
“Success to me is learning, regardless of my grade”:

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 and practice, yet esteemed indicators of student success are limited to quantifiable measures. Contemporary government and higher education documents state that student success refers to the proportion of units of study passed divided by all units of study attempted (Department of Education & Training, 2017; Oh & Kim, 2016; York, 2015). This objectifying view of student success has become so commonplace that a clear discourse of success now operates where the term is used in education spaces without clarification. This is despite the fact that success is fluid, subjective and highly personal.

‘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 may view success in ways that disrupts conventional interpretations.

Rigid definitions of student success are also reproducing mainstream ‘elitist’ views of what constitutes valued, legitimate higher education outcomes. Success rates in higher education figures refer to the numbers of students who have demonstrated circumscribed knowledges and valued learning outcomes by set, measurable methods. Students from non-traditional 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 be at higher risk of ‘failure’ or attrition.

A growing body of research is consequently challenging the suitability of limited current measures of success in higher education (Burke, 2012; Burke et al., 2017; Bennett et al., 2015; Burke, et al., 2016; Oh & Kim, 2016; O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Regulation of student success in this manner however, ensures the continual production of student graduates who possess certain skill sets and knowledges valuable to the government and its economic agenda (Dawkins, 1997). This might explain why despite gaining traction in the university sector (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018) student success is relatively under-researched and under-theorised in treatments that lie beyond simplistic understandings.

What is clear is 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. In 2018, to help influence the development of new methodologies that can account for the complexity of success, I commenced a project designed to help me better understand the perceptions of success of enabling students. It must be noted that issues of equity are not exclusive to enabling students and exists across all areas of education. However, drawing on narratives from a student cohort with higher numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Bennett, et al., 2015) can serve to highlight more easily the inequitable impacts of preserving current definitions and measures of success in education. Ten interviews were conducted with a cross section of enabling students. The interviews were designed to elicit students' perceptions of educational success. I was also seeking to capture their every day, taken for granted practices and lived educational experiences.

As discussed in my paper entitled, "*When does hot become cold?: Why we should be disrupting narrow and exclusive discourses of success in higher education*" (Allen, 2020), analysis of the interview data extrapolated three consistent findings that challenge the validity of current measures of success. Each respondent recognised that the government frame success in neoliberal 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 was noted as learning, regardless of the outcome. This was not limited to learning measurable academic skills, but also learning about university systems and 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 measurable.

Success was also rationalised 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 sense of belonging.

The emergent themes from the qualitative data overwhelmingly recognise the vital role that individual 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 therefore support the principle that more equitable forms of measurements of success are required that recognise and value the histories of the participants (Bennett & Lumb, 2019), as well as their individual goals, aspirations and accomplishments.

While these themes emerged from the narratives of enabling students, ultimately, an alternative, 're-thinking' of success and its associated measures is required for all students. As academics and equity practitioners, we must continue to push back against discourses of success that cater to government and economic agendas and silence the successes occurring for students that fall beyond that. Success is not a fixed or quantifiable term, in the same way that students are not a uniform group. The treatment of success as fluid, compound and highly complex 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.

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