularly important is paid work; 20% of students in Australian universities combining up to 20 hours per week of paid work with full time study (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). Feeling

unsuccessful means the student doesn't experience the positive effects of success – pride and satisfaction, increased self-efficacy, and a feeling of belonging to their course. Not self-identifying as a successful university student has the potential to lead to withdrawal.

However, it is also worth noting that retention and success were not synonymous in this study. There were students in this research who, despite being successful by both behavioural and grade measures, chose to withdraw or to not return in their second year. As well, Schnepf (2017) reminds us that a lack of success at university does not equate to a lack of success in life, calling for a broader view on how success at university is conceptualised.

Overall the student perceptions of success identified in this study closely align to understandings such as Kuh et al. (2006) and Schriener (2010) who see student success as more than just grades. For these first-year students, combining institutional and self-measures of success provided a dynamic mechanism to experience success in their everyday experiences. Behavioural and psychosocial self-measures gave them immediate experiences of success, while institutional measures of grades and feedback confirmed that self-assessment and activated feelings of pride and satisfaction leading to increased self-efficacy and belonging. In the best cases, this cycle continues with those positive outcomes triggering deeper engagement and leading to further success.

Implications and Conclusion

Facilitating the cycle of success illustrated in the findings suggest the need for staged support beginning before enrolment when students are making their course choices. The study found that a feeling of belonging to their course triggered positive emotions for students, and acted as a pathway to engagement and academic success. Institutions can foster that belonging early by providing extensive course and career advice with opportunities for students to trial courses and aspects of future career pathways. Once enrolled, students found

early feedback a valuable measure of success. The intentional planning of early institutional feedback provides students with opportunities to reflect upon their capabilities and behaviours as part of their development towards self-regulation, and contributes to positive emotional experiences (Kinzie, 2012; Tinto, 2012). The study also found students use grades not just as a measure of success but as a means of calibrating their successful behavioural engagement. This process could be made more explicit with students to reflect on what aspects of their engagement facilitated or hindered their academic success. That success is not just a matter of grades for students also highlights that it is not just those who are ‘failing’ courses that could benefit from more targeted support. For instance, a mid-semester survey could identify those students who are not feeling successful or who do not feel they are in the right course.

These suggestions offer practical strategies for institutional support of success for first-year students. However, additional research is needed, particularly in exploring the perspectives of other groups of students. This study was limited to first-year students at a regional university, but success may be experienced quite differently by other cohorts or in other contexts. For example, students at metropolitan universities, those in vocational courses, those undertaking courses with varied teaching delivery such as laboratory classes, or those with particular equity group characteristics would be of interest. Comparative research would be of particular benefit to capture a broader student view of success.

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