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Why Does Student Retention and Success Matter?

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Introduction

When the terms 'success' and 'retention' are considered in relation to the higher education (HE) sector, numerical references are often the most common measurement used to indicate whether universities are meeting expected goals and objectives. However, for those who are embedded within the sector, whether as students, academics or support staff, there is an implicit understanding that student success and retention needs to be considered beyond just statistics (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Indeed, such numerical or statistical framings need to be disrupted to enable alternative but equally valid perspectives to be foregrounded in discourse and policy. This is particularly key in a HE environment that is committed to attracting a greater diversity of students from all walks of life, as

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M. Shah et al. (eds.), *Student Retention and Success in Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80045-1_2

many of these cohorts arrive with different expectations and goals related to their educational pursuits.

Globally, we are in an era of increased participation within the university sector. Almost a third of the school leaver age cohort worldwide now attend university and, more broadly, all high-income countries and most middle-income countries are approaching or exceeding 50% participation across the population as a whole (Marginson, 2016). While such high levels of access appear to reflect more equitable and universal educational outcomes, deeper analysis of how university participation is experienced across all student populations reveals that not all learners are treated equally within the system, an inequality that continues to be both deeply embedded and somewhat invisible (Reay, 2016; Southgate et al., 2018; Wainwright & Watts, 2019). Within an Australian context, this inequity is particularly pertinent with the imminent introduction of a sector-wide university funding regime linked to performance in four key areas. These foci of measurement are all underpinned by a need to retain students throughout the degree and include (1) graduate employment outcomes, (2) student success, (3) student experience, and (4) participation of Indigenous, low socio-economic status, and regional and remote students. Commencing in 2020, a total of $80 million will be tied to these measures and this will grow over the following years to a cap of 7.5% of the University Commonwealth Grant Scheme (Wellings et al., 2019).

Attaching student retention and success to monetary rewards can arguably result in detriment to both student and institution, both of whom may be under pressure to sustain retention at all costs. Equally any academic performance indicators that are only outcomes focused (graduation, employment, retention) should be contextualised according to student cohorts and also university locations. Such contextualisation is needed to account for discrepancies in material, personal and educational resources and so avoid inequity or disadvantage (Harvey, 2017). This type of funding arrangement also increases the need to deeply consider the nature of retention and success particularly the, often, implicit agendas driving such understanding.

In considering student retention and success, this chapter begins by providing a brief overview of access and participation within the HE

sector both internationally and within Australia specifically. Against this context, both terms are critically unpacked in relation to wider theoretical, political and social discourses. These perspectives are then contrasted with more embodied and individualised versions of retention and success, drawing on research that details the reflections and narratives of students themselves. Foregrounding alternative but equally valuable perspectives of pursuing university qualifications evidences the need to consider the needs and desires of our increasingly diverse student populations in different and, perhaps, more productive ways. The chapter ends by considering how these alternatives might be practically reconceptualised within HE discourse and practices.

Higher Education Access: The Widening Participation Paradigm

The boom in the numbers of students accessing HE is tied explicitly to political and economic objectives, with the drive to increase participation emerging as a key policy driver across universities in most developed countries (David, 2012; Harwood et al., 2017; OECD, 2018). The term 'widening participation' was introduced in the late nineties and was included as a central tenet within the UK's Further Education Funding Council report entitled *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, also known as the Kennedy Report (1997). This report described the need to 'widen participation' as being 'irresistible' calling for a 'dramatic shift in policy' in order 'to create a self-perpetuating learning society' (Kennedy, 1997, p. 15). Such early calls were not limited to the UK; equally across OECD members the need to increase access to HE and improve participation rates for under-represented student populations was also prioritised (OECD, 2001).

Historically, widening participation has largely been translated in terms of numerical targets; for example, in the UK an initial goal of 50% participation of all 18 to 30-year-olds in HE by 2010 was established. Australia introduced participation goals in 2009 and these remain current including a target of 40% of all 25 to 34-year-olds having a bachelor

level qualification or above by 2025 and increasing the numbers of students from low SES backgrounds attending university to 20% by 2020. Perhaps as a result of such objectives, references to the term 'widening participation' abound in both political and educational rhetoric; particularly as these relate to student retention and success. However, as our student populations have diversified, so too have arguments about whether this is a positive or negative development. Increased access has attracted mixed responses. For some, such mass growth signifies the demise of quality education, a possible 'dumbing down' of the curriculum (Shervington, 2017; University Business, 2019) resulting in underqualified professionals in the field (Foster, 2015). On the flip side of this, a more celebratory or positive perspective is touted**,** where attending university is associated with 'opportunity' and 'transformation' such as gaining a more stable job, having access to a higher income and in some cases breaking a cycle of intergenerational poverty (Cassells et al., 2012).

While inexorably tied up with political and human capital agendas and rhetoric, the concept of widening participation also perpetuates a certain view of educational retention and success. The next section considers how retention is considered and negotiated both broadly and also with specific reference to the Australian context.

Considering Student Retention Within a Widening Participation Discourse

Background

The term retention, whilst commonly used within the university setting, can be perplexing in terms of both definition and significance. At the most fundamental level, retention is considered in terms of the numbers of students who complete their studies but the complexities of this journey and its oft interrupted nature continue to defy exact quantification. Similarly, the reasons why some students continue to participate and others do not remains somewhat unfathomable and can include behaviours as diverse as students attending but not participating, those who

participate but do not attain the expected standards as well as 'ghost students' who enroll but never actually attend (Stephenson, 2019). There are many different models that seek to explore and 'name' the factors impacting on retention, persistence and success with conclusions invariably identifying a diversity of psychological, institutional and social considerations (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Yorke & Longden, 2004).

Historically, the study of student retention has been entrenched within 'a specific discourse and a specific theoretical framework, both of which are open to challenge' (Tresman, 2002, para 4). Theoretically, interactionalist thinking on student retention was fundamental to early understandings of this phenomenon, an approach that explored the ways in which student and institutional environment interact or the 'sociology of retention' (Bean & Bogdan-Eaton, 2001–2002, p. 74). Spady (1970) is recognised as being the first to conceptualise the university setting as a social system manifesting unique moral and social configurations. Put simply, Spady's (1970) theory referred to Durkheim's suicide theory (1897), arguing that certain forms of integration which help to reduce suicide, may be similarly applied to retention. This approach was longitudinal and identified particular variables that aid social integration and thus, increase the chances of persistence. However, simply achieving social integration within the university setting was later recognised as not sufficient to guarantee retention, with Tinto (1975) further developing this model to include reference to individual characteristics such as social status, educational background, motivational attributes and individual expectations. Tinto's model, known as the 'Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure', has been referred to as the 'lynchpin' of research about retention and student success (Bers & Nyden, 2000) and his model continues to be refined and built upon (see for example: Braxton et al., 2000; Kerby, 2015; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

Despite widespread application and further development by Tinto (1987, 1993), Tinto's model has also attracted critical attention, particularly as the university sector has grown in size and diversity (Manyanga et al., 2017). Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003) identify how factors external to the students are not adequately addressed in these early models, suggesting that while this interactionalist framing recognises that individual students may have histories that influence decisions to depart,

the model neglects the implicit role played by external factors in these actions. These factors not only include institutional policy and structure but also broader social and political issues related to material constraints and social stratification (Reay, 2016). The next section further explores the complexity of student retention and positions this, not as an individual act or decision, but rather as something impacted by a range of social and political influences.

The Complexities of Student Retention

The journey that each student takes through university differs fundamentally and for those who choose to leave, the reasoning behind this decision is as unique as the students themselves. For students from equity groups,[1] particularly those who are intersected by a diversity of equity categorisations, the range and type of issues impacting on university retention are manifold, including (but not limited to) financial or geographic considerations (Corbett, 2016; Gore et al., 2015); lower levels of academic preparedness (Affawi et al., 2019); caring responsibilities (O'Shea, 2014); and of course limited sense of belonging or entitlement (Bathmaker et al., 2013). Yet despite the importance of recognising the complex circumstances many of HE learners contend with, institutions largely continue to treat students in a decontextualised sense with limited regard for the specific obstacles or concerns that impact on their educational journeys (O'Shea, 2016a).

By individualising the act of attending university, this activity becomes a lonely undertaking that is dependent on the activities of the individual rather than a collective endeavour. Such individualisation has been regarded as an essentially masculinist discourse characterised by forward uninterrupted movement through the HE space, the ideal of the 'turbo student' (Von Prummer, 2000) that assumes a student career in terms of

[1] There are six identified equity groups in Australia which include students from low socioeconomic status (low SES); students with disability; students from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds; Women in Non-Traditional Areas (WINTA); regional and remote students and non-English speaking background (NESB) students, also referred to as 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse' (CALD) students.

an independent learner with few responsibilities and largely studying full-time. This is a mythic creation, the contemporary university student is a complex amalgamation of people at various stages of life, of multiple ages and of course varying degrees of responsibilities external to the campus environment. Yet politically loaded concepts such as social mobility and widening participation, whether intentionally or not, continue to position the student as being largely responsible for their own achievement and academic success. Whilst not wishing to undermine the construct of being an 'independent' and self-directed learner, it is important to recognise that those from more diverse backgrounds may not have acquired the necessary capitals that underpin success and achievement in this educational domain. This does not assume that such participants are in a position of lack, but rather than the capitals (cultural, symbolic or material) held may be in a different 'currency', not necessarily valued by HE institutions (Reay et al., 2001, p. 870). For those learners who arrive at university with alternative forms of cultural or knowledge capital, adapting to often invisible or taken for granted learning expectations can result in difficult and fragmented transitions into HE landscapes. Such fragmentation often translates into interrupted educational trajectories within the HE environment (O'Shea, 2016b). This individualised system of HE makes the translation of existing capitals into those expected and required within university a very fraught process; for many learners this translation may require shedding previous beliefs and identities, crossing into new spaces and places with little assistance or support (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

If retention rates continue to be perceived as performance indicators then the emphasis will remain on the retention of students until completion rather than recognising the complex and non-linear nature of this university career. As Tight (2019) succinctly explains:

> there is the, increasingly heard, neo-liberal critique that student retention has predominantly financial drivers. In other words, it is not so much about doing what is best for the student, but about ensuring that the institution receives the highest number and proportion of student fees possible. (p. 7)

For this reason, research needs to consider the unique nature of retention to better understand this behaviour at a unique lived level rather than explore this in terms of universality or across student populations. The next section will explore the notion of success and consider how this has been translated within discourses and the factors underpinning and informing such understandings.

Negotiating Success and Its Dominant Framings

Background

Academic success, like retention, is a complex term with definitions that vary according to educational environments and also, student populations. Sullivan (2008), for example, exhorts institutions to identify different definitions of what 'success' is rather than apply criteria that do not recognise the realities of all learners. Theoretically, there are a myriad of framings that have been applied to understandings of success, these include psychological theories such as behaviourism that regard being 'successful' as premised upon actions that engender positive outcomes, an increase in these actions then resulting in achieving additional success. Such sentiments underpin Glasser's choice theory (1996) which regards the pursuit of success as reliant on perceptions of how an experience will, in turn, lead to positive outcomes. Desired success factors, though, are often unusual or unique, for example Arnold (1995) in her longitudinal study of high school students reports that from this cohort, success was ultimately defined in terms of achieving a desired future self that is aligned with an individuals' expectations of this self.

Within the Australian HE sector, official reports of academic success are based upon the relative acquisition of 'volume of knowledge', in this case the completion of subjects (units of study) by students (HESP, 2017). Using this measure, it is clear that national success rates have declined since 2004, from a peak of 86.85% in 2004 to 83.72% in 2015 (HESP, 2017). These success measures are further differentiated by the

background and contexts of students, with those attending part-time, those who are older or having lower levels of academic preparation reported as being less likely to attain institutional measures of success and also, more likely to depart university prior to degree completion (HESP, 2017, p. 6).

Yet such measurements do not provide adequate insights into how it is that students themselves perceive their levels of success. In fact, there is a dearth of research that focuses on the qualitative understandings of success as defined by individual learners. Yazedjian et al. (2008) have conducted one of the few studies that has approached learners to qualitatively reflect upon their understandings and reflections on academic success. While this study focused on 'high achieving' students, understandings of 'success' for this cohort often disrupted the assumption that success was simply equated to high marks or graduation. Overall, perceptions of academic success were 'multifaceted', with some participants defining grades as simply something to get through in order to pass a subject whilst others measuring their personal 'self-worth' through grade acquisition (Yazedjian et al., 2008, p.145). These authors also identify differentials in what constituted a 'good' grade with great variance even across a relatively stable sample of students. In most cases, being successful was a highly personal endeavor involving measures of social integration, independence and also control over the educational environment.

When considering conceptions of success, it is equally important to explore how students perceive or react to the concept of failure. One recent Australian study (Affawi et al., 2019) recruited 186 undergraduates who had failed at least one subject in their degree to investigate not only the issues that had led to this result but importantly, how the students themselves reflected upon this 'failure' and the ways in which this outcome contributed to their decisions to depart or persist. The study found that failure was often multifaceted and resulting from a plethora of factors that reflected 'dispositional, situational and institutional' circumstances (p. 6). Importantly, the act of failing also had a 'compounding' effect on existing obstacles and 'stressors' that these learners were already encountering during their university journey (p. 8), exacerbating already difficult and complex situations. Often this experience of failure was internalised by the students prompting a cycle of self-blame and, in some

cases, leading to thoughts of departure (Affawi et al., 2019). In this way, the act of failing was individualised with students either being 'blamed' or engaging in 'self-blame' for not having the necessary academic skills to achieve expectations. Such an implicit deficit discourse undoubtedly further isolating or stigmatising learners who may already have a limited sense of belonging within the institution; as Affawi et al. (2019) explain:

> Such negative individualistic rhetoric serves to further marginalise students who may be struggling and may have a negative influence on their motivation and self-efficacy, and therefore on their persisting. (Affawi et al., 2019, p. 3)

As the previous sections have indicated, the terms 'retention' and 'success' are both complex and loaded; definitions and implicit assumptions around these terms abound, with these also impacting on how students perceive themselves as well as their positionality within the institution. Both concepts are also negotiated in terms of individualisation where students are held solely responsible for their success and retention within the HE system. Equally, such individualisation also serves to decontextualise the learner with little recognition of the personal desires or subjectivities of individuals. In order to contribute to understandings of the nuances of this situation, the next section details a recent research project that explored how final year students reflected upon success and the act of persistence. This will be followed by discussions and conclusions drawn from both the data and relevant literature in the field.

Success and Retention: What Do the Students Say?

Background

The next section details the summary findings from a three-year ARC project entitled: *Higher education participation and success: Investigating the persistence strategies of students who are the first in their family to attend university* (DP170100705). The project examined how students

themselves reflected upon persistence at university and their understanding of 'success' including how the enactment of success impacted on the self and those around them.

Research Context and Design

In 2017–2018, a total of 331 students across nine universities, located in both urban and regional settings, agreed to participate in either an interview or survey. All participants identified as being first in their families to attend university and were also in the latter stages of their undergraduate degree. Each was also invited to nominate additional biographical and demographic details that applied to them, revealing the intersectionality of this particular cohort (Detailed in Table 2.1). The study is, however, gender biased with only 18% of the total participants identifying as male and so responses and findings are not necessarily representative of both genders.

Both the interview and survey guiding questions were the same, although the semi-structured interview format enabled some aspects of the experience to be explored in more depth. Even so, the qualitative data in the survey responses was rich, even if not of similar depth. Both interviews and surveys began with eliciting demographic information, followed by questions around three broad areas: self-reflections as a student; reflections on higher education; higher education participation and support from family/community, the institution and others. All the data was imported into NVivo12 and initially line-by-line coding was conducted on each of the interviews and the survey responses. Line-by-line coding was deliberately chosen to ensure that any themes emerged inductively from the data.

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was adopted in order to focus on the 'phenomena' being studied; this perspective emphasises the interpretative nature of theory generation emphasising researcher engagement with the data as well as the ways in which this is being contextually bounded by temporal, geographical, cultural and situational contexts (Addison, 1999; Charmaz, 2006). Moving between the themes that emerged from the data and also the literature in the field, combined

Table 2.1 Identifiers nominated by students in the Australian study (students could identify more than one category)

Demographic information	Surveys	Interviews^*
Female	239	52
Male	50	18
Other or skipped	17	0
Note: More than one of the categories below could be selected	13	1
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander		
Disability	15	14
LSES	83	28
Rural/isolated	93	22
NESB	20	6
Refugee	4	1
Other (see further details below)[a]	125	29
Participants with children	69	32
Partnered	143	36
Single	146	19

[a]Comments in 'other' often included more information about the category/ies selected or indicated uncertainty about a category, such as being from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds but not identifying as such. Categorising one's situation as LSES was sometimes difficult such as 'I wouldn't say low-socioeconomic background but we definitely by no means rich' (Survey), or 'My parents were [LSES] but I'm not now' (interview). Often 'other' was used to describe situations in more detail such as being or coming from a single-parent family, divorced family or dysfunctional family, having to leave home to study, leaving home at an early age, being mature aged, being homeschooled, having mental health issues; returning to study after having a child, leaving prison; born or parents born elsewhere. Participants who identified as homosexual or LBGQTI indicated this, as did others their religion, such as Muslim

with reflective memoing, avoided imposing preconceived 'analytic frames' to analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 62).

The following section focuses on the overarching themes that emerged in relation to two related questions, namely:

- What is your definition of success?
- How would you define a 'successful' student?

These are summary findings only with more in-depth exploration featured in recent publications (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019, 2021; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018).

Overarching Themes and Findings

In responding to the questions asked about success and reflections on how a 'successful' student could be defined, a myriad of themes and insights emerged in both the interviews and surveys. These have been collapsed into two key foci for the purposes of this chapter namely (1) success as a shifting discourse and (2) success and persistence behaviours.

Success as a Shifting Discourse

Participants in this study both recognised and rejected dominant discourses related to how success was defined and conceptualised. One example is Bradley (20 yrs, Year 3) who differentiated between a *'clinical way to understand a successful student',* which necessitated tangible evidence such as academic transcripts, and other more embodied or personal ways, which he characterised as *'immersing oneself in a series of academic debates and discourses, soaking up the literature of a topic or a field, engaging with the peers who are going to be working in that field with you.'* Similarly, Brett (33 yrs, Final Year) recognised that while working in the 'field' was an obvious objective for success post-graduation, he equally regarded success in a more holistic sense, defined as '*the personal growth that I've experienced through the application of what it is that you're learning.*' Donna (39 yrs, Final Year) also highlighted a delineation between professional and personal success factors when asked to define success:

> Oh look, bottom line, it's grades isn't it? That's all that matters to anyone else at the end of the day. It's what's written on that bit of paper… [but] I've had to kind of reset and look at what "success" is. For me, it would be counter-productive for me to start thinking in that way again about, you know, expectations of me…I perceive that I'm bringing value that's "success". If I'm connecting with people and I'm feeling that sort of click and there's that sense of equilibrium inside me that's "success". I can't look at it any other way now. (Donna)

Donna neatly summarises public definition of success as 'grades' but sitting alongside that and sometimes jostling uncomfortably is a more personal definition related to a sense of 'connection' and 'value'. This and other quotes indicates that amongst this cohort there was both a public or accepted definition of success as well as an alternative more embodied understanding that relied more on personal desires and perceptions.

A number of participants, like Donna, also indicated how their perceptions of success had changed and evolved over time; this shift was sometimes as a result of reassessing their ambitions and also recognising the many competing demands on time and responsibility. Erin described how her personal definition of success was largely based upon the *'amount of time that I actually have for my son'*. So while grades were important it was also the ability to manage all aspects of her life in a balanced way that determined success, which Erin described as being able to '*go for bike rides or go for walks and I can still manage everything else and get good grades – that is really a good way of measuring it* [success]' (Erin, 32 yrs, Final Year).

Success was somewhat a fluid concept, articulated at a deeply personal level, and sometimes in ways that contradicted more popular or politicised discourses and expectations, both during their studies and post-graduation. Evelyn had returned to university in her thirties and now at 38 was in the final year of her Commerce degree, managing her studies along with a disability. Evelyn explained how her definition of success was characterised by the specificities of her own unique situation:

> Success for me was getting up in the morning, going to campus and … it was getting my assignments in on time, making sure that I had everything submitted properly that I was getting my good grades. In spite of the fact that I was having my surgery…you know, in spite of everything.

She continued by explaining that as an older student with caring responsibilities and financial constraints, it was necessary to *'give yourself a break'* and negotiate success according to the material constraints of one's situation:

> You can't set unrealistic expectations. You can't say, "My measure for success is the same as the young person who lives at home with her mother and father and doesn't have to work because they're posh lawyers".

Given the individual and somewhat fluid nature of the concept of success the next section explores how understandings of success informed and related to the act of persistence at university.

Success and Persistence Behaviours

Not surprisingly, understandings of success were closely tied to the act of persisting and ultimately being retained by the institution, summed up by Kimberley (30 yrs, Year 3):

Interviewer: How do you characterise your success? What does it mean to you?
Kimberley: Not giving up. Not giving up.

A number of participants equated being successful as persisting in their degree – given their circumstances and personal contexts, simply getting to the end of their studies was deemed to be a success factor. Merelyn (39 yrs, Final Year)) explained how measures of success related to the fact that *'I've continued and I haven't given up where I wanted to'*. This success was further qualified by the impact her persistence has had on those around her, particularly her children who were witnessing her academic endeavours on the sidelines:

> for me success … will be having that piece of paper, being able to tell the kids, "Yeah, it might have taken me 12 years but I got it so therefore you guys can get it and go to uni and do what you want to do…So I think that'd be my success, showing them that it is possible no matter what you do or how long it takes".

The interrelationship of being successful and managing to stay at university were similarly reflected upon in the survey responses, often expressed in concise or straightforward ways but with equal impact:

> Success in uni is the ability to keep going despite any challenges, getting a minimum of passes to lead to graduation… to keep chasing your dreams no matter where they lead you. (A23, Female Survey respondent, 18–20 yrs, Final year)

> I think being able to persevere despite wanting to quit many times and getting to the end knowing what you can endure is an amazing accomplishment, because it certainly isn't easy with some of the stress that you go through. (A33, Female Survey respondent, 26–30, Part-time, Year Five)

> I finished my degree, that is my measure of success, I made it through many obstacles including physical/mental/financial health challenges to get to it. Success is completion, success is perseverance and success is now being able to wear the cap when I Skype with my nieces/nephews and seeing their faces and answering their questions and inspiring their journeys. (E42, Female Survey respondents, 31–40, Fourth Year)

In interviews, this connection between success and persistence was further qualified through probing questions, with some participants regarding all forms of persistence at university as underpinning 'success' regardless of the length or nature of this academic trajectory. Others, however, qualified the nature of this persistence, identifying certain forms of this behaviour as being more valued than others. This delineation is clearly indicated by Helen (45 yrs, Part-time, Year Five) and Paige (31 yrs, Final Year) who both described their view of 'successful students'. For Helen this was explicitly someone *'who's continued throughout their degree without chopping and changing'* whereas for Paige, it was all about *'trying'* as she explained: *'I'm a successful student, even though I failed something but still got myself up and did better the next time around so…'* While both perspectives similarly regard remaining enrolled at university in terms of 'success', the ways in which this is achieved further qualifies this act in more nuanced ways.

The last two sections have presented the summary findings from a national study that sought to explore how students narrated their persistence at university as well as their perceptions of success and how this was defined on a personal level. Two key themes were explored to highlight how success and retention at university are deeply interconnected for

these participants but sometimes not in the ways articulated by dominant discourses such as obtaining a good job or getting high grades. The reflections of these students emphasises the nuanced and complex nature of these terms, which are sometimes taken for granted in policy or institutional discourse. The final part of this chapter explores the significance of these findings and possible implications for the broader HE sector.

Discussion and Conclusions

We know that succeeding at university does not automatically result in decreases in social or economic stratification, particularly for those who are considered to be disadvantaged to begin with. The most recent OECD (2018) report highlights how educational mobility has not translated into relative social or income mobility across all Australian populations, with those at the lowest levels of income remaining firmly 'stuck'. Given this situation, reconsidering how success and retention is conceptualised and framed seems key to equity framings moving forward. Despite initially appearing to be transparent and almost 'taken for granted', the enactment and articulation of success and persistence has been highlighted in the previous sections as needing close and considered attention. Examining and questioning how these terms have been constructed reveals how both concepts are deeply embedded in dominant discourses, not only those related to policy but also according to certain forms of knowledge.

Academic success remains largely defined in meritocratic terms with an emphasis on the acquisition of knowledges and the achievement of grades. Despite the clearly embodied nature of this action, attending university remains largely characterised by an understanding of 'individualized life choices' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 632). As such, the more embodied nature of success and the variety of meanings it can engender remain largely unrecognised within the HE space (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Similarly, the act of persisting or being retained is regarded as the responsibility of the student. But as the previous student reflections have indicated, we need to shift this to understand success and retention in more collaborative and connected ways. Such insights are particularly

important within a widening participation framing, given that universities are attracting an increasing diversity of students with a wider multiplicity of rationales and motivations underpinning their educational participation.

To move away from dominant paradigms, I draw upon Walker's (2008) concept of 'widening capability' as one lens to revision our thinking in the field of success and retention. Rather than focus on purely fiscal or meritocratic measures of success, Walker (2008) proposes a need to 'value non-economic ends and more expansive understandings of what is valuable in human lives and for human flourishings' (p. 270). Widening capabilities then involves embedding teaching and learning strategies designed to deliberately nurture the agentic nature of learners, providing the tools and support necessary for individuals to emerge as 'strong evaluators' of future choices and opportunities:

> Quality in learning for widening participation students (and indeed all students) would require integrating learning the subject and developing reflexive judgements about what makes life good for that person. (Walker, 2008, p. 271)

One example of such reconceptualisation is to acknowledge the power of critical thinking to support individuals in adopting a critically reflexive stance in relation to their lives (Walker, 2008). Related to this is the need to recognise the possibilities that university offers for choice, this needs to be a big picture understanding of choice based upon the opening up of freedoms and futures (Walker, 2008). The power attributed to such objectives are similarly detailed in earlier research on female first-in-family students (O'Shea, 2014) in which participants celebrated university as offering a space to reflect and reconsider the possibilities in their lives. While this outcome was not necessarily financially enriching, this activity marked an emotional richness appreciated by the female participants in the study. In this way, recognising broader outcomes of HE participation and success provides the opportunity for students to be 'critical and active participants in democratic life' (Walker, 2008, p. 277) rather than simply passive bystanders existing on the sidelines.

A more expansive understanding of participation and success is particularly timely at this point in time, as Australia deals with both an emerging funding regime and an evolving health crisis. As previously mentioned, 2020 heralded the introduction of performance-based funding within Australia with universities measured fiscally in terms of predefined indicators including student experience, graduate outcomes, equity group participation and student success. What this article has shown is the variability of such measurements which may differ on a case-by-case basis, for example not all students may regard graduate employment as the desired outcome for their studies (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). The fluid nature of such performance indicators is further exacerbated by the recent coronavirus pandemic. The HE environment is currently undergoing radical and global transformation that is leading us to rethink not only delivery but also the ways in which students both participate and engage in learning as well as approaches to managing their learning. We know that this health crisis will have impacts on retention rates of students but equally this disruption offers the opportunity to rethink how HE considers and defines academic success across the student life cycle.

This chapter has deliberately 'opened up' discussion of success and retention to reveal how these terms are considered both publicly and privately. By drawing on the reflections of students, alongside the more dominant policy and institutional discourses, the need for a deeper and interconnected understanding of these concepts has been highlighted. This work points to the need to continually disrupt preconceived ideas or accepted discourses relating to students, their motivations and rationales for participating in HE. As Hinton-Smith (2012) argues, there is a continuing need to 'challenge systems of organization through which different groups of students are sorted, categorised and restricted to particular HE outcomes' (p. 308). By continuing to revisit and question terms such as 'success' and 'retention', there is a possibility to develop an educational landscape that carefully values and supports individual desires rather than simply reframing or negotiating these within dominant political or policy discourses. Such agility and ability to 'think outside the box' will be particularly important as we work alongside COVID-19, which demands that we deeply consider how future HE systems are both defined and enacted.

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