Rethinking Student Belonging, Engagement, and Success:
An Equity Perspective

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The last weeks have seen a flurry of activity across the Australian university sector with the release of the *Universities Accord Final Report*. While I write, there is vigorous debate occurring, deliberating both the Accord's strengths and its inherent limitations, one of the latter being the apparent perpetuation of low expectations for students with disability (see McLennan, 2024). Whilst the relative merits of some of the report's recommendations have been questioned, there is little doubt that both this document—and the associated review process—have succeeded in placing educational equity at the centre of any future imaginings of the Australian higher education system. This is welcome news for many of us who have worked alongside students from more diverse backgrounds and witnessed the many obstacles encountered in their higher education journeys. To address these and other enduring issues, the Accord recommends significant changes that include accessible preparatory programs for future students, a better integrated tertiary system, and—of course—increases in student funding support. But I would argue there are other, far more fundamental, issues that also need to be addressed if we are to achieve the Accord's ultimate goal of a "better and fairer education system". (Department of Education, 2024, p. 23)

Before we can begin to implement an equity-facing university sector, I suggest that we need to rethink, what I regard as, the "cornerstones" of student experience, namely *belonging*, *engagement*, and *success*. Those of us working within the higher education setting might assume that we collectively understand what meaningful student belonging, engagement, and success look like. But recent research has questioned whether common understandings of these terms actually resonate across student populations. Based on nearly a decade of work with students from more diverse backgrounds, I have frequently noted how elements of higher education participation that may seem to be relatively fixed or unquestioned in fact have other, usually hidden, meanings or translations.

Take the concept of *student belonging* which is generally straightforwardly assumed to be a learner's sense of "being accepted, included by, and connected to their institutions" (Ahn & Davis, 2019, p. 1). As a sector, it is safe to say that we have become obsessed with measuring student belonging, not only in Australia with the Student Experience Survey (SES) but also in other countries such as the UK, which measures belonging via the National Student Survey (NSS) questionnaire. This current preoccupation with belonging may, in part, relate to the recent health crisis and the resulting repercussions for global higher education. For example, the increases in the prevalence of remote and hybrid learning have meant that the spaces in which students learn are multiple and evolving. This emerging digital learning environment may have enduring, and as yet unknown, ramifications for the ways that students enact belonging throughout their university learning journeys (Matthews et al., 2022).

Belonging is inherently political, not only in terms of how it is defined but also relative to who has the power to define what constitutes acceptable belonging. Recent research (Gravett et al., 2023) considered the complexity of this state, with particular reference to the post-pandemic university environment. Current students were invited to produce video blogs (vlogs) and participate in

interviews designed to critically engage with, and deeply interrogate, how belonging is enacted at an individual lived level. The findings revealed the multifaceted nature of this state. Students told and showed us how space, objects, and even their senses combined to inform belonging states. Whilst some of the objects or spaces were relatively unsurprising (laptops or notebooks; the library) others were more amorphous (a particular smell or specific outfit; certain foods) this was not straightforward at all. As we explained:

> *Belonging is not location specific nor do learners necessarily want to "belong" to a whole university – a generalised "one size fits all" idea of belonging may actually lead to feelings of exclusion. (Gravett et al., 2023, para. 2)*

In fact, in this research, it was clear that attaining a level of belonging was not necessarily universally desired by students. It could be fleeting or flickering, with one participant reflecting how striving for this state induced a level of discomfort. Our research concluded that enacting a fixed or strictly defined sense of belonging should not be idealised. Instead, we highlighted how non-belonging was often an active choice and no less legitimate in its intent (Ajjawi et al., 2023).

Like belonging, achieving *learner engagement* is similarly regarded as key to student success and achievement within educational settings, including higher education. Globally, universities have also put engagement measures in place; for example, the US has the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which was replicated in Australia between 2007–2012 as the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), now the SES. Yet such measurements remain somewhat one-dimensional or narrow, frequently assuming a binary state and a universal desire to be engaged. Instead, engagement should be considered in terms of fluidity in its process, which may see students engaging in diverse ways and at varying levels according to the different stages of the university journey (Stone & O'Shea, in press). Crucially, the enactment of engagement (and engagement strategies) is inherently bound up with students' biographies.

There are also deep inequities in how student engagement is experienced across different student cohorts. As Brett and colleagues (in press) highlighted, when you are othered in a system, such as students with disability, enacting the expected engagement can be challenging. Other researchers have noted the ways in which students from equity groups may have different, but equally valid, ways of negotiating engagement, again highlighting the need to firmly reject "one-size-fits-all" approaches to this concept. Bennett and Burke (in-press) have argued that engagement is frequently viewed through the "lens of hyper individualism". This behavioural focus fails to consider engagement's embodied or affective nature or, as Kahu succinctly stated: the specific ways "students are feeling" (2013, p. 761). Arguably, if we are to shift purposively towards an equity-centred university system, we must avoid assuming "that the responsibility for enacting engagement lies predominantly with the student but rather, recognise the interactive nature of this state that resides with both the institution and the learner" (O'Shea, in press).

Lastly, we will consider the concept of *student success*, revealing how this term is also multi-layered and somewhat contested. Being successful in academia is variously defined in terms of academic achievement or graduation outcomes (Oh & Kim, 2016), the attainment of a necessary volume of knowledge (Sullivan, 2008), and even the ability to progress through a degree program in an independent linear and uninterrupted manner (Leathwood, 2006). In such ways, success is intrinsically tied up and informed by what Nyström and colleagues (2019) referred to as a "valorisation of high achievement" (p. 470). Just like engagement and belonging, this too is a constructed ideal and often reliant on the privileging of certain academic and cultural capitals.

Indeed, research with first in family students (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018) revealed how students reflected on a more diverse and embodied understanding of the term *success* at the culmination of their degrees.

These subjective understandings were deeply contextualised by personal biographies and, positionality. Student participants explained how academic success was variously defined, sometimes as a "form of validation", an ability to "defy the odds", or even as an embodied state. In terms of validation, for example, being successful was linked to being able to positively negotiate feelings of otherness, no longer feeling like an imposter or "other". The narratives of these students equally speak to the determination required to overcome limiting life constraints, defying the odds to achieve this educational end goal. Yet these alternative understandings of success are rarely celebrated or acknowledged within the university environment, although they may be hugely significant for students. As we argue, broader more inclusive conceptions of this state can only have positive implications for the sector and those who are involved in it:

> *Recognising the multiplicity of success within policy and popular discourse would go some way to achieving recognition of how understandings of success can be balanced. This recognition would simultaneously acknowledge the value of diversity in the university population as well as the heterogeneous nature of lived experience. (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018, p. 1073)*

The drive to measure and prescribe belonging, engagement, and success has no doubt been exacerbated by the recent pandemic. We know that the pandemic has transformed enrolment patterns and the ways in which students interact with their institutions and the courses they offer. The drive for institutions to increase participation and timely completions has only intensified this fascination for defining and prescribing what these states look like. However, too often these definitions adopt a particular perspective or standpoint that does not necessarily reflect the lived experience of all our students, particularly those from more diverse or heterogenous backgrounds.

As we move into this new post-Accord environment, the need to rethink how we define and measure these cornerstones of university participation becomes more pressing. This does not only require constant and reflective questioning of institutional assumptions about what belonging, success, and engagement "look" like but also reconsidering how these various states impact across the student life cycle. As Tomaszewski and colleagues (2022) argued, adopting a more longitudinal focus to studying the experiences of educationally marginalised populations, recognises how experiences are never "static" but rather how student experience "unfolds over the life course" (p. 134). Adopting a life-cycle approach considers not only how students may have different understandings of engagement, belonging, and success but equally how each of these states may have different meanings at various stages of the student journey. Equally, recognising that these states are not separate entities that can be measured independently but rather are fluid concepts that are interconnected.

The Accord has set universities ambitious targets. Importantly, for the sector and those of us that work within it, we need to remember that just getting students into academia is never enough. Instead, providing the necessary conditions for persistence and completion is key. I suggest that achieving these conditions is not only reliant on funding incentives or support strategies. Equally, and perhaps more importantly, it requires a constant interrogation of accepted norms and

expectations to ensure these are inclusive of all rather than, albeit unintentionally, acting in divisive or alienating manners.

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