Part IV

The future of student engagement

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Chapter 20

Who defines success in higher education?

A student perspective on the future of student engagement

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Student engagement has historically been discussed within academic literature as a term almost synonymous with student satisfaction, retention, engagement in educational developments, representation and general involvement in an academic community. In parallel to these conversations surrounding engagement and satisfaction, higher education (HE) has recently turned its attention to the notion of student success. Defining student success is challenging as the term is relatively contested and ambiguous within educational literature. Indeed, a critical student perspective is also notably absent from this conversation. In this chapter, I will draw upon my own experiences as a student to critically appraise the concept of success in the context of HE. I will examine how this term may be located within wider pedagogic issues that may not capture the nuanced and often diverse experiences of today's students. I will end by exploring how the future of student engagement must acknowledge the multifaceted nature of success in HE, whilst remaining sensitive to the complexities of the student experience.

My perspective

I finished my degree exactly twelve months ago. Throughout my studies as an undergraduate student I felt, by and large, 'Super Engaged'. I approached my lecturers for extra reading, I went to pedagogic and academic conferences, I worked as a research assistant, and I read beyond the scope of the reading lists. I discovered a genuine love for learning and found the academic environment stimulating, challenging, and exciting.

However, despite my enthusiasm for my subject, I was often late or absent from morning lectures because I had been working a night shift (in my part-time zero-hour contract job to support myself financially). I quickly became more interested in data analysis for my research assistant job than I was for my academic assignments. I found a niche area of psychology that fascinated me and found it difficult to put down these books in favour of mandatory reading lists. I failed modules. I chose family time over revision. Towards the end of my degree, I spent my evenings working on job applications instead of my dissertation. I never engaged with the student union. I did not join societies, including

the psychology society, and generally avoided any group-based interaction. But I felt passionate and stimulated by the world of education. And I *loved* my degree.

So, with our theories and practice of student education, engagement, satisfaction in mind, what kind of student would I have looked like on paper? With decent (albeit relatively mixed) grades and mediocre attendance, would my university have considered me to be engaged? Would I have been considered a success?

What is success?

Before we can explore how and why I may or may not have been considered a successful student in the context of pedagogic theory and understanding, it is first important to set the scene for this complicated and nuanced term. The definition of success, as with most concepts in pedagogy, has been heavily contested (York, Gibson, and Rankin, 2015). Indeed, it can be interpreted in a multitude of different ways, depending on the institutional context and the agenda in which it is situated. Perhaps the most common thought is that success is a term in HE synonymous with ‘student achievement’ and is related almost exclusively to academic outcomes. For example, in the pedagogic literature, success is thought of as being related to academic attainment, student retention, and successful progression throughout the degree (Bean and Eaton, 2001; Choi, 2005). However, these definitions should be explored critically, considering whether this way of measuring success captures the full picture.

Indeed, the way in which we define success matters because it conveys to both educators and learners a set of principles against which both parties are measured. It also, crucially, sends an implicit message about what is valued in HE. We know that in universities metrics matter. They guide our pedagogic agenda, they determine funding and allocation of resources, and, perhaps most importantly, they contribute to our understanding of success and failure. I should note here that I am not necessarily concerned with the educational ethics or *value* of metric-based measurements of success. In psychology, the divisions between qualitative and quantitative methodologies run deep, despite emerging mixed-methods approaches to research. I am, rather, interested in critically exploring *what* these metrics contribute in the context of what we understand success to look like in HE. How does both what and how we measure influence what we understand success to mean?

Being successful means different things to different people, as is the case with most concepts in education. Here, I would like to share a student perspective of how the way we define, measure, and recognise success can contribute to wider pedagogic issues. For example, Lockhart, Wuetherick and Joorisity (2018) understand student success to mean a combination of student characteristics (e.g. personality, preparedness, locus of control), experiences (e.g. teaching and learning, belongingness, accountability), and outcomes (knowledge, perception, grades). The focus on belongingness (as per Yorke, 2016) is particularly interesting in the

context of my own experiences within HE of *feeling* engaged, despite this not being reflected in the administrative metric data attributed to me. In this sense, and in relation to my own experiences, context is of utmost importance. If my engagement with my studies was reduced entirely to traditional metric measures of student success, I doubt I would have been considered ‘engaged’. Yet, on almost every other dimension within HE – satisfaction, wellbeing, feeling part of a community of learners, feeling safe and happy within the context of university – I would have rated highly.

This introduces the concept that there are richer and more nuanced methods of understanding success, rather than academic attainment alone. Using grades as indicators of the success of an educational journey is simplistic and does not capture the multi-faceted, deeply subjective nature of the student experience. In my opinion, the fundamental problem with relying solely on these kind of administrative data collection to assess success is that they fail to acknowledge diversity of experience. Indeed, this diversity occurs both before, within, and after time shared in the classroom. For example, student nationality (Gebhart, 2012), gender (Kessels, Heyder, Latsch, and Hannover, 2014), academic preparedness (Lockhart, Wuetherick and Joorisity, 2018), sociodemographic background (Yorke, and Thomas, 2003) all contribute to the profile of a student (Hu and Wolniak, 2013). Therefore, we should acknowledge that students may enter university with a set of success parameters that may not necessarily map onto the values that are measured and celebrated in the institution.

Case study I

To illustrate how metrics may not account for the multifaceted student experience and complexities of subjective understanding of success, meet Student A – we’ll call her Annie.

Annie is a first-generation undergraduate student studying for a degree in psychology. She commutes from her home town into university by the train. She plays hockey every Thursday. To subsidise the gap between her student loan and her rent, she works part-time at a corner shop. She achieves an average of 62% in her university assignments but finds the university context quite stressful and prefers working at home rather than in the libraries. One day, Annie finally braved it and entered the library for the first time. She considered it to be one of the biggest successes so far in her degree. She does not have many friends on her course so prefers to socialise with friends from home.

Let’s first consider Annie’s case in the context of what we know from the pedagogic literature. Annie is a commuter student, a subgroup that is often reported to have lower student engagement (Jacoby, 2000), although this concept itself is contested (see Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer, 2001). Annie may experience some university-related stress due to lack of a strong peer network, which is also associated broadly with academic

outcomes (Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton and Osborne, 2012). She is doing relatively well in her grades although does not fully engage in the ‘learning community’ (e.g. Zhao and Kuh, 2004) of her institution, which can make it challenging to connect with peers (Tinto, 2000). She is also a first-generation student, a group who benefit largely from peer support as a means to adjust to HE (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, 2005). Due to Annie’s potential feelings of imposter syndrome (Parkman, 2016), her one-time library visit was considered a personal milestone. This was her subjective measure of success, although this may not be in line with the measures attributed to her.

Therefore, if Annie’s overall success at university was measured purely by metric measures, would she be considered to be currently engaged in her studies? Would metric measures of student engagement recognise her? Should the university be doing more to engage Annie?

Case study 2

With the same questions in mind, consider Student B, Henry.

Henry is a first-year undergraduate student. He’s studying part-time following a career change after having his second child. He loves studying and has always wanted to return to university after his first degree. Most of his academic work is done on evenings and weekends due to childcare. His primary goal is a specific career path that requires a specialist undergraduate qualification; therefore, in his mind, as long as he passes the modules necessary to progress in the degree, he has succeeded.

Like all students, Henry will come to university with a set of knowledge, values, and experiences that will support and contextualise his learning. As a mature student, this may be even more relevant in his experiences (Toynton, 2005). He may not participate in ‘student engagement’ incentives and he may be satisfied with achieving the minimum grades which will enable him to progress to his chosen career path. Echoing the questions asked of Annie’s profile as an (un)successful student, would Henry’s approach to his education be considered a success? Has his institution done enough to engage him fully with his studies? Should they?

According to traditional metric measures of student success, the students described in these case studies may not be considered ‘engaged’ on paper. They do not engage in extra-curricular academic activities, they do not volunteer within their institution, they do not mentor or take advantage of mentoring schemes, and their attendance and grades are below average. In response to this, York,

Gibson, and Rankin (2015) offer a more nuanced and complex picture of student success, arguing that success is formed broadly of six main tenets: academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competences, persistence, learning outcomes and career success. They also note that students have both intrinsic and extrinsic measures of success; personal satisfaction is intrinsic, academic outcomes are more extrinsic. Annie's trip to the library or Henry's completion of his degree, therefore, may offer a satisfying levels of intrinsic success. However, they may now score as highly on more extrinsic, quantifiable measures of success.

Who gets to decide?

Some theories of student success have also focused on the students' relationship with their educational environment (e.g. Kuh et al., 2001), suggesting that success occurs when learning culture and personal development respond to one another. This brings up an interesting question of accountability and responsibility for student success. Ultimately, who gets to decide what success looks like in HE? Rendón, Jalomo and Nora (2000) posit that students and educators both share some responsibility for ensuring that culture, norms and personal goals are mapped onto one another effectively. I agree, and would like to continue the conversation surrounding the picture of success.

The process of defining success is entrenched within rigid and hierarchical power dynamics. In line with feminist pedagogic ways of thinking, critically exploring *who* defines success is as, if not more, insightful than looking at *how* it is defined. In this sense, it is important that conversations surrounding student engagement involve some level of student voice. This is often the missing link in HE conversations. Whilst there are well-documented and well-executed initiatives targeted at engaging students within educational curricula, and feedback, there is often a crucial link missing – a distinct lack of student involvement in the conversations surrounding student engagement and pedagogic practice itself. Without a sense of student voice, conceptualisation of success in the context of teaching and learning becomes challenging and unrepresentative. It does not capture the true experiences of what it is like to study at HE institutions.

More problematically, without a clear and critical student voice in these conversations, the concept of success is in danger of becoming paternalistic. In this sense, language really matters. The words we choose to frame concepts in the context of HE communicate ideas about how we value and understand the student experience. An ongoing dialogue between staff and student is the only way to challenge our reliance on metrics.

As with many others contested within HE, the definition, conceptualisation, and measurement of success should not be something that is *done* to students. It should be done with students, as per the 'students as partners' approach (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). 'Students as partners' is a way of thinking about education that situates the learner and the teacher as equal agents. It dismantles

power between the two and creates equity, and a space for collaboration and co-working. Importantly, it rejects the idea that learning is something that is done *to* a student, and instead celebrates the unique positions and perspectives that both parties have in the dialogue of education. Indeed, some measures of success appear to be in direct contrast to this approach. Success is individualistic and personal. It is, or rather it should be, self-defined. In the same way that ‘students as partners’ approaches attempt to use partnership to empower students to take more control over their own learning, our understanding of success would also benefit from a more nuanced and empowered perspective.

When we think about success we should also consider the wider context. Due to tuition fees and a culture of ‘student as consumer’, this context is by its very nature political. Therefore, it is not enough to regard success as a score on metric individualist measures at the student level. We need to shift our focus and consider students in their own unique contexts. Student education does not happen in a vacuum.

Redefining success

In response to my thoughts about how success can be redefined to reflect these issues, I recently ran a day-long workshop on feminist approaches to teaching and learning in HE. We shared our frustrations and concerns with some of the traditional methods of measuring students at various points throughout their journey to and through education. One particularly engaging conversation was centred on the metric-based admission process. We discussed how reliance on purely metric-based admissions (i.e. through UCAS points alone) may not be suitable for non-normative student experiences. I was interested in this, and posed to the group how we may translate these issues to the context of student success throughout their degree. The room grew lively with shared frustrations and difficulty in defining the malleable, subjective, slippery nature of success in HE.

We decided together that we all understand the importance of contextualising entrance into university; we listen to students’ experiences through their personal statements, and we are relying less on grades alone as indicators of students’ suitability for HE. Yet, this approach is not entirely evident once students get through the door. We lose a sense of context, positionality, subjectivity.

In light of this, student engagement remains a prominent term and area of activity in HE. Within an outcomes-focused, neoliberal HE, student engagement now comes with a new partner, student success. Those who adhere to metric measurements need to remember that definitions of success are meaningless if they do not reflect a student voice. Institutions should remain mindful that the student community’s engagements and successes do not always fit into rigid, quantifiable outcomes. It is important to remember the key pillars of student engagement – inclusivity, transformation and partnership – to ensure we are creating a HE where all students can thrive in their own individual way. Therefore, we should question, is student success, to use Tinto and Pusser’s (2006, p 8) words, merely ‘*successful*

learning in the classroom? Or does it, and should it, reflect a richer picture of students in their own unique context?

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