



RESEARCH PAPER

“When does hot become cold?”: Why we should be disrupting narrow and exclusive discourses of success in higher education

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Student success is a prominent focus across contemporary higher education policy with the success of courses and programs resting on dominant framings. In this paper I argue that students' experiences of success are reduced through limited quantitative measures and associated nomenclature accordingly, which invisibilise the many 'other' important forms of success. Experiences of success are subjective and successful educational outcomes are as varied and diverse as the students who achieve them. The dominant discourse of success, however, reproduces narrowed forms of knowledge and limiting views of the 'ideal' student in higher education. Furthermore, normalising statistical practices which objectify and strip away the capacity to gain a fuller picture of student success also serves to privilege limited 'valued' knowledges.

This paper details the findings of a study designed to elicit the perceptions of success from students seeking to enter higher education through an enabling pathway. Participants rejected the official measurements of success and explored success through subjective and emotional terms. Drawing on the findings of this study, it is recommended that current measures of success in higher education need re-evaluating. More equitable forms of measurement are required to recognise and value the histories and aspirations of all students – to account for the complexity and fluidity of success.

Keywords: success; higher education; discourse; Foucault

Introduction

To authenticate student success in higher education, government and higher education documents refer to the proportion of units of study students have passed, divided by units of study attempted (Department of Education and Training, 2017; Oh & Kim, 2016; York, 2015). This view of student success is objectifying and yet worryingly commonplace (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; May, Delahunty, O'Shea & Stone, 2016). Drawing on interviews with students about their experiences of success, my analysis suggests that rather than a fixed equation, success is fluid, subjective and highly personal.

The success rates of interest to higher education institutions are the numbers of students who have demonstrated circumscribed knowledges and valued learning outcomes as measured by set, quantitative methods. Students from under-represented backgrounds, or those who have had negative experiences of schooling, may find that the attainment of success in this definition is more difficult to achieve and therefore may be at higher risk of ‘failure’ or attrition. Furthermore, rigid definitions of student success have the potential to reproduce mainstream and exclusionary views of what constitutes valued, legitimate higher education outcomes.

In this article I argue that fixed measures of student success are problematic as they fail to capture students’ experiences and personal perceptions. Students are not a homogenous group whose success can be measured uniformly. Success may take on different meanings for different students (May, Delahunty, O’Shea & Stone, 2016) and while some students’ definitions might align with more traditional markers, others view success in ways that disrupt conventional interpretations.

A growing body of research is consequently challenging the suitability of limited current measures of success in higher education (Burke, 2012; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017; Bennett et al., 2015; Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, & Southgate, 2016; Oh & Kim, 2016; O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Limited measures are perceivably regulating education outcomes so that graduates acquire only the certain mainstream skill sets and knowledges that are valuable to the government and its economic agenda (Dawkins, 1988). This might explain why despite gaining traction as a concept in the university sector (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2017) student success is relatively under-researched and under-theorised in treatments that lie beyond simplistic representations of what constitutes success.

Following research from Burke (2012), Bennett et al. (2015), Burke et al. (2016) and O’Shea and Delahunty (2018), I argue that academics must continue to disrupt and counter narrow and exclusive discourses and reconceptualise success through research that values and represents the voices of students. This project was designed to elicit perceptions of success maintained by students enrolled in an enabling program and influence the development of new methodologies accordingly, that can help account for the complexity of success.

Enabling programs are designed to provide alternate pathways to university for students who do not have the formal entry requirements. On successful completion of an enabling program, students qualify for entry into an undergraduate degree. It must be noted that issues of equity are not exclusive to enabling students as relations of inequality are experienced across all areas of education. However, enabling programs feature typically higher numbers of students from under-represented backgrounds (Bennett et al., 2015), so drawing on narratives of enabling students may serve to highlight the inequitable impacts of preserving current definitions and measures of success in education.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether broader methodological frameworks are required that can account for the complexity and subjectivity of success. The study draws on methods that acknowledge the context behind the figures to reveal more accurate readings that can represent students’ own perspectives. This is positioned as particularly important in enabling programs as readings of student success taken from figures alone cannot account for disadvantage and so instead are actually reproducing it.

Issues of equity exist across all areas of education. As such, an alternative ‘re-thinking’ of success and its associated measures are proposed to benefit all students. As the narratives of the

research participants reveal in this project, success is not an entirely quantifiable term. Rather, success appears to be fluid, compound and highly complex. The treatment of success as such, in all areas of education, will help to ensure that all students have their educational outcomes recognised and valued, and that success is attainable to all students, regardless of their history and background.

The neoliberal discourse of success and its relationship to enabling education

Government and policymakers define student success in higher education through units passed and programs completed (Oh & Kim, 2016; York, 2015). These measures have become increasingly accepted with the neoliberal movement and dominant across the global university sector. Neoliberalism imposes “an economic prerogative on all aspects of human life, and entails viewing the world as an enormous marketplace” (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018, p. 1063). In higher education, neoliberal perspectives position the student as a ‘consumer’ of education, where the ‘successful’ student is referenced through employability, productivity and potential impact on the strength and vitality of the nation’s economy (Dawkins, 1987). In this system, “only the measurable matters” (Lynch, 2006, p. 7) as this data can be used to inform interested parties of the successes and failures of the students as ‘consumers’ in relation to their own market agenda. Advocates of metrics-based evidence stress that education should follow the pattern that has created “the kind of progressive, systematic improvement over time that has characterized successful parts of our economy and society throughout the twentieth century” (Slaven, 2004, p. 16), made possible due to measurable evidence as the basis for practice.

The manifestation of neoliberal principles in higher education has heavily influenced both policy and practice (Apple, 2006; Lynch, 2006). Under the premise of ‘common good’ or ‘public interest’, accountability, productivity and calculability are seen as requisites for promoting high standards in metrics-based education. Over time, this approach has created a discourse of academic success which overshadows the personal and subjective nature of what success means to different stakeholders (Biesta, 2007). In this discourse, success is reserved for those who can achieve set outcomes that are valuable in a neoliberal economy only. It is a homogenising practice that disregards the array of different personal, subjective and shifting outcomes of education and the different indicators of success accordingly. Nonetheless, this discourse is pervasive and has become so commonplace that success is often referred to in higher education spaces without clarification. This is alarming for as explained below; the neoliberal discourse is reproducing inequality and silencing outcomes that have no perceivable immediate economic impact.

While enabling programs are designed to establish more inclusive practices in education (Bennett et al., 2015), this rationale is threatened by higher education practices that seek to homogenise valued knowledges, methods of demonstration and measurable learning outcomes. This homogenisation conflicts with approaches to diversify higher education enrolments and, therefore, with a key rationale of enabling programs.

Metrics-based frameworks foreground notions of ‘generalisability’ and ‘objectivity’ which have been assessed by communities of researchers as reproducing educational disadvantage (Burke & Lumb, 2018). The practice embeds an “objectifying, paternalistic and colonising set of technologies” (Burke & Lumb, 2018, p. 12) that regulate the type of student that is valued in higher education and who has the ‘right’ to be there (Burke, 2012). Conventional markers of success reflect institutional structures that are historically exclusive to the cultures, practices and experiences of many under-represented groups in higher education (David, Burke & Moreau, 2019). Consequently, many students may find that the attainment of success in this definition is

more difficult to achieve. This practice is therefore sustaining histories of exclusive principles in higher education and disregarding successes that might be valuable to the student, but which fall beyond the scope of those esteemed within the institutional or policy discourse.

Success beyond the figures

Limited views of success may also be at odds with, or fail to capture, the successes that are valuable to a student in the context of their individual background, goals and aspirations (May, Delahunty, O'Shea & Stone, 2016). Educational experiences which have produced other outcomes such as the development of confidence and self-efficacy are not being recognised. Unless that confidence accompanies a passing grade, it isn't tied up in the dominant discourse of student success and ultimately not deemed as valuable (Bennett et al., 2015).

This understanding that success is subjective and personal further problematises findings on success that are extracted from quantitative figures alone. Quantitative readings can reproduce inequalities by failing to capture important contextual differences between students and their goals and aspirations accordingly. In other words, gauging student success by figures alone can produce skewed information on successes occurring for enabling students (Hodges et al., 2013; Jones-White et al., 2009).

It is important that student data is collected across all areas of higher education to inform interested parties of student success. However, in education and equity policy documents, understandings and conclusions drawn regarding successful student outcomes are produced entirely by quantitative data alone. Broader methodological frameworks must be adopted that can account for the complexity and subjectivity of success (Burke & Lumb, 2018). This is particularly important in enabling programs as readings of student success that are taken from figures alone cannot account for disadvantage. Treatment of success in such a prescriptive manner can therefore unwittingly reproduce the very inequalities that enabling programs are attempting to address (Burke et al., 2016). Methods that acknowledge the context behind the figures are crucial for revealing alternate readings of student success.

The Research Design

My study was designed to contribute to the growing body of research that recognises that the outcomes of enabling education are “productive in many complex ways, and [contain] a different ‘micro-economy’ of student completion and attrition activity than the university undergraduate model” (Bennett et al., 2013, p. 154). By exploring perceptions of success of students who seek to enter higher education through an enabling pathway, my aim is to influence the development of more nuanced methodologies that demand measures that are able to account for what success means to students.

To understand the personal and subjective dimensions of educational success, I conducted ten semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with students enrolled in an enabling program. Semi-structured interviews allowed a conversation to take place between myself as researcher and students about their lived experiences. The nature of the interview as ‘semi’ structured allowed me to speak to themes rather than set questions and invite greater clarification or elaboration on responses. The interviews were designed to address five main areas:

- student's perceptions of what constitutes success according to the government and educational institutions
- student's own perceptions of success

- student's aspirations
- student's perceptions of outcomes experienced in enabling education
- student's notions of failure.

Through an expression-of-interest process promoted to students enrolled in enabling programs at one Australian university, the first ten respondents were selected to be involved. Despite the fact that participants were selected on this basis and not chosen purposefully to present a wide cross-section of equity groups, the participants were quite varied.

Of the ten participants:

- seven identified as female and three as male
- one identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- two mentioned that they had a language background other than English
- two mentioned that they had a disability
- four were the first in their family to attend university
- one lived in rural Australia and was taking up temporary residence to study on-campus
- four were parents or mentioned carer responsibilities of children.

The semi-structured interviews were coded to 'make sense' of the raw data (May, 2001). Primarily, I wanted to ensure that the richness of the narratives was represented by my analysis. I individually identified students' responses to common themes examined in the interviews and placed the responses side-by-side. I also searched interview transcripts for key words and phrases repeated throughout. Undertaking this process helped me to search for recurring motifs and similarities and differences between responses that resonated with my research aims, questions and themes.

Analysis of the data extrapolated three key findings that were consistent throughout. Firstly, each respondent recognised that the government frames success in narrow, economically-driven terms, defined by student grades, pass rates, employment figures and economic impact. Each interviewee, however, provided personal anecdotes or reflections that spoke to the subjective nature of success, as an abstract concept that is variable and not easily defined. The dominant view of success as expressed by participants was learning regardless of the outcome. This was not limited to learning measurable academic skills, but also learning about university systems and about themselves as students. Many students explored their understandings of success through discourses of failure, for while each respondent quickly recognised that the perceived opposite of success is failure, students also rationalised that dichotomising success and failure is unreasonable as both terms are individual and fluid. Each respondent, therefore, rejected the prevailing discourse that success is limited and instrumentally driven.

Finally, success was also experienced through emotion. All students mentioned the development of confidence as a key successful outcome of their enabling education, which accompanied their growing understanding of their perceived capabilities and limitations as a student. Success was also described through a developing knowledge of university cultures and systems, which aided feelings of legitimacy as a student and a sense of belonging.

Overwhelmingly, the emergent themes from the qualitative data recognise the vital role that an individual's context plays in determining what qualifies successful outcomes of enabling education. This was an important finding as current evaluation methods are not calibrated to account for the breadth of experiences that the enabling program participants shared. The themes

that emerged support the principle that more equitable forms of measurements of success are required to recognise and value the histories of the participants (Bennett & Lumb, 2019), as well as their individual goals, aspirations and accomplishments.

Student perceptions of success: Government

Education spaces can be sites of struggle where complex and shifting workings of power produce dominant discourses. These discourses shape understandings and perceptions of ‘truth’ (Burke, 2012). Burke (2012) draws on Foucault (1980) to explain that power produces knowledge (and vice versa). Power and knowledge directly imply one another. In the current education space, for example, power is affected by those who possess it through the adoption and implementation of neoliberal policies that value limited forms of knowledge and the “technologies of regulation, discipline and control” (Burke et al., 2016, p. 20) that measure it. This constructs a prevailing discourse of success that is valued by the neoliberal economy as impactful on national financial gain and productivity (Lynch, 2006). It also, however, produces ‘dividing practices’ that objectivise (Foucault, 1982), differentiating students who do and do not achieve valued, narrow education outcomes to a set standard, categorising them as successful or unsuccessful accordingly. This discourse of social control (Foucault, 1982) has shaped wide-scale perceptions of what constitutes valued and valid student attributes and student success. This is despite the fact that a growing body of research is demonstrating that success is subjective and personal in nature (May, Delahunty, O’Shea & Stone, 2016) and challenges the premise that the attainment of student success can be legitimately objectified and measured in this manner.

When asked about their perceptions of the government’s definition of student success, all participants referenced the economically-driven views that characterise success. Students recognised that to the government, success is measurable and these measures form quantifiable data that can support the government’s own market agenda (Lynch, 2006). Wayne, for example, mentioned that to determine student success, the government would be looking for “*metrics*” of commencement and completion rates and “*weighing up against the cost they’re funding for the taxpayer*”. Similarly, Annette mentioned that the “*government probably looks at statistics only, and the amount of students who finish the course with a pass mark...That would come down to their funding...cut this course, increase this course, based just on people completing*”. Other students talked about the perceived link between success and employment. Annie mentioned that students are “*instruments*” of the government, who are “*using them to contribute to a changing world*”. Leah stated that “*a successful person to the government would be someone who contributes to society and is filling these gaps in employment that they want filled, because they want to meet a quota. That’s just how the government works*”. These student views of government success reflect a discourse fuelled by the relentless promotion of employability and employable skills that accompany contemporary neoliberal higher education (Williams, 2013).

Other students recognised the exclusionary practices that narrow treatments of student success can produce. Bernadette mentioned that to the government, student success is “*black and white...100 per cent dedication to the course, above-average marks, clear direction where you’re going with the degree [and] finishing within the top percentile*”. However, she supplemented that response by explaining that to the government, a successful student would have “*a good sturdy family background to support that, you know, none of this working nightshifts to pay rent*”. To Bernadette, the government therefore frame success through characteristics more easily afforded to those of privilege, such as the capacity to dedicate all available time to study. Describing the government’s views of success as “*black and white*”, she has recognised the notion of objectivity present in their definition and the hegemonic, dominant discourse created as a result, which situates and excludes those trapped “*working night shifts to*

pay rent” as ‘other’, less privileged and therefore less capable. Burke (2015) draws on Fraser’s (1997, 2000) work to warn that these hegemonic processes reinforce traditional dominant views and can result in different bodies and personhoods becoming misrecognised. Misrecognition is a process where a *“pathologizing gaze is projected on to Other bodies that have historically been constructed as a problem, and suffering from a range of deficit disorders”* (Burke, 2015, p. 394). This process marks these individuals as ‘different’, and less deserving of higher education participation (Burke, 2012) than their middle-class counterparts.

The students’ accounts suggest that the prevailing discourse of success is regulating a singular ‘type’ of student that is valued in higher education. These perceptions came from students enrolled in an enabling pathway despite the fact that enabling programs encompass higher numbers of students from under-represented backgrounds who are at greater risk of being misrecognised within this discourse. Evidently, in an increasingly commercialised educational landscape, policies to widen participation and increase diversity are embedded in homogenising practices and are therefore contradictory (Burke, 2015). If widening access policies are aimed at overcoming the barriers faced by students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, an irony exists if the aim of the equity policy is to solely develop the outcomes of education that are valued by the neoliberal economy (Burke et al., 2017). This contradiction is noted through the responses of the enabling students interviewed. Each participant identified measurable elements of success that are associated with neoliberalism, demonstrating the pervasiveness of the discourse, but each also rejected this definition, rationalising the subjective nature of success and the range of successful outcomes of education that lie beyond limited measures.

Student perceptions of success: Success as subjective

A key finding of the interviews is that success is personal and subjective which problematises the validity of hegemonic measures of success. Many students explored success by discussing notions of failure to identify that success and failure are not dichotomous; they encompass *“shades of grey”* (Bernadette). This propensity to understand success through failure aligns with a key finding of a study on success by O’Shea and Delahunty (2018). They noted that many of their participants understood success through articulating what success was not. In this present research study, Lewis used the analogy that success and failure are like temperature. He said *“there is hot and cold but that doesn’t mean that it’s either going to be 100 degrees or 0 degrees...there’s going to be some in between invariably”*. Through this metaphor, Lewis proposed the question of when cold becomes hot, or in this case, when success becomes a fail. More importantly though, Lewis established that people may not agree. He concluded that *“what some people might consider a success, others might consider a failure and vice versa”*. Lewis came to understand success by concluding what success is not, in this case, objective.

Other students challenged how normative measures of success, for example grades and withdrawal rates, can dictate the attainment of success. A prominent finding is that success is defined through learning, regardless of the grade. One student mentioned that to him, success is about self-satisfaction. He said, *“it does really depend on what your goals are. If you want nothing more than to study for study sake then it’s successful...I think success is just however you view it. Whatever you do is either successful or a learning curve”* (Lachlan). Another student said *“there is only success in learning. If you’re trying, you’re succeeding”* (Annie). Other students did acknowledge a link between grades and success but problematised a pass mark as an accurate measure, establishing that it is difficult to distinguish, or draw a neat line between, the subjective and personal nature of successful outcomes. Annette for example stated that, *“I would be failing if I didn’t get the top grade”*. Another student echoed this sentiment, explaining that, *“I’m not saying that a pass or credit is bad, but success to me is a high distinction”* (Annie).

Participants also reflected on the range of successful outcomes that they perceived could be achieved in conjunction with withdrawing from or ‘failing’ their enabling program. One student drew on a personal anecdote of a friend who *“tried university two or three times”* but realised that *“she can’t study that way, she can’t learn that way”*. She realised *“that university is not for her...that she’s a hands-on learner...and has now enrolled in an electrical apprenticeship, which is something that she’d never thought of”*. Referring to her friend’s ‘drop out’, the participant reflected, *“that’s success there”* (Bernadette). Another student drew on personal experience. He mentioned that this is his second attempt at an enabling program as when he enrolled in 2017, he had *“chosen one incorrect”* course. He gauged this ‘correctness’ based upon his evolving aspiration which he later realised would require the ability to *“write academically in a succinct, coherent fashion”* (Wayne). He withdrew from his courses and re-enrolled in 2018 to pursue courses that he understood would have a greater focus on skills valuable to him. Clearly, while these withdrawals from education would not be registered as ‘success’ by normalised metrics, successes have occurred, thus challenging the validity of these standardised measures.

Some participants talked about successes that can come from failing grades. Annie, for example, was very passionate about the damaging discourses of failure. She mentioned that *“failure only shows you where your weaknesses lie and it’s a matter of just picking up those weaknesses and moving forward. I suppose really at the end of the day it’s how you choose to look at it. I choose to look at it in a positive manner”* (Annie). Another student talked about a friend who failed an enabling program but who still speaks of her experience so fondly, and the friends she made. He said, *“I definitely think that should be considered a success”* (Lewis). Another student mused that even if she failed the enabling program, *“going to uni, the friendships made, learning all this information that will be useful no matter what career path, knowing how to write an essay or write academically... having that knowledge is still a success, like whether you passed or not. It’s knowledge you’ve gained”* (Leah).

The practice of measuring student success by grades, standardised assessments and attrition rates is objectifying success, limiting outcomes of education as either successful or not. A key finding of the interviews with enabling students is that on the contrary, definitions of success, failure and ‘successful’ grades are all relative and variable depending on the backgrounds, aspirations and goals of the individual. Students are not a homogenous group whose success can be measured uniformly. Findings from this study support the growing body of research asserting that enabling students need more nuanced analyses that can capture the “multifaceted, fluid, and at times unpredictable” (Oh & Kim, 2016, p. 288) nature of success.

Student perceptions of success: Success is explained and understood through emotion

A broad theme that emerged from a recent study was that university students often reference success through emotional terms (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Likewise, in the context of this research, each participant rationalised success through the embodiment of changing feelings about themselves and their own capabilities, in particular the development of self-confidence and a sense of belonging to the university culture.

Lachlan, for example, explained *“I had a presumption that university is for really smart people, which it is, but it would be somewhere you wouldn’t go to because they just pass the cream of the crop, everybody else fails and lecturers were quite aloof and had nothing to do with the students...you were on your own”*. Annette who hadn’t studied in over twenty years admitted that, *“I was paranoid I was going to come in here as the bottom of the ladder, the oldest, the stupidest, the slowest”*. She used words like *“scary”*, *“stupid”*, *“slow”* and *“overwhelming”*, referencing thoughts of *“tearing hair out. I can’t do it all! I can’t do it all!”* These two students

were embodying the “intensive forms of anxiety many students experience during their transitions to university...connected to their sense of (in)capability” (Burke et al., 2016, p. 49) due to this discourse. A recent study points to a strong correlation between ATAR bands achieved, confidence levels and academic capability (Burke et al., 2016). The participants in this study were enrolled in an enabling program so the probability of the participants having an ATAR is low. It is possible therefore that the participants commenced their program feeling insecure about their academic capability and their ‘place’ in the institution, like Lachlan and Annette expressed. Burke et al. (2016) also identified that using ATAR levels as a gatekeeper for university access ensures that only those deemed ‘capable’ can gain standardised entry. This establishes a discourse of the ‘type’ of student who ‘belongs’ in higher education, once again, reinforcing homogenising practices that situate those who enter by alternative methods, such as through enabling programs, as ‘other’. As established earlier, this practice heightens the chances that enabling students will be misrecognised as ‘different’ from the desired mainstream, potentially impacting their confidence to feel like a legitimate student.

A remarkable realisation, however, is that when reflecting on the perceived successful outcomes of their enabling education, every participant involved mentioned a development in self-confidence. Snyder et al. (2002) theorises that a student’s development in self-efficacy and capability will contribute towards their sense of ‘hope’. To Snyder et al. hope is not simply an emotion but a cognitive motivational system that enables students to focus on the attainment of their goals and, thereby, increase their chances of success. Lachlan mentioned that success for him would be *“having that degree of confidence to communicate with other people...because I don’t have that”*. Wayne said, *“confidence...[is] probably the most important thing for me, not just to get into uni”*. Madison bashfully stated, *“I’m coming out of my shell”* while Kylie mentioned that *“I’ve gotten...personally confident, like having that confidence to socialise with people, and the knowledge I learned from these classes, like I can use that outside”*. Lachlan said, *“I just found it totally different to what I imagined...It’s not as intimidating as you might imagine. I’m finding it very positive and much better than I’d hoped for. I’m starting to feel more confidence and a bit excited about it”*. While an increase in self-confidence is not a traditional institutional marker of success in higher education, intelligence and ability are not the only determinants of students’ successes (Dweck, 1999). Hope theory proposes that it is students’ views of themselves as agents capable of implementing actions to achieve their goals, which will ultimately drive their ambitions. On the other hand, Snyder et al.’s (2002) research has also shown that, irrespective of intelligence, students who possess lower levels of hope are more likely to ‘give up’. Clearly, while development of confidence and hope are not sole markers of success, they are components which contribute to the likelihood of success in their own right. This concept provokes further discussion regarding the suitability of policies that advocate grades as sole measures of successful outcomes in higher education.

When asked what the main drivers were of the change to their self-confidence, Annette reminisced upon the strategies she took to feel familiar with the university culture and systems. She said, *“before I’d even attended my first class, I went to the uni four times; learned how to use the library, I’d already borrowed books from the library; I knew where all my classes were...I learned about all the tools and everything that is available. I thought, I feel good. I can do this”*. Burke et al. (2016) noted that this feeling of “I can do this” or sense of capability, was probably connected to her familiarity with/in her institutional context. By navigating the university systems she was increasing her familiarity, her confidence and her sense of feeling like a legitimate student, all of which are positive successful outcomes of higher education.

Other students pointed to their experiences in their enabling program as the catalyst for their

change in confidence. This reveals that the programs are providing an important service in fostering student “familiarity, preparedness and empowerment” (Bennett et al., 2015, p. 49), to help combat damaging discourses of belonging. Lachlan said, *“they sort of take you up through and they nurture you and don’t expect you to swim a marathon. It’s not as intimidating as you might imagine...I’ve had a very positive time...much better than I’d hoped for”*. Referring to the staff and students in her enabling program, Annie said, *“they share and they share and they share. We don’t all have the answers, but collectively we do and that’s how they teach it and that’s a good way...you come together almost like family. It’s like a home away from home which makes my world easy”*.

Prior to their enrolment in their enabling program, many students in this project were clearly affected by damaging, elitist discourses that made them feel “*stupid*” and “*scared*” of university education. However, each also noted that a successful outcome of their enabling education was a change in their feelings. This shows a clear evidence of impact of the programs on students’ feelings of belonging and self-worth established through a culture of care (O’Keefe, 2013). This was evidenced when Fran remarked, *“you would not believe how my identity’s changing”*. Clearly, the evident emotional changes in students and the impact of this on their academic identity are so important to their success. It is a travesty that metrics of success say nothing of these individual realisations and experiences in higher education (Walker, 2003). Once again, connections between emotion and success further substantiate the need for different methodologies, including the qualitative approach and methods utilised in this study. Mixed methodologies can better capture what matters to the participants involved, enabling a more holistic approach to understanding and representing students’ success than static, homogenous measures (Bennett, 2018).

Conclusion

The project discussed in this paper was designed to influence the development of new methodologies that can account for the complexity of success. While current education and government documents characterise success through rigid equations (see Department of Education and Training, 2017, p. 19), drawing conclusions based upon ‘hard’ data alone can tell a skewed story. In particular, there is an under emphasis on methodologies that “engage the subjective, emotional and experiential dimensions” (Burke, 2012, p. 70) of education engagement. Qualitative data can provide a more holistic perspective of students’ experiences in higher education to supplement reductive views of performance represented by grades and figures alone.

An analysis of interviews with ten enabling students produced three key findings. Firstly, all participants recognised the prevailing neoliberal discourse of success determined through grades and attrition rates. Each participant, however, rejected this definition. Secondly, all students perceived success and failure as subjective and personal, influenced by different backgrounds, experiences and aspirations. To illustrate this, some students drew on anecdotes to explain examples of success that accompanied personal failure or withdrawal from an enabling program. Others defined success as learning, regardless of the graded outcome. Lastly, definitions of success were commonly explored through emotion, with all participants recognising that a key successful outcome of their enabling education was a development of confidence and a sense of feeling like a legitimate higher education student.

All students rejected the notion that success can be defined solely through grades and retention. Each spoke to the fluid and variable nature of success and personally valued the impact that enabling education has had on their changing feelings of adequacy. These three findings support

the premise that current measures of success in higher education need re-evaluating. Notions of success must be contemporised to do justice to its complex nature. With limiting definitions of success reproducing social inequalities, revisiting current methodologies in enabling education can also enact a commitment to the pursuit of social justice by ensuring that success is recognised in its many diverse forms. Using enabling education as a focus emphasises the inequitable impacts of preserving current definitions and measures of success in all higher education. This highlights wider, macro-level implications for education in all lifelong learning contexts.

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