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Success and failure in higher education on uneven playing fields

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Executive Summary of the Findings

Higher education is in a state of massification (Sharma, 2008). More people are accessing higher education than ever before, and targets are being set to further increase these levels of participation. It is in the context of widening participation agendas that this study examines student aspiration, success and failure within their first experiences of assessment at university, to improve knowledge and practice to better support students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) groups. Exploring forms of cultural and social 'capital' that first year university students draw upon from their prior schooling to support their transitional journey into higher education, specifically we aim to better understand contributing influences on students to ensure success in higher education.

The questions that guide this study are:

- To what extent do Australian higher education reports informing current policy account for experiences of student success and/or failure?
- How do first year equity students experience academic failure and success?
- How do first year equity students mobilise and make sense of their first experiences of failure and success in higher education?

Crucial to these agendas are an examination of who is currently afforded a place in higher education and who may eventually be afforded a place. School sectors are becoming increasingly segregated as some families, with predominantly middle/upper class backgrounds, are able to choose where they send their children to school while others are not afforded the same privilege, creating social hierarchies. Our review of key documents highlights that students are entering university from increasingly diverse backgrounds and this brings into question whether the definition of equity should be extended beyond low SES in government policy.

The study includes a secondary quantitative analysis of existing anonymised institutional data. Participants in this part of the study comprised 7,239 domestic students (2,744 males, 4,495 females) enrolled across four undergraduate courses (commerce, education, nursing and civil engineering) in one academic year (2016) from four different faculties at various campuses of a large metropolitan and regional university in Victoria. The students ranged in age from 16.91 years to 71.7 years ($M = 24.49$ years, $SD = 6.52$ years). This phase of the data collection investigated the effects of SES and Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) on student failure and drop out rates. More specifically, when controlling for other student characteristics and demographic factors, the unique contributions of SES and ATAR are of interest to the key findings of the study. The significance of failing one unit identified that this group of students were at higher risk of dropping out than students who did not fail any units. Three variables that were seen to statistically significantly influence academic failure and drop out were: entry based on ATAR (versus non-ATAR); studying part-time and off-campus (external); and being mature age (over 24). However, the effect size on academic failure and drop out varied from small or small to medium. It is important to note that an examination of interaction effects identified the highest failure and drop out rates amongst low SES and part-time students. Significantly for this study, SES as a categorisation alone is not adequate for predicting academic failure and drop out, supporting an argument for widening the definition of equity groupings.

Within the agenda to widen access to higher education across Australia and internationally, attention is often drawn to the quantifiable measurement of impact and progress. Taking an approach which acknowledges the complexity of access in higher education, we have used multiple methods and have also drawn on qualitative data to gain a richer understanding of the ways to examine what influences and informs student aspiration, success and failure in

higher education. To this end, focus groups and interviews were held with 24 students across two higher education institutions, Deakin University in Victoria and the University of Wollongong in New South Wales. Ten of the 24 students were enrolled at Deakin University and 14 were recruited from the student body of the University of Wollongong. Taking heed from the quantitative findings, the qualitative data was collected from students across a range of equity and diversity groupings and did not focus solely on SES, nor ATAR. The research was conducted at the University of Wollongong during the first half of the academic year in both institutions.

The key findings from the qualitative data demonstrated that the connections between first year students' experience of success and failure are related to outcomes of their first assessment in higher education. For students transitioning from secondary school into higher education or coming into higher education after taking time off from formal education, receiving high marks/grades on their first assignments reaffirms them as belonging in higher education. When they are not as successful on the first assignment, often they relate this to them not knowing what is expected both on the assignment and how it will be assessed. This can lead first year students to question if they belong in higher education.

Support networks and structures are important in the ways in which students experience success. How and where they mobilise these networks from multiple entities both within and external to higher education institutions are also significant; this includes support by family and friends, Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programs (HEPPP) and programs such as Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS), and support and feedback from lecturers and tutors. It would appear that there is a trend for students to access supports from further afield than directly from the academic staff within their degree of study. This disconnection between the academic and the student is also related to the notion of success and belonging, and failure and not belonging in higher education.

The findings suggest that SES alone might not be an adequately sensitive category for predicting academic failure and drop out, and the literature for some time has suggested there is a need for a shift in the higher education sector in the way in which equity students are considered. The findings of this study illustrate that clichéd and simplistic understandings of equity are no longer useful. Alongside this we would argue for consideration of a change in funding arrangements for students to include a widening model of point in time and place supports for students to ensure their likelihood of success prior to and throughout their first year of higher education.

Future research that examines more in-depth pathways to higher education than are currently considered in the Australian context are recommended. Many of the students from this study could be considered as part of multiple equity groupings. As the diversity of our students increase, seeking tailored support strategies embedded within the curricula for the students in front of us matters to ensure that the increasingly uneven playing fields are addressed before they become even more segregated and exclusive.

Introduction

The three research questions guiding this study are:

- To what extent do Australian higher education reports informing current policy account for experiences of student success and/or failure?
- How do first year equity students experience academic failure and success?
- How do first year equity students mobilise and make sense of their first experiences of failure and success in higher education?

The study employed a mixed methods approach. It drew upon three separate methods to address the research questions listed above:

- 1) critical review of Australian reports influencing higher education policy
- 2) secondary analyses of an existing quantitative data set from two Australian universities
- 3) focus group interviews with students from two Australian universities.

The aim of the study was to explore first year higher education students' lived experiences of success and failure after their first assessment experience (summative and formative) in higher education. We explored the meanings students ascribe to academic success or failure and how they mobilised different forms of capital (including those from secondary school) in dealing with these episodes of failure and/or success in their first assessment. The study is underpinned by Kahu and Nelson's (2017) notion of 'mechanisms of student success', wherein we purposefully eschewed the transition metaphor by avoiding a deficit approach that suggests that there is a single and final identity destination for success. Instead, we used their 'engagement in the educational interface' framework and Pierre Bourdieu's 'capital' (1973) to explore some of the elements involved in the stratification experienced in higher education; specifically, those elements that connect to, or that impede, academic success and attainment. The motivation for adopting this approach centred on the need to develop a deeper understanding of some of the persistent inequalities involved in schooling and how these impact on the personal, academic and achievement attributes required within most higher education institutions.

An important feature of the study is its incorporation of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu's notion was applied to understandings about the complex interplay of identity formation and the ways in which success or failure was conceptualised by the participants in this study. The Bourdieusian conception of habitus is about the individualisation of action via personal decision-making. Habitus is the collection of dispositions (conscious/sub-conscious) that "... stress the bodily as well as cognitive basis of action" (Swartz, 1997, p. 101) of individuals. While contemporary personal identity formation is popularly framed on "... notions of individual choice and responsibility" the concept of habitus "... has provided a means of counteracting the view that everything is possible and that individuals have complete freedom to choose futures of their own making" (Bathmaker, 2015, p. 64).

Recent higher education policy and practise has interpreted student success and failure with achieving or not achieving 'key educational milestones', these being successful completion of Year 12 or equivalent by age 19 and being fully engaged in education, training or a full-time job at age 24 (Lamb & Huo, 2017, p. 2). The academic literature on student success and failure in higher education often highlights entrant trajectories over the course of a period of study focusing primarily on notions of 'productive participation' (Watson, 2013, p. 412). Productive participation relates to the level of familiarity and capacity students possess in working confidently and successfully with the institutional demands of studying in a higher education institution. It can be often reflected in the level of 'academic capital' possessed by a student; this form of capital reflects the "... legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge profitable to students" (p. 416) within the higher education sector. Invariably the skills and knowledges needed by students to be successful in higher education translate "...

into academic attainment and award, and therefore a higher value cultural capital” (p. 417). Watson claims that academic capital builds as students become increasingly familiar with and more engaged in higher education. Academic capital also involves students successfully working with and understanding the disciplinary knowledge base associated with the particular higher education setting. This concept of academic capital also incorporates:

“... adherence to referencing and citation conventions, orthodox approaches to searching for, accessing and critically appraising knowledge sources and to justifying and substantiating ideas and arguments; and the legitimated style and delivery of oral presentations and written work, including the structure and tone of academic writing.” (p. 417)

While alternative, more embodied, understandings of academic success exist (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018), the productive participation and procurement of academic capital is the most common barometer of higher education academic success. Such understandings mean that academic failure is generally interpreted as the incapacity of a student to work confidently and successfully with the institutional demands of studying at a university and a lack of academic capital. Success is also often linked to the completion of the degree of study and student failure in higher education in this regard is often portrayed in ‘deficit’ (Devlin, 2013), where students themselves or their institution are viewed as the problem. This can frequently be interpreted as a sociocultural misalignment between background and middle-class higher education culture. Whatever reason exists for academic failure, successful student integration into higher education, particularly of those from less advantaged backgrounds, is problematic (Braxton, 2000; Peelo & Wareham, 2002).

This study focused on first year student experience of success and failure and the relationship between outcomes of their first assessment in higher education and feelings of success and belonging. It is important for research exploring student success and failure in higher education to focus on the first year (and the first assignment) as Kift (2009) argues:

“the first year of university study is arguably the most crucial time for engaging students in their learning community and equipping them with the requisite skills, not only to persist, but to be successful and independent in their new learning throughout their undergraduate years and for a lifetime of professional practice.” (p. 40)

First year university students face a number of challenges transitioning into higher education including unrealistic expectations of academic study, lack of knowledge and skills required for independent learning, adopting superficial approaches to learning and disengagement from study (Kift, 2015). First year students also struggle to understand the link between criteria and standards in a given discipline and the requirements of assessment tasks (Blair, 2017).

For students transitioning from secondary school into higher education or coming into higher education after taking time off from formal education, receiving high marks/grades on their first assignments reaffirms them as belonging in higher education. When they are not as successful on the first assignment they often relate this to them not knowing what is expected both on the assignment and how it will be assessed. This can lead first year students to question if they belong in higher education. Therefore it is crucial for assessments to be well-designed and for feedback practices to facilitate students' transition into university (e.g. Kift & Moody, 2009; Thomas 2018) particularly in the first assessment of the first year in higher education. Assessment supports students by developing their foundational skills, guiding them towards effective study and supporting them in becoming independent learners (Gill, 2015). High quality assessment and feedback can reassure first year students about their progress, maintain or stimulate interest in their studies, and help them to integrate into an unfamiliar environment (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

To this end, this study broadly explores success and failure in higher education through three parts. *Part One* explores the schooling and higher education policy research landscape, *Part Two* involves secondary quantitative analysis of a large dataset to look at relationships of student characteristics and socioeconomic status to success and failure, and *Part Three* explores how students narrated their first experiences of assessment in higher education and the forms of capital they choose to mobilise during these experiences, particularly for students who belong to multiple equity groups. This research is original as it triangulates students' perceptions and experiences of failure and success in higher education with actual demographics and achievement data as well as popular research report documents, with the aim of improving and enabling greater support for first year students from a strengths-based perspective, and extending understandings of how capital is mobilised.

Although this study focused broadly on equity with a subcategory focus on SES in the quantitative dataset, we argue from the position that equity groups are in fact diverse, nuanced and dynamic intra-groups and cannot be essentialised into low SES groups. This position is aligned with previous reports (Burke et al., 2016; Zacharias, 2017) and studies (O'Shea, 2016; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018) calling for a reimagining of students considered to be a part of equity groups in a positive strength-based conceptualisation rather than a marginalised and deficit imagining.

Part One: Critical Review of Key Reports

Key Findings

1. The policy drivers of higher education legitimise and shape particular values and practices and influence ways that change can be enacted across particular moments in time in the higher education and schooling landscapes.
2. The promise of higher education suggests stronger, more in-depth understanding of the impediments that some underrepresented and marginalised students encounter, particularly in their first year of higher education in Australia.
3. Widening participation agendas often adopt a deficit conception of equity groups with failure attributed to the individual rather than systems.
4. Who is afforded a place in the increasingly segregated school sector, has the potential to have a significant impact on the transition from secondary to tertiary education and will require a more complex conceptualisation of equity groups.

This section outlines key learnings from a critical review of reports that currently inform higher education in Australia. The question guiding this focus is:

To what extent do current Australian higher education reports informing current higher education policy account for experiences of student success and/or failure?

These reports informed our findings and provided key themes and discourses to frame our subsequent quantitative and qualitative data analysis. These include:

- the policy drivers of higher education
- the promise of higher education
- widening participation
- who is afforded a place.

To inform our understanding of the experience of first year university students outlined in *Part Three* we undertook a critical review of key reports informing current policy and conversations in access and equity in higher education within Australia in order to map out the underlying dominant discourses that are underpinning the current debates in higher education in Australia. The reports include:

- Transforming Australia's Higher Education System also known as "The Bradley Review" (Bradley et. al., 2008)
- The Evaluation of HEPPP 2017 Report (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017)
- The Australian Student Equity Program and Institutional Change: Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual (Zacharias, 2017)
- Uneven Playing Field: The State of Australian Schools (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016)
- Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes (Australian Government, 2016)
- Counting the Cost of Lost Opportunity in Australian Education (Lamb & Huo, 2017).

The reports were chosen as impacting on a national rather than individual state level and were examined in order firstly to set the scene in terms of Commonwealth and higher education agendas. The final three reports relate specifically to the impact of the Commonwealth's agendas on the school sector and how this positions and is aligned with higher education discourses.

Although not strictly a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we did follow Fairclough's approach (2012) where he argues that:

"The predominant form of critique associated with CDA and critical social research more generally has been ideology critique. But we can

distinguish three forms of critique which are relevant to CDA: ideological, rhetorical, and strategic critique ... Whereas ideological critique focuses on the effects of semiosis on social relations of power, and rhetorical critique on persuasion (including manipulation) in individual texts or talk, what we might call, 'strategic critique' focuses on how semiosis figures within the strategies pursued by groups of social agents to change societies in particular directions." (pp. 465-466)

The Policy Drivers of Higher Education

Contemporary dominant discourses in higher education legitimise and shape particular values and practices and they do so through the influence they have in enacting change. Critical policy sociology (Gale, 2001) and critical policy analysis (Taylor, 1997) are distinct from education policy analysis for their *critical* attention to issues of power. In this report, our analysis was limited to the ways in which the various reports influence policy and how this can be seen as 'policy as text' and is enacted as discourse (Ball, 1993). Ball (1993) notes, "we need to appreciate the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of 'truth' and 'knowledge', as discourses" (p. 13). We focus on critiquing sociological matters of educational access and equity in higher education (Gale, 2001). Like Ozga (1990) we argue for the importance of analysis that is both macro-level and micro-level. In doing so we are particularly focused on the structural gaps and individual perceptions of policy enactments (p. 359) across particular moments in time in the higher education and schooling landscapes.

The Promise of Higher Education

Key documents driving policy globally and in Australia regarding higher education reflect an increasing acceptance of integration with the key elements of a knowledge-based economy (skilled labour forces matched by knowledge-intensive industries). Broadening student participation in higher education aligns with an enhanced productivity and economic growth agenda founded upon 'human capital' development. In the Australian Government's *Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes*, framed by a 'skilled workforce' and 'creative community' discourse, school education and higher education specifically are both positioned as the means through which national economic performance is seen to be activated (Australian Government, 2016). The performance of students at all levels of the educational continuum is important in realising the key objectives of enhanced national productivity, increased workforce participation, stronger and more vibrant communities, and economic prosperity (Australian Government, 2016).

In Australia, continued expansion of higher education is dependent upon the inclusion of students from underrepresented groups and near universal student participation, which has in recent times been mediated through an equity lens (see Gale et al., 2013). This has been recognised with the setting of student population targets, "(40 per cent of 25–34 year olds to hold a bachelor degree by 2025) and this is dependent on achieving its equity target (i.e. 20 per cent of undergraduate students to come from low SES backgrounds by 2020)" (Gale et al., 2013, p. 11). Policy aspirations of this kind suggest stronger, more in-depth understanding of the impediments that some underrepresented and marginalised students encounter, particularly in their first year of higher education in Australia.

In the Australian education system there is a pronounced link between student achievement and inequalities based on background (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2016). School outcomes in Australia are strongly influenced by the interplay between socioeducational factors as distinct from what schools and teachers do (Bonnor & Sheppard, 2016; Skourdoumbis, 2014) and imbalances connected to a growing school sector stratification in Australia that exacerbates disadvantage (Bentley, 2017; Rowe,

2017). Through the critical review of the literature we traversed the landscape upon which access to higher education in Australia is now built. In doing so we considered how students from all backgrounds can become lost in an era of marketisation, globalisation and sustained disadvantage.

Higher education is considered vital to conferring individual benefit "... in terms of personal development, lifelong income earning capacity, and career and social status" (Rizvi & Lingard 2017, p. 6), but so too it must deliver in terms of a nation's economic well-being by tapping into the human capital narratives of the 'knowledge-based economy' (i.e. innovation, creativity, flexibility and so on) and the demand for advanced skills. Australian higher education as elsewhere is now a mass system (Marginson, 2008). There has been an increase in student numbers, particularly from 2009 with the introduction of reforms geared towards the entry of "non-traditional students previously excluded from university participation" (Gale & Parker, 2017, p. 81). Indeed, higher education policy articulations in Australia from 2009 have focused on two elements: widening the participation of students from lower and underrepresented socioeconomic groups and improving economic competitiveness by enhancing the nation's skills base via the leveraging of gender, ableism, race and class, in an effort to disrupt historical power disparities.

The focus of these policies are at the entry level into higher education. The *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) not only focused on widening participation but also on completion and retention of students as an indicator of success and called for more research into this. Increasingly the retention of students to ensure completion of a qualification is now gaining attention (see *Higher Education Standards Panel*, 2018; Zacharias & Brett, 2018).

Successive government reforms represent a determined government ambition around the notion of levelling the playing field. This imagery is connected to the global idea of engaging competitively in the 'knowledge economy' and aligning more broadly with the 'neo-liberal imaginary' (see Rizvi & Lingard, 2011; Gale & Tranter, 2011). It also acknowledges the challenge of social equity by aiming for greater levels of fairness and social justice (Gale & Parker, 2017). This aspect of Australian higher education policy has been a historic and enduring feature over a period of four decades.

Access and aspiration has remained uppermost in government objectives for higher education policy in Australia, underwritten by a range of funding arrangements to assist in implementation. Nonetheless there has also arisen in recent times a general public disquiet that Gale and Parker (2017) characterise as "... a sense of panic and crisis, that something was awry in higher education" (p. 83) in Australia. Increasing numbers of low SES students in higher education find themselves trapped by, according to OECD data, declining levels of system quality and performance. This itself has historical roots in the policy terrain of higher education which we now explore.

Building on from the *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), Australian higher education has become an increasingly destabilised policy terrain and driven by targets. The Bradley review focused on two targets, one of which strove for attainment around degree qualifications and the participation of low socioeconomic status students within each university, and a second which tracked system quality and performance as benchmarked against other OECD nations. Targets centred on increasing student participation were: (1) that by 2020 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year olds will hold a bachelor's level qualification, up from the current 29 per cent and, (2) 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments will be students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. According to Lynch, Walker-Gibbs and Herbert (2015) "[t]he Bradley Review made strong arguments for the need for a shift towards universal higher education in order to support Australia's economic and social progress ... advocating, among other things, targeted outreach programs" (p. 146). These outreach programs were designed specifically to increase aspirations to higher education in groups that "lack awareness of higher education and lack

understanding of what is involved in preparing for it” and “are not aware of the benefits of a higher education” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 40). The deficit discourse or rhetoric underpinning these objectives reflect judgements about who aspires and who is afforded a place in higher education, to which we now turn our focus.

Widening Participation and Higher Education

A persistent level of inequality in Australian higher education is characterised by the relatively low level of participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Chesters & Watson, 2013). This is despite the expansion in higher education over recent years. Research suggests various factors contribute to the low rates of participation in higher education from students of disadvantaged backgrounds, including: lack of financial resources; lower educational aspirations; generally lower levels of educational attainment and a lack of awareness of the possibilities and benefits of tertiary education (Bradley et al., 2008). Further, equity students who do enter higher education are more likely to drop out. Common discourses around these students often adopt a deficit conception (Walker-Gibbs, Ludecke & Kline, 2015) with failure portrayed as the ‘fault’ of students who are deemed in ‘deficit’ (Devlin, 2013) and who don’t belong in universities (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003).

Students who fail may be ‘othered’ by their peers, teachers and institutions (O’Shea, Lysaght, Roberts & Harwood, 2016). Poor performance is attributed to a lack of effort, lack of care, not studying, goofing off and that it could be rectified if they put in more work and got serious (McMillan & Reed, 1993). Students who lack institutional habitus (Reay, 2004) can be perceived as requiring remedial support that is often accompanied by a deficit thinking discourse that can end in “blaming the victim” (O’Shea et al., 2016). Instead, this study takes a strengths-based perspective that argues equity students come to university with various forms of capital. O’Shea (2015a; 2015b) in her work on First-in-Family highlighted the value of Yosso’s (2005) ‘community cultural wealth’ framework as a useful alternative lens to the deficit discourse typical of equity student groups who underachieve. The children of student participants in O’Shea’s (2015b) study were a source of motivation for their higher education study, as mothers wished to serve as role models to them.

A study currently being conducted by Ajjawi, Bennett and colleagues (under review) into failure and persistence in higher education identified that experiences of failing an academic unit (or subject) in a course of study is reasonably common (up to 52 per cent in one course). Students from various equity backgrounds including low SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, regional and remote and those who were first-in-family, and mothers, described strong aspirational capital and career motivations when they experienced failure. However, these students were still more likely to drop out of their course. Therefore, students come to university with multiple forms of capital but equity students continue to fail individual units and drop out from their courses at higher rates. How equity students mobilise their forms of capital around assessment and experiences of failing an academic unit (or multiple units) is not known. The study outlined in this report seeks to understand this aspect in first year students, to better understand how their previous forms of capital (from schooling) interplay with their refashioning of their university student identity (and other intersecting identities) in their experiences of success and failure in the first year of study in university.

Who is Afforded a Place?

Australia is a valuable site for studying policy tensions and levels of inclusivity for students from marginalised groups, exposing who is afforded a place at university. Societal inequality tends to be reflected in a country’s education system (see Perry, 2009) and inequality has steadily grown in Australia since the 1990s (OECD, 2017). Across several markers of inequality, the gap between those ‘with’ and those ‘without’ has grown increasingly stark. In

terms of the highest and lowest income earners, wage growth and precarious employment, Australia is considered to have a higher Gini coefficient (higher levels of inequality) than Canada {OECD, #3239}. An OECD Economic Survey described these gaps as follows:

“inclusiveness has been eroded ... households in upper income brackets have benefited disproportionately from Australia’s long period of economic growth. Real incomes for the top quintile of households grew by more than 40% between 2004 and 2014 while those for the lowest quintile only grew by about 25%.” (OECD, 2017)

To that end, we are interested in how, at a time in Australia where we are experiencing an increasingly segregated school sector, this has the potential to have a significant impact on the transition from secondary to tertiary education. We argue that secondary school is one of the most significant ‘feeders’ or structured pathways for higher education, and studies consistently demonstrate the link between secondary schools ranked high in terms of the number of students achieving an ATAR and higher education aspirations or ambitions (Boyle, 1966; McDonough, 1997). In terms of size, scope and levels of government funding, Australia maintains one of the largest privatised secondary school systems in the OECD (Perry, Lubienski & Ladwig, 2016; Watson & Ryan, 2010; Windle, 2009). Therefore, by focusing on the Australian higher education sector and key policy reforms, we consider broader measures of educational access and participation for targeted equity groups.

The Evaluation of HEPPP 2017 Report

In Australia, key policy initiatives such as the federal government-funded Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) fund universities to “undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low SES backgrounds and improve their retention and completion rates.” The introduction of HEPPP in 2010 (ACIL Allen Consulting 2017) increased targeted funding to better support marginalised and non-traditional students to access higher education. According to Brett (2017), “The terms ‘equity’, ‘performance’ and ‘accountability’ are not commonly linked concepts in higher education literature” (p. 10). However, enrolment across all targeted equity groups—including students from a non-English speaking background, students experiencing a disability, women in a non-traditional area of study, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, low SES students, regional and remote students—have all increased. However, it is unclear whether this increase is a direct result of the HEPPP policies and targeted approach, because evaluations of HEPP exclude analyses of equity groups other than low SES, despite all equity groups increasing shares of enrolment since 2001 (Australian Government, 2016). A commissioned review of HEPPP described the effects as follows:

“Across a number of measures, low SES individuals are increasingly accessing higher education — the number of low SES individuals applying for, being offered a place at, commencing at and enrolling in university has increased considerably. Growth on each of these measures is higher in the low SES group than the medium and high SES cohort. The growth has seen the share of higher education students from low SES background increase from 14.8% to 16.1% ... Despite this growth, however, low SES students continue to be underrepresented in higher education.” (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017, our emphasis p. xvi).

It is argued in this review, that once at university, “low SES students have lower retention, success and completion rates than other students — econometric analysis indicates that the extents of these differences have fallen slightly relative to the pre-HEPPP period 2006-2009” (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017, p. xvi).

Students from low SES backgrounds are increasingly accessing higher education, even though critics claim that both retention rates and standards of academic rigour are dropping (see *Higher Education Standards Panel*, 2018; Sellar & Lingard, 2018). These criticisms simply further substantiate deficit discourses around low SES (Gale, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2017). At the same time Sellar and Gale (2011) point out “aspiration raising strategies tend to focus on instilling desire for a particular end, rather than engaging more strongly with the situation of different groups and with questions of what matters for them” (p. 117).

Until 2017, there had been no national investigation of the design and implementation of institutional HEPPP programs in different universities and how these meso-structures contributed to student outcomes at institutional and sector levels. The next section focuses on the 2017 review and these findings.

The Australian Student Equity Program and Institutional Change: Paradigm Shift

The Australian Student Equity Program and Institutional Change: Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual report by Nadine Zacharias (2017) reviewed HEPPP and its implementation in universities since its inception in 2010. A key finding of this report was that at the individual university level the way in which the equity ‘group’ of low SES was defined varied from university to university and resulted in different approaches. In particular the report found that:

- In practice, ‘students from low SES backgrounds’ often became the shorthand way for addressing educational disadvantage experienced by all three groups identified in the Bradley Review: students from regional and remote backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and low SES students, although the cohort could also include additional equity groups [The report includes minor commentary on non-English speaking background and students with disabilities (Figure 2 page 28)].
- A narrow focus on low SES as SA1¹ misses the broader point that HEPPP funded curriculum and student support initiatives in particular have enabled the retention and success of a much greater share of the increasingly diverse undergraduate cohort in Australian universities.
- Equity practitioners are able to deal with the complexity in their target communities and have developed interventions which address, and often overcome, the structural barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education (Zacharias, 2017, p. 6).

The *HEPPP 2017 Report* mapped current understandings of the educational context in Australia and illustrated the economic imperatives impacting on student aspirations for higher education. Potentially contrary to other reports and their findings, Zacharias’ report argues that “the introduction of HEPPP and demand-driven funding, has been a demonstrable success and has broken the trend of stagnant participation of people from low SES backgrounds in higher education” while at the same time noting “at the institutional level, outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds were highly variable and it is difficult to establish any influence of HEPPP funded work on those outcomes at the program level” (Zacharias, 2017, p. 7). Key issues identified are the need to broaden understandings or definitions of what constitutes success, the challenge of short-term funding to address long-term systemic issues and the buy in of all key stakeholders in the HEPPP program or

¹ SA1 is Statistical Area 1 see:

[http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1270.0.55.001~July%202016~Main%20Features~Statistical%20Area%20Level%20\(SA1\)~10013](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1270.0.55.001~July%202016~Main%20Features~Statistical%20Area%20Level%20(SA1)~10013)

initiative being implemented. Of interest to this project is the recommendations that the Participation Target that focuses on low SES should be revisited and widened to include sub-targets more relevant to institutions and that:

“The HEPPP Guidelines should legitimise other equity groups to address compound disadvantage while the focus remains on poverty and the sociocultural disadvantage it creates. The definition of socioeconomic disadvantage should be extended to include the next quartile up (26–50 per cent of the population) which experiences similar disadvantage in terms of educational attainment and material wealth.” (Zacharias, 2017, p. 11)

A final recommendation of the report is that “The current review of the equity groups should develop a target group definition, or a blended model of group and individualised indicators, which is more accurate and user-friendly in targeting equity interventions at groups and individuals” (Zacharias, 2017, p. 12).

Uneven Playing Field: The State of Australian Schools

In 2016 Bonnor and Shepherd released a report for the Centre for Policy Development titled *Uneven Playing Field: The State of Australian Schools*. The report begins by asking “what does the *My School* website data tell us about the current state of Australian schools?” (p. 7). *My School* was introduced in 2010 and has been used as data and evidence of how well (or not) schools are seen to be performing since then (ACARA, 2018). A consequence of *My School* is that it has shaped the Australian education system by providing a public portal where policymakers and families alike can “judge a school’s educational performance” (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016 p. 22). For example, national testing score rankings are published within the publicly accessible profile which “would apparently coerce schools, systems and governments to ‘lift their game’” (p.22). The downside of this however is that it is often limited to the middle class—those with more cultural capital—who are able to ‘choose’ the schools where their children attend, reinforcing class stratification. Furthermore, schools with higher institutional capital can also ‘filter’ students in and out of the school itself, as well as subjects through internal streaming, which conflates school success with student success. In 2011 we were reminded in what was to become known as Gonski’s *Review of Funding for Australian Schools* (2011) that “the data provided by *My School* is providing public access to information about school performance and resources ... [w]hile these reforms lay a good foundation for addressing Australia’s schooling challenges, they need to be supported by an effective funding framework” (p. xiv). The challenge set by the Gonski report was that the current system was imbalanced and essentially inequitable and that funding and resources alone were not enough to address this disadvantage. A strong emphasis of Gonski et al. (2011) was that “Australia’s schools, government and non-government, should be staffed with the very best principals and teachers, those who feel empowered to lead and drive change, and create opportunities for students to learn in new ways to meet their individual needs” (p. xix). This inclusive rhetoric would suggest that all students will be able to be afforded the very best opportunities in each school in which they attend. Fast forward to 2016 and Bonnor and Shepherd’s report is less optimistic, in fact their report “shows that, in the few years since Gonski et al. reported, school equity is declining, especially in metropolitan areas and amongst our secondary schools. A child’s background is having a greater impact on their ability to succeed at school” (p. 7). Bonnor and Shepherd (2016) further suggest that the inequities first described by Gonski have created a system that is rife with privilege and advantage gaps increasing at the cost of those who are falling even further behind. According to Rowe and Lubienski (2017) “the Australian education policy agenda pushes and promotes parents to avoid low-performing schools, and be active and engaged in choosing the ‘best’ school” (p.342). Bonnor and Shepherd (2016) see this choice as being:

“not as simple as a ‘drift to private schools’; the reality is that parents are seeking out schools with higher achieving students in both the government and non-government system. These schools often have barriers to admission such as entrance exams, or commercial fees. As higher achieving students shift to these schools, the pool of students in schools lower down on the socio-educational scale lose much needed diversity and talent in their population.” (p. 27)

The shift in enrolment patterns sees increasing levels of disadvantage in many schools, while schools with predominantly ‘advantaged’ students are able to make choices and decisions about who gets to attend where. This means that those who are most likely to need higher levels of support will become increasingly disadvantaged. Our concern in this research is that those who will aspire to higher education from low SES and disadvantaged backgrounds will find it increasingly difficult to do so.

Student success is often defined as the demonstration of acceptable cultural capital (O’Shea et al. 2016). While defined in this way, success in higher education is also about understanding the personal action/s habitus of individuals. As habitus is the ingrained habits, skills and dispositions which determine the ways individuals see the social world they inhabit, (Bourdieu, 1990), it is important to note how one’s view of the higher education world relates to the personal confidence felt in negotiating their way through it. So, if capital is about resources, habitus involves responses in the sense of “... an unconscious calculation of what is possible, impossible and probable for people in their specific locations in a stratified social order” (Swartz, 2002, p. 645). This means that the personal dispositions of an individual (students for example) and their capacity to act corresponds and is related to a form of naturalisation and/or conditioning.

In 2018 in what is known colloquially as Gonski 2.0 in *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools (2018)* Gonski et al. also acknowledge that “[d]eclining academic performance is jeopardising the attainment of Australia’s aspiration for excellence and equity in school education” (p. viii). Gonski et al. further argues that “within our current model of school education, some students are being left behind while others are not being adequately challenged” (p. ix). Mention is made of the diversity of the Australian population but not the fact that the segregation referred to by Bonnor and Shepard and Rowe and Lubienski above means that the population experienced by the students will become less diverse.

Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes

The concerns about a less diverse student population and schooling more broadly are linked to arguments about how to achieve quality schools and quality educational outcomes that include teacher professional development, a national workforce strategy and school leader support and career opportunities, with much of the focus on improving teacher quality and academic performance. No mention is made of the increasing issue of segregation and the potential shift away from these systems by teachers who are being held accountable to the *My School* website and evidence-based performativity pressures. Linked to this, the way in which teachers and school leaders will feel the impact of this policy can be seen in the document *Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes* published by the Australian Government in 2016 where it is stated:

“Systems and schools should set recruitment targets for STEM qualified teachers and Indigenous teachers. This should include publishing employment data such as the number of teachers in a school against each level (graduate, proficient, highly accomplished and lead) of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers on the My School website.” (p. 10)

There is clear rhetoric around attracting and retaining ‘quality’ school leaders and teachers in difficult to staff and disadvantaged schools, but at the same time the emphasis is on a performance based culture which is being shown in the current national government’s own reports to be in decline, i.e. the targets are not being met despite the funding being provided. Again in this document the Australian Government declares that:

“Across a range of areas the Australian Government is providing extra support to disadvantaged students to ensure they have the assistance they need to succeed. This includes additional funding for students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, Indigenous students, students with low English proficiency and students with disability. Extra funding is also provided for regional, remote and small schools to acknowledge their higher cost to deliver quality education.” (2016, p. 12)

Counting the Cost of Lost Opportunity in Australian Education

The documents thus far have examined whether aspiration to higher education equals access and opportunity — from economic, status and future prosperity perspectives. If the gaps between those who are disadvantaged and those who are already advantaged are increasing what does that mean in terms of aspiration, equity and social justice for the future generations who might have previously accessed higher education opportunities?

In the 2017 report *Counting the Cost of Lost Opportunity in Australian Education*, Lamb and Huo state:

“Education is one of the main mechanisms through which opportunity and success are determined, and is a key predictor of a person’s level of engagement in lifelong work and study. Individuals with higher levels of education have higher-paying jobs, better general health, and a lower likelihood of engaging in crime. They also gain from a range of family household benefits, such as more effective household management and care of their children’s health and education.” (p. 10)

As with the previous reports the risk of non-participation and engagement in education is not evenly spread. Lamb and Huo (2017) further add that “more students fall behind than catch up as they progress through education, with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and remote areas least equipped to take up the challenges ahead. Current arrangements lead to one in four (26 per cent) 24 year olds being disengaged from both study and work, and at risk of long-term marginalisation” (p. 8). The gap between those who are already advantaged by the current education system will widen despite the investment by previous programs such as HEPPP and reports such as Gonski (2011) and the Bradley Review before it.

Discussion and Summary of Findings from the Critical Review

Bourdieu maintained that the education system, through the actions and effects of schooling, reproduces “... all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes” (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 80). The reports examined in this section illustrate the complex interplay of identity formation in terms of success and failure and how the cultural and social reproduction at work in both the school and higher education systems makes social hierarchies and the “... reproduction of these hierarchies appear to be based upon the hierarchy of “gifts”, merits, or skills” (Bourdieu, 1973, p 84). In other words, scholastic attainment and achievement is dependent upon ‘natural’ talent, hard work and cognitive ability. However, Watson (2013) suggests that there is now a “growing appreciation of the

depth and complexity” connected to success and failure in school and higher education with “a movement away from the apparent assumption of deficit towards greater recognition of the role played by institutions themselves” (413). This lends itself to the examination of ‘instructional habitus’, in terms of how higher education institutions may privilege certain types of knowledge, success and failure. This means that the economic and cultural inter-relationships enacted in particular fields (higher education) for example, contributes to the sense of un/familiarity and alienation one feels and moreover, perceived levels of self-efficacy in navigating highly competitive and class-based social spaces such as universities.

In policy and in practice the goals of equity and social mobility tend to be in competition with the segregation of schooling, manifested in who actually gets to come to university anymore. Higher education perhaps more than any other field incorporates a series of stratifying codes and practices dependent upon the combined effect of one’s level of cultural capital and habitus. To understand the sociological processes affecting attainment in higher education involves untangling the “complex social and psychological processes underpinning students’ decision-making practices” (Reay, 1998, p. 520). Bourdieu maintains that the individual habitus is never static, it is constantly evolving as it adapts to the outside world (see Bourdieu, 1990). Nonetheless, the habitus is dependent upon a “rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective, interiorized and permeating both body and psyche” (Reay, 1998, p.521). As such, the experiences of students in higher education coupled with their levels of personal confidence and cognitive ability is dependent upon a crafted habitus that has in turn been moulded by “issues of cultural capital, family and institutional influences, advice, support, certainty, uncertainty and degrees of exclusion” (Reay 1998, 528). Each of these components play their part in destabilising students as they attempt to find their way across uneven playing fields.

A recent review of 14 reports by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE, 2018) also found that “while equity in higher education has seen unprecedented advances over the last decade, there is now less certainty as to whether past trends are any guide to future directions” (p. 3). Overwhelmingly this aligns with the texts under analysis here which indicate a pervasive and ongoing sense as well as evidence that how we conceive of equity and the measures currently in place are disconnected and ineffective. There seems to be a disconnect between the way in which institutions at a school and higher education level and governments take up notions of participation and access within equity groups. The challenge in this for this study is in how this impacts on individual’s perceptions and experiences of success and failure once being afforded access to what is arguably an uneven playing field. *Part Two* of this report focuses on secondary analysis of survey results from 7,239 first year students (2,744 males, 4,495 females) in higher education and their experience of academic success and failure by examining factors relating to SES, ATAR and failure and dropping out in the first year.

Part Two: Quantitative Study

Key Findings

1. Students who failed at least one unit have a higher risk of dropping out than students who did not fail any units.
2. Four variables from our data set were found to have a statistically significant influence on academic failure and drop out. These were entry based on ATAR (versus non-ATAR), studying part-time and off-campus (external), and being mature age (over 24). However, the effect size on academic failure and drop out varies from small or small to medium.
3. SES as a categorisation alone is not adequately sensitive for predicting academic failure and drop out, supporting an argument for widening the definition of equity groupings.
4. Examination of interaction effects identifies highest failure and drop out rates amongst low SES and part-time students.

Methods

The overarching question guiding the research from the study is:

- How do students experience academic failure and success?

Specifically though, the data in this section explored what factors or variables influence the likelihood of failure and drop out of students in one academic year of university. The quantitative data looked at the characteristics of students that influence success, failure and drop out. This is relevant to the study to explore if belonging to an equity group made a student more at risk of failing or dropping out.

The review of policy documents that were integral to this study highlights the potential that students are entering university from widening backgrounds, and questions whether the definition of equity should be widened beyond low SES. To provide some evidence towards this debate we conducted secondary quantitative analysis of existing anonymised institutional data. Participants in this part of the study comprised 7,239 domestic students (2,744 males, 4,495 females) enrolled across four undergraduate courses (commerce, education, nursing and civil engineering) in one academic year (2016). These courses were offered in four different faculties at various campuses of a large metropolitan and regional university in Victoria, Australia. The students ranged in age from 16.91 years to 71.7 years ($M = 24.49$ years, $SD = 6.52$ years).

Specifically, the aim of this phase of the data collection was to investigate the effects of SES and ATAR on student failure and drop out rates. More specifically, the unique contributions of SES and ATAR when controlling for other student characteristics and demographic factors were of interest.

Analysis

The dataset used in this study was gathered from course level student data compiled by the university admissions team from Deakin University. The dataset was compiled and collated in April of the 2017 academic year. Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS v. 25 and JASP open-source software.

The independent or predictor variables were SES, ATAR, Attendance Type (Full- or Part-Time), Age, Attendance Mode (Physical or External Campuses), Gender, Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) status, Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB) status and Disability Status. The outcome variables were failure rate and drop out rate.

For those analyses that required a continuous predictor, failure rate was defined as the ratio of units failed to units attempted within the academic year, expressed as a decimal with values ranging from 0 to 1. For those analyses requiring a grouping variable, failure was defined as whether or not a student had failed at least one unit.

Drop out rate was coded as a dichotomous dummy variable in which 0 indicated that a student was retained in (“R”) or had completed (“C”) their course, while 1 indicated that a student was lost (“L”), had intermitted, taking time off from study (“I”) or had transferred (“T”) to another course. While raw attrition typically refers only to lost (L) and transferred (T) students, the decision to include those who intermit or become inactive here (I) is based on the fact that such students ultimately tend to drop out of the course. Attrition figures given are based on cases of drop out prior to the census date of Trimester 1, 2017.

Stage 1: The Effects of SES, ATAR and Other Demographic/Student Factors on Failure Rate

Stage 1 involved using a combination of regressions, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to establish zero-order relationships between the demographic predictors and the outcome variable of failure rate. Only predictors which achieved a 0.05 level of significance in terms of zero-order prediction of failure rate were progressed to subsequent stages of the analysis.

Stage 2: Confirming the Failure-Drop Out Relationship Across Levels of the Predictors of Interest

Given that SES and ATAR remain the primary predictors of interest, Relative Risks (RRs) were calculated to confirm that failure rate predictions were positively related to drop out rate across the different levels of the predictor variables (High, Medium and low SES groups, and those who were admitted to their courses based on their ATAR versus those who were admitted on another basis).

Stage 3: Interactions Between SES/ATAR and Other Predictor Variables in Predicting Failure and Drop Out Rates

To control for the effects of other demographic factors on the relationship between SES and failure/drop out rates, those predictors which achieved a 0.05 level of significance in Stage 1 were entered alongside SES in a set of two-way interaction ANOVAs. Further analyses exploring interaction between SES and ATAR on failure and drop out were not conducted due to missing data.

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 column three shows the raw numbers of students in each demographic category, and as a percentage of the total number of students in each course and in the overall university cohort (N = 7,239). The number of units failed and attempted were used to calculate failure rate. Mean Units Failed = 0.72 and Mean Units Attempted = 5.49

Table 1 column four describes the number of students who failed at least one unit in each demographic category, as a proportion of the overall sample of students who failed at least one unit. For example, the sum of part-time and full-time students is 2,478 (34.23 per cent of

the overall sample of 7,239) who failed at least one unit. There were 632 part-time students who failed at least one unit, representing 25.5 per cent of the 2,478.

Table 1: Description of students in each demographic and the sample of students who failed at least one unit

Demographics		Description of sample of all students number (percentage)	Description of sample of students who failed
Attendance	Part-Time	1,556 (21.5%)	632 (25.5%)
	Full-Time	5,683 (78.5%)	1,846 (74.5%)
SES	High SES	2,285 (31.6%)	805 (32.5%)
	Medium SES	3,977 (54.9%)	1,304 (52.6%)
	Low SES	934 (12.9%)	354 (14.3%)
	SES not available	43 (0.6%)	15 (0.6%)
Gender	Male	2,744 (37.9%)	1,177 (47.5%)
	Female	4,495 (62.1%)	1,301 (52.5%)
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	ATSI	134 (1.9%)	72 (2.9%)
	Non-ATSI	7,105 (98.1%)	2,406 (97.1%)
Disability	Disability	429 (5.9%)	151 (6.1%)
	No Disability	6,810 (94.0%)	2,327 (93.9%)
Language (English Speaking Background/Non-English Speaking Background)	ESB	7,026 (97.1%)	2,378 (96.0%)
	NESB	213 (2.9%)	100 (4.0%)
Campus	Physical Campuses	6,257 (86.4%)	2,037 (82.2%)
	External	982 (13.6%)	441 (17.8%)
Age	Mature Age	2,003 (27.7%)	679 (27.4%)
	Non-Mature	5,236 (72.3%)	1,799 (72.6%)
Entrance Pathway (Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank)	ATAR	2,949 (40.7%)	901 (36.4%)
	Non-ATAR	4,290 (59.3%)	1,577 (63.6%)

For each demographic, *Table 2* provides the number of students who failed at least one unit and the proportion of all students in each demographic this represents. For example, 632 part time students failed at least one unit. This represents 40.62 per cent of the 1,556 part time students in the overall sample.

Table 2: Number of students in each demographic who failed at least one unit ranked by percentage

	n failed	n overall	% failed
ATSI	72	134	53.73
NESB	100	213	46.95
External	441	982	44.91
Male	1,177	2,744	42.89
Part-Time	632	1,556	40.62
Low SES	354	934	37.90
Non-ATAR	1,577	4,290	36.76
High SES	805	2,285	35.23
Disability	151	429	35.20
SES not available	15	43	34.88
Non-Mature	1,799	5,236	34.36
ALL	2,478	7,239	34.23
No Disability	2,327	6,810	34.17
Mature Age	679	2,003	33.90
Non-ATSI	2,406	7,105	33.86
ESB	2,378	7,026	33.85
Medium SES	1,304	3,977	32.79
Physical Campuses	2,037	6,257	32.56
Full Time	1,846	5,683	32.48
ATAR	901	2,949	30.55
Female	1,301	4,495	28.94

Stage 1

Regression Analysis of Variables and Academic Failure

A linear regression model was constructed to calculate the relative effect of various demographic predictor variables on the outcome variable, which was defined as the proportion or ratio of units failed to units attempted. For example, a ratio of 1 would indicate that a student had failed all the units attempted. This outcome variable was chosen in preference to the raw number of units failed, since the underlying psychometrics (normality and Durbin-Watson statistic) were better. Moreover, the total number of units attempted represents a ceiling for the number of units it was possible to fail, and therefore was controlled for in the model. Finally, in order to approximate a more normal distribution, those cases where no units were failed were removed from this part of the analysis (since the large number of cases with a ratio of zero would greatly skew the distribution).

Seven predictor variables were entered into the multiple regression. A significant regression equation was found, $F(7,874) = 19.94$, $p = .000$, with the model explaining 14 per cent of the overall variance in the outcome. *Table 3* below shows the seven predictor variables, their correlation with the outcome variable (standardised beta coefficients), and whether or not they significantly predicted the outcome. SES could not be entered in the regression and was analysed using ANOVA.

Table 3: Standardised coefficients and significance values for the seven predictors

Predictor	Beta (correlation)	Significance (p-value)
ATAR	-.101	.002*
Gender	.033	.296
ATSI	.018	.564
NESB	.032	.316
Attendance Type	.288	.000*
Age	.132	.000*
Disability	.000	.994

Note: the direction/sign of the results may be interpreted as follows: Gender was dummy-coded such that 1 = female and 2 = male. ATSI, NESB and Disability status were coded as 1 = no and 2 = yes, hence higher scores indicate the presence of ATSI, NESB or disability status whereas lower scores indicate their absence. Attendance type was coded as 1 = full-time and 2 = part-time. An asterisk* indicates that the prediction was significant at an alpha value of 0.05.

Table 4: Mean and SD of failure rate for each SES group

SES	M	SD
High	0.35	0.48
Medium	0.33	0.47
Low	0.38	0.49
n/a	0.35	0.48

Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons showed that **none** of the pairwise differences between the groups were significant at the 0.05 level, with the exception of Low-Medium.

Stage 2

Relative Risks for Each SES Group

As identified by the ANOVA, SES did not seem to significantly affect failure rates. Relative risks were then calculated to explore the influence of SES on dropping out of a course. *Tables 5, 6 and 7* describe the failure and drop out rates for each SES group. The numbers in each table were used to calculate the relative risk of drop out if at least one unit is failed (“units failed flag”) for each group. These relative risks are listed in *Table 8*.

Table 5: Low SES group

Frequencies for Outcome Flag					
Units Failed Flag	Outcome Flag	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	Drop out	52	9.0	9.0	9.0
	Retained	528	91.0	91.0	100.0
	Total	580	100.0	100.0	
Yes	Drop out	125	35.3	35.3	35.3
	Retained	229	64.7	64.7	100.0
	Total	354	100.0	100.0	

N failed/dropped out = 125

N failed/retained = 229

N passed/dropped out = 52

N passed/retained = 528

Table 6: Medium SES group

Frequencies for Outcome Flag					
Units Failed Flag	Outcome Flag	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	Drop out	217	8.1	8.1	8.1
	Retained	2,456	91.9	91.9	100.0
	Total	2,673	100.0	100.0	
Yes	Drop out	472	36.2	36.2	36.2
	Retained	832	63.8	63.8	100.0
	Total	1,304	100.0	100.0	

N failed/dropped out = 472

N failed/retained = 832

N passed/dropped out = 217

N passed/retained = 2,456

Table 7: High SES group

Frequencies for Outcome Flag					
Units Failed Flag	Outcome Flag	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	Drop out	134	9.1	9.1	9.1
	Retained	1,346	90.9	90.9	100.0
	Total	1,480	100.0	100.0	
Yes	Drop out	249	30.9	30.9	30.9
	Retained	556	69.1	69.1	100.0
	Total	805	100.0	100.0	

N failed/dropped out = 249

N failed/retained = 556

N passed/dropped out = 134

N passed/retained = 1346

Table 8: Relative risks for each SES group

SES Group	Total	RR	CI	p-value	z
Low	934	3.94	2.93-5.29	<.0001	9.10
Medium	3,977	4.46	3.85-5.16	<.0001	20.00
High	2,285	3.42	2.82-4.14	<.0001	12.57

In order to test whether the differences between the RRs for each group were significant, Ratios of Relative Risks (RRRs) were calculated as follows:

Low vs. Medium

Ratio of Relative Risks (RRR) = 0.88, CI (0.64-1.23), z = -0.74

Low vs. High

Ratio of Relative Risks (RRR) = 1.15, CI (0.81-1.64), z = 0.79

Medium vs. High

Ratio of Relative Risks (RRR) = 1.31, CI (1.03-1.66), z = 2.16

All three groups showed a significantly higher risk of drop out if at least one unit was failed. (All three RRs were significant as their CIs did not span "1"). The Low SES group was not at a higher risk of drop out due to failing one unit than the other two groups. (The Low vs. Medium and Low vs. High CIs both spanned "1".) However, the Medium SES group had a significantly higher RR than the High SES group. (The CI of the Medium vs. High RRR did not span "1"). If the outcome is the same in both groups the ratio will be 1, which implies there is no difference between the two arms of the study.

Relative Risks for Each ATAR Group

Three relative risks were calculated to determine whether failing one unit or more exposed students to a higher risk of subsequently dropping out. The RR was calculated for the overall sample, and for those who were and were not admitted based on their ATAR separately.

Tables 9, 10 and 11 show the failure and drop out figures used to calculate the RR for the overall sample, for those admitted based on their ATAR, and for those admitted not based on their ATAR respectively.

Table 9: Overall sample

Frequencies for Outcome Flag					
Units Failed Flag	Outcome Flag	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	Drop out	403	8.5	8.5	8.5
	Retained	4,358	91.5	91.5	100.0
	Total	4,761	100.0	100.0	
Yes	Drop out	853	34.4	34.4	34.4
	Retained	1,625	65.6	65.6	100.0
	Total	2,478	100.0	100.0	

N failed/dropped out = 853

N failed/retained = 1,625

N passed/dropped out = 403

N passed/retained = 4,358

Relative Risk = 4.07, 95% Confidence Interval (3.65, 4.53), p <.0001, z = 25.44

Those who failed at least one unit had a 4.07 times higher risk of dropping out than those who did not fail any units. This increase was significant at the .0001 level (the CI did not cross "1").

Table 10: Students admitted based on their ATAR

Frequencies for Outcome Flag					
Units Failed Flag	Outcome Flag	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	Drop out	165	8.1	8.1	8.1
	Retained	1,883	91.9	91.9	100.0
	Total	2,048	100.0	100.0	
Yes	Drop out	261	29.0	29.0	29.0
	Retained	640	71.0	71.0	100.0
	Total	901	100.0	100.0	

N failed/dropped out = 261

N failed/retained = 640

N passed/dropped out = 165

N passed/retained = 1,883

Relative Risk = 3.60, 95% Confidence Interval (3.01, 4.30), $p < .0001$, $z = 14.05$

Among students admitted based on their ATAR, those who failed at least one unit had a 3.60 times higher risk of dropping out than those who did not fail any units. This increase was significant at the .0001 level (the CI did not cross "1").

Table 11: Students admitted not based on their ATAR

Frequencies for Outcome Flag					
Units Failed Flag	Outcome Flag	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	Drop out	238	8.8	8.8	8.8
	Retained	2,475	91.2	91.2	100.0
	Total	2,713	100.0	100.0	
Yes	Drop out	592	37.5	37.5	37.5
	Retained	985	62.5	62.5	100.0
	Total	1,577	100.0	100.0	

N failed/dropped out = 592

N failed/retained = 985

N passed/dropped out = 238

N passed/retained = 2,475

Relative Risk = 4.28, 95% Confidence Interval (3.73, 4.91), $p < .0001$, $z = 20.79$

Among students who were admitted not based on their ATAR, those who failed at least one unit had a 4.28 times higher risk of dropping out than those who did not fail any units. This increase was significant at the .0001 level (the CI did not cross "1").

Finally, a ratio of relative risk was computed to compare the two subgroups (those who were and were not admitted based on their ATAR), as follows:

Ratio of Relative Risk = 0.84, $z = -1.52$, Confidence Interval (0.67, 1.05)

Because the confidence interval of the RRR spanned the value of 1, the difference in risk between the two groups was not statistically significant (i.e. it cannot be said for sure that the RRs for the two groups are not in fact equal). Moreover, the confidence intervals of the two groups' RR values overlap, again meaning that they are likely not significantly different from each other. Therefore, although the RR for those not admitted based on ATAR (4.28) is higher than the RR for those that were admitted based on ATAR (3.60), it cannot be concluded that the relationship between failure and drop out is stronger in one group compared to the other.

Stage 3

Two-Way Interaction ANOVAs for SES with Failure Rate as the Outcome

Based on the results of earlier stages, the first set of ANOVAs was conducted with SES and Attendance Type, Attendance Mode, and Age Group as grouping variables, and the ratio of units failed to units attempted as the outcome ("failure rate"). Cases with no available SES data were removed from the analysis, so that only three groups (Low, Medium and High) were considered. Note: in order to serve as a grouping variable, the continuous variable of age (from Stage 1) was collapsed into a dichotomous variable where "mature-age" students were defined as those aged 25 and above, and the remainder were termed "non-mature age".

1. A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of SES and Attendance Type on failure rate. There was a significant main effect of SES, $F(2, 7190) = 4.07, p = .017$, but the effect was small (partial eta squared = .001). There was also a significant but small main effect of Attendance Type, $F(1, 7190) = 201.54, p = .000$, partial eta squared = .027. There was no significant interaction effect between SES and Attendance Type. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that the mean failure rate for the Low SES group ($M = 0.20, SD = 0.32$) was significantly higher than the mean failure rate for the Medium SES group ($M = 0.16, SD = 0.30$). While the High SES group actually had a failure rate in between the other two groups ($M = 0.17, SD = 0.30$), it was not significantly different to either of them. The main effect of Attendance Type indicates that Part-Time students had a higher failure rate ($M = 0.28, SD = 0.39$) than Full-Time students ($M = 0.14, SD = 0.27$). Regarding the interaction effect, it was found that the highest failure rate was for the Low SES Part-Time combination ($M = 0.32, SD = 0.40$) whereas the lowest failure rate was for the Medium SES Full-Time combination ($M = 0.14, SD = 0.26$). However, these differences were not significant.
2. A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of SES and Attendance Mode on failure rate. There was a significant main effect of Mode, $F(1, 7190) = 191.86, p = .000$, but the effect was small (partial eta squared = .026). There was no significant main effect of SES and no significant interaction effect between SES and attendance mode either. Regarding the main effect of Attendance Mode, a higher failure rate was found for the External (Online) group, ($M = 0.31, SD = 0.40$) whereas a lower failure rate was found for the Physical Campus group ($M = 0.15, SD = 0.28$).
3. A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of SES and Age Group on failure rate. There was a significant main effect of SES, $F(2, 7190) = 3.44, p = .032$, but the effect was small (partial eta squared = .001). There was also a significant but small main effect of Age Group, $F(1, 7190) = 32.19, p = .000$, partial eta squared = .004. There was a significant interaction effect between SES and Age Group as well, $F(2, 7190) = 4.29, p = .014$, partial eta squared = .001. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that the mean failure rate for the Low SES group ($M = 0.20, SD = 0.32$) was significantly higher than the mean failure rate for the Medium SES group ($M = 0.16, SD = 0.30$). While the High SES group actually had a failure rate in between the other two groups ($M = 0.17, SD = 0.30$), it was not

significantly different to either of them. The main effect of Age Group indicates that Mature Age students had a higher failure rate ($M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.35$) than Non-Mature Age students ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.28$). Regarding the interaction effect, it was found that the highest failure rate was for the Low SES Mature Age combination ($M = 0.24$, $SD = 0.36$) whereas the lowest failure rate was for the Medium SES Non-Mature Age combination ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.27$).

Two-Way Interaction ANOVAs for SES with dropout as the outcome

Similarly, the second set of ANOVAs was performed on the same grouping variables, but with drop out (a dummy variable comprising R/C vs. I/L/T groups) being the outcome. Drop out (I/L/T) was coded as “1” whereas Retention was coded as “0”. Therefore, a higher mean score indicates a higher dropout rate for the group.

1. A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of SES and Attendance Type on drop out rate. There was a significant main effect of SES, $F(2, 7,190) = 4.03$, $p = .018$, but the effect was small (partial eta squared = .001). There was also a significant but small main effect of Attendance Type, $F(1, 7,190) = 114.92$, $p = .000$, partial eta squared = .016. There was a significant interaction effect between SES and Attendance Type as well, $F(2, 7,190) = 4.00$, $p = .018$, partial eta squared = .001. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests however indicated that the mean drop out rates for each of the three SES groups were not significantly different to each other. The main effect of Attendance Type indicates that Part-Time students had a higher drop out rate ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.45$) than Full-Time students ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.35$). Regarding the interaction effect, the highest drop out rate was found for the Low SES Part-Time combination ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.47$) whereas the lowest drop out rate was found for the Medium SES Full-Time combination ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.35$).
2. A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of SES and Attendance Mode on drop out rate. There was a significant main effect of Attendance Mode, $F(1, 7,190) = 101.96$, $p = .000$, but the effect was small (partial eta squared = .014). There was no significant main effect of SES and no significant interaction effect between SES and Attendance Mode. The main effect of Attendance Mode indicates that External (Online) students had a higher drop out rate ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.46$) than Physical Campus students ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.36$).
3. A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to investigate the effect of SES and Age Group on drop out rate. There was a significant main effect of Age Group, $F(1, 7,190) = 11.68$, $p = .001$, but the effect was small (partial eta squared = .002). There was also a significant interaction effect between SES and Age Group, $F(2, 7,190) = 5.76$, $p = .003$, partial eta squared = .002. However, there was no significant main effect of SES. The main effect of Age Group indicates that Mature Age students had a higher drop out rate ($M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.41$) than Non-Mature Age students ($M = 0.16$, $SD = 0.37$). Regarding the interaction effect, the highest drop out rate was found for the Medium SES Mature Age combination ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.42$) whereas the lowest drop out rate was found for the Medium SES Non-Mature Age combination ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.36$).

Summary of Findings and Implication for Quantitative Results

In summary, the findings of the secondary analysis of our large quantitative cohort data did not identify a significant relationship between SES grouping and failure rates or dropping out rates. Four variables from our data set were found to statistically significantly influence academic failure and drop out. These were entry based on ATAR, those with no or low ATARs as more at-risk to fail and/or drop out, (versus high ATAR); studying part-time or off-campus (external); and being mature age (over 24). Exploring these variables further indicates that the effect size on academic failure and drop out varies from small or small to medium. Our findings suggest that SES alone might not be an adequately sensitive category

for predicting academic failure and drop out and therefore, supports the argument for widening the definition of equity groupings. Examination of interaction effects with more than one variable identifies highest failure and drop out rates amongst low SES and part-time students. Furthermore, this part of the study was limited to the available institutional data where success was defined as being retained in the relevant course of study at census date the following year and failure referred to receiving a fail grade for a unit of study.

Part Three: Qualitative Study

Key Findings

1. Success and failure are intrinsically connected to emotional responses to the marks/grades received on the first assessment.
2. Students transitioning directly from secondary school into higher education and students coming into higher education after taking time off from formal education both associate their sense of belonging in higher education to the marks/grades they receive on their first assignments.
3. Students mobilise networks for success through academic support from multiple entities both within and external to higher education institutions. Support received is both internal and external to higher education institutions and includes support by family and friends, HEPPP programs and programs such as PASS and support and feedback by lecturers and tutors.
4. Students make sense of success through their recognition of their transition into independent learners and building self-efficacy.

Methods

The questions guiding the qualitative research from this study are:

- How do first year equity students experience academic failure and success?
- How do first year equity students mobilise and make sense of their first experiences of failure and success in higher education?

As discussed in the introduction to the report, the first question examines students' lived experiences of success and failure after their first assessment experience (summative and formative) in higher education, and the meanings they ascribe to their academic success or failure. The second question examines what happens after this experience and how students mobilise different forms of capital (including those from secondary school) in dealing with these episodes of failure and/or success in their first assignment.

Building on from *Part One* and *Part Two* which highlighted the potential that students are entering university from widening backgrounds and that definitions of equity should be widened beyond low SES, as SES alone is not a sufficient category for predicting academic failure, this part of the study focuses on first year students' experience of failure *and* success to further uncover. The students in our qualitative study represent a diverse cohort of 24 students across two higher education institutions, Deakin University (DU) in Victoria and the University of Wollongong (UOW) in New South Wales. Ten of the 24 students were enrolled at Deakin University and 14 were recruited from the student body of the University of Wollongong and interviewed in the first semester (UOW) and trimester (DU) in 2018. Twenty two of the participants lived and completed secondary school in Australia, whilst two students finished their secondary school examinations in China (English as first language) and the US. Prior to higher education, 62.5 per cent of the students attended Government schools with seven students attending these schools in inner regional areas and two located

in outer regional areas. Less than half of the participants (37.5 per cent) received their schooling at non-government, fee-paying schools, located in major cities.^[1]

All focus group participants/interviewees from Deakin University were enrolled in the undergraduate degree course Bachelor of Education (Primary) and studied up to four core units. The composition of the focus groups interviewed at the University of Wollongong was more diverse. The participants were studying up to four core units towards an undergraduate degree in the following areas: Bachelor of Education (Primary), n = 3; Bachelor of Psychological Science, n = 4; Bachelor of Arts (Psychology), n = 3; Bachelor of Public Health, n = 1; Bachelor of Social Science, n = 1; Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies and Bachelor of International Studies, n = 1; and Bachelor of Science Education, n = 1.

Our sample comprised of 23 female students and one male, who were all studying full-time. Eleven students were First-in-Family. Four students were mature age (defined as those who are 25 years of age or older). Two students nominated a disability, one based on a physical condition. They all identified as Australian, their statements on ethnicity differed regarding their individual concept of thought, ranging from Australian, English to Caucasian, white, Maltese and Filipino. All participants identified themselves as non-Indigenous. Regarding their religious affiliation, students responded with definite statements such as “no”, “atheist” or further descriptions for example Christian, Anglican, Catholic, Hindu, undecided, not sure. Seven of the students identified as coming from multiple equity group categories.²

Analysis

Data-driven thematic analysis, including inductive and theoretical coding, was undertaken by the research team who identified themes relating to the research questions. The analytical framework incorporated a thematic approach to inquiry focused on the identification in the participant data of key themes including:

- the experiences students had of their first assessment task
- the experience/s of success and/or failure in relation to the first assessment.

The team then performed a cross-case analysis using their initial thematic coding of individual transcripts to identify substantive congruence and divergence within and across the data.

Qualitative Findings

The findings from the student interviews and focus groups highlighted multiple themes to consider together with our research questions for how first year equity students experience academic failure and success and how they mobilise and make sense of their first experiences of failure and success in higher education. These themes include:

- success and failure after the first assignment

^[1] The level of relative remoteness is measured by the road distance from a point to the nearest urban centre and locality in five separate population ranges. Remoteness area categories (RAC) are: 0 - Major Cities of Australia, 1 - Inner Regional Australia, 2 - Outer Regional Australia, 3 - Remote Australia, 4 - Very Remote Australia. Inner regional areas are those areas where geographic distance imposes some restriction upon accessibility to the widest range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.

² The variables used for equity groupings are the current reified categories used to sort the data. We argue in this study however that in future these categories must be widened and reimagined to include a more nuanced and complex portrayal of equity groups.

- motivating student success through feedback
- social interactions and success and failure — first years with peers and tutors
- assisting with success and failure — first years' experiences with peer-to-peer study programs
- becoming an independent learner.

Success and Failure After the First Assignment

In this study higher education student participants reinforced the notion of 'working hard' and being focused where the self-imposed pressure to 'do well' and avoid failure results in a "good feeling when you get those marks back and you know you've worked for them" (DU Student 23). This all important consideration is crucial in understanding the connection that some student participants made between doing well by achieving high marks/grade on an assessment task and the "... what's the point" feeling that comes with lower than expected grades. Receiving lower than expected grades on the first assignment for first year higher education students was difficult when being assessed on performance is linked to their identity as a successful student worthy of being at university.

The student/s who discussed putting in significant effort toward their first assignment and receiving high marks were generally happy.

Oh, I thought I would have got a bit higher but "I'm happy with that" whereas people who received lower marks were then continuing to complain and wondering why they received the lower marks. (Student 6)

I had my results back and I got a HD so I was very happy with that. That was pretty much that sort of view that that's what I needed to do to keep going for that subject. (Student 3).

The second student's remark highlights how receiving a high distinction on her first assignment was both an expectation and a motivator for her to continue with the subject. The connection between receiving high marks and success then leads to the question of the connection between success and failure when receiving low marks on the first assignment.

Students discussed the effect receiving a poor mark on an assignment might have on their self-confidence, indicating how success and failure can be embodied through assessment.

If I got a mark that I'd worked hard for and it was just a pass I would probably have a good cry about it for sure. I think if that was to happen it would probably be full meltdown mode for about a day. I get over it pretty quickly, but yeah I think if that was to happen it would probably affect my later marks as well because I'd probably be thinking I'm not good enough to do it. I need to be doing well to keep doing well because otherwise if I have that bit of self-confidence I'll be able to do better, but if I get a really bad mark then I'll just be I'm not good enough to do it in a way. (Student 21)

Transitioning to university after a break between secondary school and higher education is another factor in the emotional effects of assessment and the experience of success and failure. Student 19 had taken a five year break in her education. She stated that her assessment mark directly affected her self-confidence. This student felt that the experience of being assessed through essay format, when she had not written an essay in five years, to be "daunting". She stated:

I think for me it was worrying because I haven't come straight out of school, so it's been five years since I've written an essay and so my first assessment was an essay and I was like crap, I don't know if I can still

write one properly. So it was daunting and I was hanging out for the results, I wanted to see where I was at just so I could be a little bit more confident, so it was daunting. (Student 19)

Here the student is exhibiting how they are 'buying in' to the cultural and social reproduction in the higher education systems that make social hierarchies and the "... reproduction of these hierarchies appear to be based upon the hierarchy of 'gifts', merits, or skills" (Bourdieu 1973, 84). In other words, scholastic attainment and achievement is dependent upon 'natural' talent, hard work and cognitive ability.

Another older female student spoke at length about assessment and how they are a gauge on her own belonging within the institution, demonstrated by her need to achieve the highest grade.

I was actually really nervous because I was like, 'I really want to get an HD' ... I've never been in university before, I haven't come from high school; I've had 10 years away so I had a lot of pressure on myself but the assessment itself was pretty good. (Student 13)

Like the previous student who would "have a good cry", this student described being *emotionally attached to the results* so the assessments seemed to be about more than simply getting good grades but also held more embodied connotations for individuals.

Another student who had taken a significant break from education reiterated their drive to achieve high marks:

It's probably, it's hard because it's been so long since I've been in proper education, I guess. I've always tried to do the best that I can so trying to get a higher mark in everything has always been what I wanted to do and achieve. (Student 22)

Another student who had fifteen years between secondary school and university discussed her love for the course but how "stressful" the assessments are.

I'm loving the course, but the assessments are really, really stressful. And I realised I haven't done assessments or referencing, or any of that stuff, for like 15 or 16 years. (Student 23).

The stress of undertaking the first assignment after not being academically assessed in a very long time was experienced differently by DU Student 19 as she felt confident she would receive a high mark for their first assignment. However, upon receiving her mark the student cried and said it was "really confronting":

I'm a massive book reader, and it's always been a part of how I, like, self-identify, so not achieving as high as I thought I would was really confronting ... I cried. I was devastated. I had, like such a high expectation of myself and what I would achieve, compared to the reality of what came back. (Student 23)

This student felt that her love of literature and book reading was a part of her identity, perhaps even an embodied sense of self and that this embodiment would translate into a good assessment mark. The mark she received was a credit:

I did, actually quite well, but I was expecting, like in the mid-70's to high 70's, but it was in, like the higher 60's sort of range. (Student 23)

When her mark was not as high as she had hoped, she felt as though she was not a successful student. This failure was very much 'felt' and reflected upon in terms of her learner identity.

For these students who have not gone directly from secondary school to higher education, academic failure and success is inextricably linked to assessment items, it is the measurement of meritocratic success that perhaps assures them of their place within the university setting. Undoubtedly there are other approaches to measuring academic failure and success but for this cohort and in these institutions, this is largely defined by the results from assessment. For this reason, exploring how learners relate to and understand assessment items is valuable as this provides insight into the inner workings of an institution, including how learners reflect upon their engagement and relationship with the university.

Students who transitioned directly from secondary school to higher education continually reflected back on their past experiences with assessment to compare and contrast the differences and similarities. Self-directed learning in higher education differs for many students coming straight from secondary school. For some, this can be a difficult time as they transition into the university education system.

I'm worried because I haven't had to do it in intense sort of assessment conditions before. (Student 9)

I found in high school it was the teachers, to help you pass your HSC as there was such a big emphasis on passing and getting a high HSC — they would tell you the answers or tell you what you'd want to write ... basically it was just that they would give you the information to tick off the checklist that they had whereas at university I've found that regardless of what the essay question is or anything, there is still no actual right or wrong answer as long as you can justify that yourself. (Student 6)

I had a psychology essay I had to do and I think the biggest difference from high school assessments to uni assessments is you're not writing about general, basic information; in university you have to apply critical thinking to pretty much every single sentence — you have to be really specific towards your writing style and just sort of getting used to that, I think it is taking a bit of time but it's getting better for me, I think. (Student 11)

These students were grappling with their first assignments and 'how to write an essay' as they reflected back on how they would have done this in high school. The transition between high school assessments and higher education assessments is not as 'smooth' and unproblematic as might be considered. Students were applying strategies and approaches that assisted them in high school but also understood that these may not be appropriate in the university's academic system and may not ensure their success in higher education.

Achieving these high grades essentially underpinned how these students gained their identity as a higher education student. For the student who transitioned into higher education directly from high school, and the student with a long absence from education, performance on assessment items were being considered as evidence as to whether they should be enrolled and continuing to pursue higher education ambitions.

Motivating Student Success Through Feedback

The emotions related to turning in the first assignment and the anticipation of receiving their first assessment result was not only a measurement of success and failure, but also a benchmark to be overcome in the subsequent assignment.

I wasn't really sure how it was going to turn out or what the outcome was going to be but I was probably a bit stressed ... a bit worried about that, hoping that I covered all the content but then post to receiving my results I was probably a little bit disheartened because I thought that—I don't know,

I kind of thought, oh, I—like I tried really hard and it was kind of like, oh, and she said to us, I'm not going to mark as harshly on the first one as the second one so I was like, oh, no, what's the second one going to be like? So, then I was even more stressed so then—yeah, but then it was good as well because when I—she said to me, don't stress about it because not many people fail their first assessment so then when — even when I got my results I'd only just passed and I was kind of like, oh, but then to receive the results and the feedback, it was good because then I could focus on just that for my next assignment. (Student 17)

Another student who received high marks on her first assignment discussed how she wished she had received more feedback so that she can improve even more in the future.

I feel university assessments are more enjoyable, especially because in high school, it was easy to get full marks and there was little feedback given whereas I thrive on feedback. So, I would prefer not getting a high mark but working off the feedback to improve myself. (Student 5)

This student's comment illustrates how growth mindsets are intrinsically connected to feedback for improvement/development.

Another student sought further feedback immediately after the 'confronting' experience of receiving a lower mark than she had expected on her first assignment.

The professor was fantastic. She sat with me for two hours and went through it with me, as I just like, picked her brain apart, and I said, please help me, I don't understand—I sent her an email and I just wanted to go through—because she gave really good notes, but I couldn't understand it, because she said, like, you haven't connected these things, and in my brain, they connected fine. And she went through it with me, and I mean, I have to go and do an essay writing course or something, because even though she was really thorough with it, I recognised my particular writing style doesn't match up to the Deakin style of essay writing. (Student 23)

The student commented that she wrote her essay as she had in secondary school and that after seeking feedback:

I realised that I need a lot more help with my essay writing, so I've been going to the writing mentors here to get them to try to show me how to do—I'm going to have to do a course in it though, because even though everyone's been explaining it to me, it's not connecting properly in my head, and I still—it doesn't make sense, so I'm going to have to find an essay writing course, like to do over the holidays or something. (Student 23)

The expectation of doing well expressed via a successful orientation towards study manifested in how student participants reflected on their motivation to learn, particularly if disappointed with an assessment result.

I guess — it was kind of what I expected but I also was a little disappointed that I didn't do better because I know I could do better. Literature's probably my strongest subject, so I was—that's one course that I'm always—pushed myself to do better in. (Student 16)

... well, I think it kind of also motivated me a little bit to try a bit harder and seek a little bit more information ... it's kind of like a little bit of a lack of confidence as well. You kind of start questioning yourself a little bit when you submit the next one [assessment task] saying, oh, what's the outcome

going to be next time and you — well, for me, I was constantly checking to see when the results came through and when I got my second assessment back it was a little bit better so I was like, oh, that's good. So, yeah, it was kind of like, oh, well, I'm glad I had that feedback because then it motivated me to go and find more information about that — how to write the assessment. (Student 17)

The practical specifics of a successful and motivated disposition towards learning in higher education was expressed in the personal habitus (Bourdieu, 2004) of individual participants. Their beliefs about how to succeed at university guided their approach to learning and also in how to prepare for major assessment tasks.

I think I have a lot of intrinsic motivation to do things. (Student 19)

Both participants had not yet experienced failure in the higher education setting but both reflected upon what being a 'successful learner' meant on a personal level. For the older student, success required an ability to be flexible and adaptable to the higher education environment. As she explains:

I think a successful student in my eyes would be someone that really walks away from this with a bag of skills to take into whatever direction they're going. (Student 13)

For this student being successful at assessment in university requires 'forgetting' everything about what they know about learning at school, having a 'growth mindset' and not to be 'deterred' by poor marks.

Social Interactions and Success and Failure – First Years' Experiences with Peers and Tutors

Experiences of success and failure are not only constituted through the numeric grade/mark attained—or the end result—even though participants are clearly focused on outcomes, assessment results and the percentage value of a particular assessment. Success and failure can also be experienced vis-à-vis social interactions, when a student is interacting with peers and their tutors. Support through social networks were mobilised including from friends within their courses and friends and family external to the course.

I think I can just—I can work it out myself or I could just contact my—the tutors or ask friends. I've—I ask friends any time I've got a question and just—it's a quick question, they get back to me within five minutes and I'm on my way, type thing. (Student 16)

I know in one class, we sort of buddied up or found people in the first couple of weeks. So, if you missed a class or you don't understand something, you sort of had someone to say, "Hey, I missed this class. Would you be able to fill me?" Or something, so we were sort of making a conscious effort to give you that support in a friend in that class. (Student 15)

I've more asked my friends who have done the same course as me and completed it. Obviously not the content of the work and that sort of stuff but more just how they got through the subject and what they found challenging and what I can do to get motivated and boost my marks and that sort of thing. (Student 5)

I had an essay due and my sister—she’s just graduated from uni—and so she helped me with the referencing because I just wasn’t really sure how to do that. (Student 3)

Networks were not always a source of support for participants. There are also external causes that can inform (weaken or strengthen) someone’s self-efficacy. Mature-aged students with families who have decided to change careers may face difficulties based on family presuppositions or societal expectations.

Yeah, so my mum and my sister was like, oh, that’s really great, the in-laws were like, oh, okay, good for you, and then at the start of the year my husband and I were having some issues and we were almost separating and at that point my mum and my sister were like, you should really defer, you’ve got so much on your plate, probably shouldn’t be doing this right now. (Student 22)

This student is grappling with their perception of success as a student in higher education and the divergent realities outside of higher education.

When considering who to approach for assistance in studying for their assignment one student discussed how they did not think to seek help from their tutor and even less so from their lecturer.

I didn’t think to reach out to the tutors or the, anything like that because I felt like [my tutor] had already given us so much information on how to go about it, I thought if I was a little bit, perhaps a little bit embarrassed about perhaps reaching out to her when she’d already tried to provide us with so much guidance ... I guess it’s probably that — the lecturer didn’t come into my mind as a person to contact ... I just didn’t think about them as a contact person, I just thought, well she’s the lecturer, so —. (Student 22)

The final statement from the student “I just thought, well she’s the lecturer” is illustrative of the disconnect between the academic and where and how a student seeks academic support.

Assisting with Success and Failure — First Years’ Experiences with Peer-to-Peer Study Programs

Students in the interviews and focus groups discussed taking advantage of tutelage from their peers and family both informally as discussed above and formally through PASS — Peer Assisted Study Sessions. Deakin University and University of Wollongong provides the PASS student assistance program. Sessions are non-compulsory and are free, voluntary and only offered in what are deemed to be difficult units. The level of difficulty has been ascertained through unit student pass/failure rates over time and are usually aligned with units which contain large student enrolment numbers. PASS sessions are offered for both on and off campus (online) units. PASS tutors are Deakin students (usually third or fourth years) that have successfully completed difficult units in the early stages of their degree. Sessions are generally conducted for 50 minutes on a weekly basis over the course of a semester.

Programs like PASS are important because they have the capacity to help students who don’t have external academic support from family and friends.

My family couldn’t really help me with engineering because no one did engineering but I found that PASS was a really big help to me because it’s all a group assignment, group environment, so we can all learn together at a really fast pace, sharing each other’s ideas, going through past papers, examples. (Student 25).

I've used the student mentor program and I found them really helpful. I didn't use them for asking questions on my assessment in particular but just for getting through uni, what were some hints or motivations to get to the early classes and that sort of struggling so I've used that support mechanism and that's been very helpful. (Student 6)

I think PASS is really great. I've used that a few times. They are really, really helpful; they go over the main points of what you really do need to focus on rather than all the extra information that's important. It just kind of supports what they're really teaching so I think PASS is really good. (Student 12)

The student here emphasis the important role peer support and PASS programs play in preparation for assignments and other study support needs.

Becoming an Independent Learner

When discussing what students would do differently for future assessments the consensus was that they would be more organised with their time, be more efficient in their study and use the resources offered for support. In regards to studying for their next assessment students said:

I need to start my assignments earlier and also a thing I found different about uni is that they don't tell you when your assessments are going to be due. So, one time, I realised I had an assessment due four days before it was actually due so I was like, 'Oh no'. I did it, I handed it in time and I was like, 'This is really different from high school because in high school they tell you when your assessments are due and stuff'. (Student 4)

Yeah, I'd say, 'Use the resources that they offer because chances are, they've taught the subject before and they know they're there to help you so it's not just some link they put up for fun. It's pretty helpful a lot of the time. I don't know, I guess just find your own way to study as well and make note cards or write things down, take notes by hand, or just find your own way to study and really stick with that. The first semester or the first year is kind of like a trial and error so it's good to see, just to test out different things and see how you can study and try different ways. (Student 12)

Some of the students expressed that the ability to be self-regulating is more demanding in higher education. At the same time, students expressed feelings of success through frameworks of self-efficacy, the capacity to respond to feedback effectively and the ability to be self-regulating and apply self-discipline.

I do love learning new things and I'm competitive with myself. So, if I don't understand something or get something wrong, I love to beat myself the next time — that just gives me more motivation. I'm just a more motivated person I think than what I was a few years ago so I'm happy to get up, get my work done really early — that's the type of learner I am ... in terms of learning, I just am quite positive and like to motivate myself. (Student 5)

I like to learn but I like to learn in small doses or do tasks in small doses. I really break things down so I think I feel I've achieved more. If I have a sort of a tick-box, often I can do it — that's why I really like to study; I like doing small multiple choice quizzes as opposed to sitting and doing a whole chapter of a book or I'm breaking down a task so I've written my intro or

I've got my topic skeleton written up for my essay, then I'll take a break and come back. So, with my learning, I like to do just small, strong productive bursts as opposed to long, drawn out sittings. (Student 6)

I guess preparing in a way that works well for yourself, giving yourself plenty of time to do that and looking at all the subject readings and things but yeah, doing it in your individual style. (Student 3)

I would say read over the assignment at the beginning of the semester — every assignment that's due and at least have an idea of what to look for in the lectures so you can include it in the assignments, just get a general idea and write it down, write out the assignments on a big calendar. That'll save you. Just ask questions. I mean, ask people in your class, ask your tutor, your lecturers — email them because that's what they're there for. (Student 12)

The above excerpts highlight how some students know how to play 'the game' at university. The transition from secondary school to higher education might not have been smooth, but these students were aware of the self-discipline and independent study required of them to be successful in their course. In the student comment below this is articulated as how to be a "good learner" and a "successful student".

When directly asked about what being a "successful student" at university is, students responded with various insights. These reflections ranged from having a 'growth mindset' where they focus on what they need to do themselves to be successful, to inner strengths or an ability not to be 'deterred' by poor marks or past failures — in this case succeeding at university requires an ability to be self-directed, flexible and fluid in approaches to study.

A "successful student" I think is the other end of being a good learner — a successful student is someone that's successful within themselves. They've kept and kept on trying and they've reached that goal of where they've tried to get as opposed to being like, "I'm trying to reach to get 100 per cent" — they've just tried to go, "I got a pass for my subject last time. I'm going to reach to get a credit this time" and that makes them successful within themselves. That's a successful student, trying to reach the next stage of where they can go. (Student 6)

Not all good learners are successful learners. A good learner is someone that is easily able to understand something but I think a successful learner is like even though you fail, you try again and improve on what you did wrong. (Student 4)

I think just focus on yourself because it's so easy to get caught up in what everyone else is doing, the way they learn but it's really just finding what works for you and taking a step back and finding out how you learn best and sticking with that routine and just accepting that everyone learns differently in different cases. It's really just finding out, focusing on yourself. (Student 12)

I think a successful student in my eyes would be someone that really walks away from this with a bag of skills to take into whatever direction they're going. (Student 13)

Summary of Findings on Success and Failure

First year students use first experiences of assessment to calibrate their expectations, their performance and their own suitability for higher education. Their sense of belonging in the higher education institution—in particular after some form of ‘gap time’ between formal schooling and university—is linked to the experience of success. Student’s disposition—conditioning around how individuals think about success and failure and themselves as learners—and potentially institutional conditioning is connected to the experience of success and failure in the result in their first assignment. The students appreciated when tutors and teachers were accessible and available and offered useful feedback. However, the students also have identified they feel disconnected from lecturers and other university academic staff. Some students expressed that self-regulation is more demanding in higher education than in secondary school, yet the students who recognised how to ‘play the game’ of higher education expressed feelings of success through frameworks of self-efficacy, the capacity to respond to feedback effectively and the ability to be self-regulating and apply self-discipline.

Discussion of Findings and Implications for Future Research

First Year Equity Students' Experience of Academic Failure and Success

This study focused on the various experiences of academic failure and success in higher education. Firstly we reviewed current research and reports informing higher education and mapped the promise of higher education alongside key political and aspirational agendas.

In summary, the findings of the secondary analysis of our large quantitative cohort data did not identify a significant relationship between SES grouping and failure rates or dropping out rates. Four variables from our data set were found to statistically significantly influence academic failure and drop out. These were entry based on ATAR (versus non-ATAR), studying part-time or off-campus (external), and being mature age (over 24). Exploring these variables further indicates that the effect size on academic failure and drop out varies from small or small to medium. Our findings suggest that SES alone might not be an adequately sensitive category for predicting academic failure and drop out and therefore, supports the argument for widening the definition of equity groupings. Examination of interaction effects identifies highest failure and dropout rates amongst low SES and part-time students.

The qualitative data, although not directly comparable to the quantitative data, provides a rich tapestry of experiences that provide in-depth understandings of the changing ways in which students are engaging with supports in higher education as well as the impacts of the individual social capital of the student versus institutional expectations of who they might be. We found that the levels of social capital that a student may bring into a situation may be quite influential for how experiences of success and failure are constituted and taken up. For example, one particular student who experienced a loss of self-efficacy in her creative writing class, after being told by her tutor that her writing is “cliché”. The student came to the conclusion that they were not “as good a writer I guess as I thought”. This student’s feeling of failure was not actually constituted through the number on the page—the outcome—but the feeling of failure that arose through their interactions with their tutor; and a comment that has demonstrably remained for them, and evoked considerable anxiety.

Alongside this the qualitative data highlighted that when there is a disconnect between the academic and the student this contributes to the notion of success and belonging, and failure and not belonging in higher education which impacts on the student. Academic studies define academic ‘success’ as completion of a degree. Beyond completion however, there are only a few studies asking students what they believe success in higher education is (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Picton, Kahu & Nelson, 2018) and still little information on what constitutes success from the start of higher education programs and degrees to the completion. In this study when students were asked questions regarding being a successful learner and successful student, completing their degree was not mentioned. Instead the focus was on the various skills that personally were being learnt along the way.

For example Student 13 stated:

I think a successful student in my eyes would be someone that really walks away from this with a bag of skills to take into whatever direction they're going. (Student 13)

Here the student discusses the transference of skills outside of higher education but this is not congruent with completion. Other students in the study discussed doing their best to achieve high marks on assessments and setting personal goals of success:

A “successful student” I think is the other end of being a good learner — a successful student is someone that’s successful within themselves. They’ve kept and kept on trying and they’ve reached that goal of where they’ve tried to get as opposed to being like, “I’m trying to reach to get 100 per cent” — they’ve just tried to go, “I got a pass for my subject last time. I’m going to reach to get a credit this time” and that makes them successful within themselves. That’s a successful student, trying to reach the next stage of where they can go. (Student 6)

Again, this student is looking inward for success “within themselves” and not outward. When success is defined by external tangible goals, such as achieving a degree, the complex and dynamic smaller successes can be forgotten.

Students’ experience of success and failure is about what happens to the individual students in a particular context that is seen to be personally bound by their perceived ability to develop skills that are useful in a higher education setting. Success or failure on their first assignment is taken up by the students to either reinforce their belonging to the institution and or sense of exclusion and subsequent comparable impacts on their personal identity.

Furthermore, students mobilise their different networks in order to make sense of feedback, comments and also to ascertain what the expectations are in assessment. Some students talked about making friends in class and others discussed asking housemates, external friends who have completed or are at university and also family. For students who may not have as extensive networks to utilise in terms of seeking external academic support, programs like PASS enable this social and academic function to play out.

Who is the Student in Front of Us?

In this study we asked “who is the student in front of us?” and how are they conceptualising success and failure? To do this we, like McKay and Devlin, must challenge deficit narratives of the ‘marginalised’ student and ask what, who and how are these students *being* marginalised. By focusing on the student experience through the narratives of the students themselves we attempted to draw out how success and failure is experienced and mobilised by students from diverse equity backgrounds and how this might mean a change in how these students are portrayed in higher education policy and institutions.

Students from diverse equity backgrounds need to be recognised for their successes and supported in their failures. The current discourses being produced and propagated by studies such as the Grattan Institute 2018 report *Dropping Out the Benefits and Costs of Trying University* (Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018) explore equity student circumstances and higher education retention that converge on individual ‘issues’ rather than widening the focus to include unequitable systemic circumstances. In framing the debate in these ways there is an implication that those who are not accessing higher education lack aspiration. Deficit discourses see failure to participate or succeed in education as a consequence of individuals lacking the requisite resources, capacities or attributes. Deficit discourses are evident in simplistic explanatory narratives that point to such things as deficient genetics, socialisation, and family culture as sources of failure, or as cause for intervention or remediation, thus constructing underrepresented groups as needing to change in order to succeed within a pre-given domain.

Given that our findings suggest that SES alone might not be an adequately sensitive category for predicting academic failure and drop out and that there is a shift in the way in which equity students are considered, simple understandings of equity are no longer useful.

The quantitative data that showed that students may be first-in-family but not necessarily low SES was also reflected in the qualitative data. The students in this study are also likely to represent the more engaged student who is keen to achieve high results. Given the

changing nuances and complexities of who the student 'standing in front of us' is in 2018, this will become increasingly important to consider as the school sector becomes more segregated.

We argue that this supports the argument for widening the definition of equity groupings and consideration of a change in funding to include a widening model of point in time and place supports for students to ensure their likelihood of success prior to and including their first year of higher education.

We agree with McKay and Devlin (2016) that we need to have high expectations for all students regardless of background and that we must understand the complexities of the contributing factors of 'inequity'.

Who is in Front of the Student?

There is an underlying assumption that success and/or failure in school/higher education is simply the product of one's capacity to engage and less about how "... socioeconomic and cultural factors enable some to more powerfully pursue their aspirations than others" (Bok, 2010, 176). While scholastic attainment and expectation is dependent upon the affinity and inclination one has for study as a deliberate choice of personal advancement through dedicated hard work and cognitive ability, it is also a product of the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) each individual has and can tap into.

Students discussed the confidence they gained when tutors encouraged them to get to know their peers in the class and/or form peer study groups. These seemingly minor interactions within the larger institution of the university suggest support for Watson (2013) about the "... growing appreciation of the depth and complexity" connected to success and failure in school and higher education with "... a movement away from the apparent assumption of deficit towards greater recognition of the role played by institutions themselves" (p. 413) and the kinds of pedagogic strategies used. Work in this research study aligns with how Reay has spoken of it as "... a means of viewing structures as occurring within small-scale interactions and activity within large-scale settings" (2004, p. 439). Encouraging connections is one of the pillars espoused by Tinto (2017) to promote persistence in students.

Bound up in the small-scale interactions of the student participants as learners are the implicit dispositions that widening participation in higher education expects and is supposed to engender Independent, self-directed and "... unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt" (Leithwood & O'Connell 2003, p. 599) the autonomous learner is left to take up the opportunities on offer. The findings in this study are significant because, as discussed in *Part One* of this report, education segregation is becoming more prominent in Australia. Students in this study reported that they relied on their tutors for support, but rarely the lecturer who was seen as removed and distant. Family and friends were often key supports on a personal level but at an institutional level academic support was sourced from central bodies far removed from the work of the academic or degree in which they were studying.

Our study would reflect that, similar to the review by Zacharias (2017), HEPPP has been successful at an institutional level in bringing supports to students 'at risk' of success to access when needed. We would suggest however that this has potentially distanced this work from that of the academic responsible for the content and knowledge of the degree in which the student is engaged. The potential disconnect between the student and the academic has implications for understanding the academic requirements of the course, but also the mutual recognition of what the student needs to achieve success and gain a sense of belonging in higher education.

Recommendations

Policy

Australian education policy to include a widened definition of the parameters of equity groups to allow for more flexible funding models that enable students from more diverse backgrounds to be supported.

Practical Action

Practical action in higher education to strengthen the connections between the various key stakeholders in the students' journey of success may also increase their access to support programs. Currently there is considerable awareness of these programs but students are not always accessing it independently.

Building feedback literacy into early assessment experiences. Students in our study were unsure about how to address some of the feedback information. Recognising that first experiences of assessment act to calibrate students' expectations of assessment criteria and standards, more needs to be done to engage students with assessment expectations, standards and criteria beyond mere provision of a rubric.

Further Research

Further study into developing more interconnected support programs (including building assessment literacy, support and well-being into units of study) with students, academic and professional staff to encourage students to reflect on their definitions of success, and to normalise help-seeking if they fail to meet their expectations or if they fail a unit. Currently academic support for students is seen to be separated from academic staff.

Research on students over time beyond the first assignment is recommended to investigate how students change and adapt their assessment habits and how this might increase their sense of belonging in higher education.

Investigating more in-depth pathways to higher education than currently considered. Given many of the students from our study come from multiple equity categories, seeking tailored support strategies for the student in front of us matters to ensure that the increasingly uneven playing fields are addressed before they become even more segregated.

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