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Student experience: 10 things I know for certain

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Student experience: 10 things I know for certain

Abstract

Through an autoethnographic account of a university career journey, this paper addresses ten key themes in higher education. These are the ten principles which matter most in education. Attending to the quality of these elements will ensure that the vast majority of students have an excellent experience and that by virtue of completing their education, graduates will have the foundations they require to achieve their career goals. High quality universities keep the focus on their students, and students are welcomed and encouraged as agentic, contributing citizens, who will lead communities forward through graduate careers. The student experience is streamlined, minimising expectations of students beyond their coursework. Whereas the educators make or break the experience for the students, there are numerous other education-focussed staff roles in universities and staff must work in-concert. Universities must continue to apply digital innovation to improve processes such that student experience mechanisms, such as enrolment, are efficient and user-friendly, so that students can expend their cognitive energies on learning rather than navigating convoluted processes. One size does not fit all and university education must be delivered in ways which meet the needs and expectations of diverse student cohorts, and personalised in bespoke and supported ways for individual students. Universities seek to enhance and continuously improve student experience, engagement and retention.

Practitioner Notes

1. Keep the focus of education on the students.
2. Support students' priorities of assessment, learning and career development.
3. Directly support students in straight-forward ways.
4. Apply the Universal Design for Learning tenets of multiple means of representation, engagement and expression.
5. Enhance student engagement and student retention through being engaging and supporting educational experience which students are able to sustain.

Keywords

Students, Experiential, Student engagement, Learning Journey, Personalisation, Student retention

Introduction

I have been working in university education for nearly thirty years. First, in Canada and then in Australia. I have worked for four universities and been an adjunct at two others. I have been awarded three national learning and teaching research / practice grants which have given me the opportunity to talk to students, graduates, staff and employers and visit the campuses of nearly every university in Australia.

I intentionally navigated a personalised learning journey of my own as a university staff person. The first third of my career was spent as an academic. I started as a casual educator, achieved a position as assistant professor and then Canadian tenure, and ascended through academic promotions to the position of professor. I taught undergraduate and postgraduate students, conducted research, received competitive grants, completed multiple fellowships, and contributed service within and beyond my universities. I spent the next third of my career in executive positions, leading university-wide learning and teaching. During this part of my journey, I achieved personal accreditation as a Principal Fellow Higher Education Academy.

I am spending the final third of my career as an executive, leading whole-of-institution student experience. The three divisions within which I have worked – academic teaching, central learning and teaching, and central student experience – have shaped, and continue to shape, my perspective. The diverse working relationships have given me a holistic view of the enterprise of universities. My situated experiences inform empathy for the staff working in the various facets of the university. I have insights into the motivating factors and lived realities within different roles and responsibilities. I can build bridges between the different areas for a joined-up experience. For me, my pathways have led me to this destination. When I taught, I taught students – not information - and the creation of learning environments that enabled student success was at the core. When I researched, it was to discover better ways to support student success, and I wrote good practice guides and implemented practice discoveries to close-the-loop. When I led learning and teaching, the desired impact was enabling diverse students to succeed. I now have the pleasure of indulging at the heart of student experience. I have the privilege of being wholly dedicated to supporting students and their experiences.

A global pandemic?

What has the COVID-19 pandemic changed? The pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the student experience and while there has been trauma, innovation has also risen from the ashes. There are high risk impacts on personal wellbeing; Tice et al. (2021) attribute declining student feelings of belongingness as one of the root causes. At my home university, the University of New England (UNE), doubling the number of student counsellors was offered as one antidote. A Google search reveals that 40,000 university jobs were lost across Australia's universities in 2021, as consequences of the pandemic. This has dire consequences for workforce wellbeing. Staff losses have put strain on student services. There is also isolation. I occupy an increasingly common pandemic employment condition, where I was thrust into lockdown a fortnight into commencing my new role in a state away from my husband. Our relationship has been split by five months. And yet, I have heard far more trying situations from students locally and globally (e.g., Fialho et al., 2021).

At UNE in Trimester Three (T3) 2021, we provided 300 bursaries – directly deposited into the bank accounts of our students. To be eligible for these bursaries, students had to be enrolled in at least one unit in T3, briefly describe how they were COVID-19 impacted and identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, low socio-economic status, regional and/or remote. The overall goals of the initiative were to:

- Support the wellbeing of students with heightened vulnerabilities, by allowing students to spend funds where they needed them.
- Support the study success of students by alleviating financial stress factors.
- Improve student retention by reducing the financial factors, a common factor of attrition.

Applicants were asked to describe their COVID-19-affected financial hardships. Responses were thematically analysed, and clustered overwhelmingly into two top categories: 1) work-related (being made redundant, given reduced hours, businesses failing); and 2) dependent-related (single parents, caring for multiple children while studying, home-schooling). An illustrative narrative one student provided included:

At the beginning of COVID, I was working as a cleaner to help make ends meet in rural Victoria. However, when the first lockdown arose, my 5 children were not able to attend school on a face-to-face basis and had to commence home schooling. As restrictions began to lift, my 2 younger children were able to re-attend face-to-face learning, which still left me with 3 children to home school. By the time our 3 other children were allowed to re-commence face-to-face learning, my position had already been filled. It was at this point my mental health began to decline. Working in Family Law has always been a dream of mine, and when I stumbled upon the UNE website, I found that I was able to commence study on an online basis, and complete at a pace that worked for our family.

This student highlighted that the consequence of the pandemic on higher education had not been entirely negative. Suddenly, nearly every aspect of university education shifted online (e.g., Crawford et al., 2020). For many people, rapid digitalisation supported continuity of learning and increased flexibility through online learning. This supported a 'levelling of the playing field' and made degrees achievable. Notably, the mode of education – on-campus, online, or blended including residential intensives – does not assure or correlate with quality. On-campus teaching and online teaching can be equally strong and equally weak. In other words, education quality has to be deliberate and fostered regardless of the education mode. The next section of this paper addresses how students evaluate the quality of their student – learning – experience.

Student voice on student experience

To become more attuned to the student voice – having recently commenced my current role as Executive Principal Student Experience in July 2021 – I conducted manual thematic analysis of ~1,000 open-ended UNE student comments provided in national surveys: 2021 Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) Student Survey; 2020 and 2021 Student Experience Surveys (SES); and 2020 and 2021 Graduate Outcomes Surveys (GOS).

Articulating this in a Jeopardy-like fashion, I worked backwards to determine the questions students were asking themselves when forming their comments. These questions were:

- Were my educators passionate, supportive, and engaging?
- Was my course content stimulating and intellectually engaging?
- Were my activities, particularly within the Learning Management System (LMS), interactive, so that I was called to engage with the activities and engage with other students through activities?
- Did I have the opportunity to meet other students and strengthen my networks – through my coursework?
- Did what I learned and experienced – through my coursework – make me employable and ready for the real-world? Did I feel engaged with industry throughout my learning experience?

In other words, the themes expressed across the questions above depict the way in which contemporary students think about their student experience and express what they expect from university staff.

What matters in university student experience

In the next section of this paper, I present a distillation of the top-ten elements of desirable university student experience. When universities are on the right track and doing the right thing by their students, staff can provide evidence of meeting these ten statements.

For each of the ten categories listed below, I have provided the following content:

- Statement – which can be used as a checklist.
- Interpretation of the statement.
- How I know the statement to be accurate and important.
- The practical implications for university practice.
- Quotes where relevant, usually from the voice of students.

1. Student centricity must be mission-critical

Students and their experience should be mission-central for every university.

Why do universities exist? What is their central purpose? I believe that the response is straightforward. Universities share and produce knowledge. Students should be considered as, and treated as, both the recipients and the co-contributors of knowledge. Students do not arrive at universities as empty vessels waiting to be filled-up with information and neither do they step-out of their regular lives and into university. Students arrive with socially constructed conceptualisations and ideas from intersecting community experiences. University brings-together connected communities whether online or on-campus. Students are vital – and valued – members of those communities who should be acknowledged, nurtured, and heard.

What happens when universities forget their central purpose? We have all heard the stories of universities who do not put their students first. Often these stories are told by students who have transferred to another university where they are better treated. When students are not put-first, they feel like a number. They do not feel like they belong. They frequently leave university before they have achieved their degrees. If they do complete their degrees, they are often unsuccessful as graduates.

How do I know, for certain, that students must come first? One of the ways I know this is through analysing – together with my PhD student Madelaine-Marie Judd – the strategic plans of all of Australia's universities and then comparing these explicated foci against the results of student, graduate and employer surveys (see Kinash & Judd, 2018).

Another way of knowing that a student-first perspective works is by listening to the voices of people with this perspective (Baeten et al., 2010). For example, here is an illustrative quote from one of our students. This is an anonymous student quote, drawn from results of a national Student Experience Survey in 2020 (Social Research Centre, 2021).

UNE is a wonderful community and caring university that genuinely is concerned with its students' welfare. Being an online student is often difficult and a little isolating and the options to engage and be brought into the Uni as a member of the learning community are vast and welcoming. Lecturers and unit coordinators are friendly, accommodating, knowledgeable, and

understanding. University staff are so willing to assist, and are all extremely friendly and helpful, warm and welcoming in every interaction I've been fortunate enough to have.

Here is a 2021 quote from Professor Brigid Heywood, UNE Vice-Chancellor, at a Year-in-Review Message to the University staff that illustrates the critical role central and professional student experience teams play in enabling the student learning experience.

I'd like to give a shout-out to the student experience team and to the leadership of our new Executive Principal, Professor Shelley Kinash, who has wrestled to the ground this question of how we put the student first and how we take the lens of the student and their needs as a means of designing, renewing, refreshing and innovating the support we provide around enabling the student experience.

What are the implications for university practice? One of the ways in which universities enact a student-first mission is by budgeting / spending first and foremost on our students and their experience. Another implication is that the question of student consultation is consistently and repeatedly asked. Have we consulted the students and understood their voice on the matter? How do we know this is what students want and need? Have we invited students to partner and co-design? Are we making this decision in a way that respects and honours our students? Have we considered what this will mean for our students? Can we do this better for our students?

2. Experience must be situated in learning and teaching contexts

The students' coursework, and particularly assessment, are the fundamental elements of the university student experience.

Most students have more complex lives than did previous generations of learners. When today's students enrol in university, they are not on a retreat from the other aspects of their lives. Many students are simultaneously maintaining jobs, families and financial matters. All of these elements need to be held stable in order for them to succeed in their studies and beyond. Full lives mean that most students do not have time for extra, bolt-on activities. The student experience must be nested-into their course-based student experience and for-credit where possible. The staff voices students are going to attend to are those of their educators. If they are going to participate in an activity, it is because it is part of their course-based assessment.

This puts a high onus of responsibility on academic university staff. This means that our academic educators need the support of professional staff behind the scenes. For example, professional staff can support course accreditation and compliance, coordinate placements, arrange industry presentations, design study accommodation plans for students with disabling conditions, ensure the mechanisms for online exams are working and countless other education tasks. The academic staff who are teaching the students in the units are the people with whom the students communicate first and most often and from whom students primarily take direction and feedback. Institutional frameworks can work to support this (Dean et al., 2020a, 2020b), when embedded and situated in the learning and teaching context.

The implications for university practice are that faculty-based and central-service-based staff cannot operate in siloes. University practice needs to be joined-up. Staff need to communicate, consult and decide together (see Kinash et al., 2017b). Messages to students need to be consistent and delivered primarily by the people who the students are going to make the time to hear – their educators.

3. Quality of teachers matters

Students expect their teachers to be engaging, knowledgeable, supportive and passionate, and they expect teaching approaches to be interactive.

In 2002 I commenced my PhD dissertation research into blind online learners. In 2006 my dissertation research was published as a book (Kinash, 2006), which forms the extra reading for this theme. The research questions I pursued were:

- a) What is it like to be a blind online learner?
- b) What are the best online learning design characteristics?
- c) What impact is yielded by blind adults studying online?

Readers might be surprised by my findings. You might expect that my research participants – being blind – would have described substantially different online learning experiences than would sighted students. They did not. You might also expect that the online learning experienced in 2002 was quite a bit different than it is nearly 20 years later, now that we are rapidly approaching 2022. It was not.

The first question I asked students echoed my first research question – what is it like to be a blind online learner? I expected my research participants to focus on being blind. They did not. They spoke instead about the experience of online learning and on their experiences with those who were teaching them. They brought-in the topic of blindness a long-ways into the conversation, after we had pretty much exhausted discussion of online learning design and experience. All my research participants described themselves as students who happened to be blind, not as blind students. The online learning they described sounded for the most part like the experiences we continue to deliver to students.

My point is that we need to focus on the basics of education. Whether the education is online or on-campus, whether the students are blind or sighted and whether we are a regional or a group-of-eight university, students expect learning experiences which are interactive and educators who are engaging, knowledgeable, supportive and passionate (Crisp et al., 2009).

I worked with a colleague, who taught Law students, whose quote I will never forget. He said:

I have just as much power to be boring or exciting in my teaching and why would I do the former, because it would just be boring for me too.

The implications for university practice are not all on the shoulders of the academics. Students tend to credit or blame their educators for the quality of the student learning experience, because this is who is in their line of sight – playful pun intended in the context of this research example. However, we in universities know that it takes a village to educate our students and provide them with an exemplar education. For example, it is professional staff in the central student experience teams who trouble-shoot, enable students' enrolment, track their progression and process their fees. We need to ensure that we work proactively as possible to clear as many of the student learning process roadblocks as we can. We need to respond to students helpfully and respectfully, answering the specific questions they have with as short turn-around times as possible.

4. Instrumental supports

University staff holding important educational roles across the university – beyond directly teaching students - must work in-concert to support student success.

It is easy to get caught-up in process. A standard answer to the question of why we are doing things the way we are is because that is the way we have always done it. We need to pause and ask whether our processes are working and if they are not, we need to try another way. We need to constantly ask ourselves what is the challenge we are trying to resolve. What are the relevant risks against which we are putting treatments, mechanisms, and processes in place? We need to focus on impacts for students. Here are the key impact questions:

- a) Are students choosing our university for their studies?
- b) Are students passing – i.e., ‘student success’?
- c) Does this include students with diverse needs – known as widening participation?
- d) Are student feeling engaged?
- e) Are students staying-with their studies – known as student retention?
- f) Does this include students with diverse needs?
- g) Are students satisfied with their student experience?
- h) Are students graduating?
- i) Are students achieving their career goals after graduation – whether first job, promotion, or enterprise?
- j) Are students becoming lifelong learners and returning to university for postgraduate study?

If an evidence-based response to any of these questions is no, then processes *need* to change. Evaluation is key to continuously improving the student experience and university staff are required to close-the-loop on the results of that evaluation. Student voice is a critical component of evaluation (see Kinash et al., 2015b).

The other factor to keep in-mind in the context of instrumental supports is to keep student services as direct as possible. The most effective student services are often the simplest. While retention has a lag-time as an indicator of student service success, at UNE for example, we have early indications that providing direct payments (bursaries) into the bank accounts of students who are pandemic-affected are going to allow those students to stay-in their studies (Singell Jr, 2004). This is a more powerful treatment of risk than more indirect strategies would have been.

It is easy to shuffle students from university department to department and from one service team to another. Students fall between the cracks and drop-out or fail-out. A student services team member who will take a half-hour to show an international student how to use the Australian SEEK website and help that student improve their resume and practice interview skills will make a real difference to that student’s success.

5. Business systems must create smooth student journeys

University functional mechanisms such as enrolment, advising, progression and fee-payment need to work smoothly so that students can place their energies into learning rather than systems.

Smooth, efficient online experiences have changed the way in which people search and book travel, watch movies and order food. Machine learning and the internet-of-things make wide-ranging tools, objects and mechanisms smart and responsive. Universities have not kept-up with other industries. Enrolling, making changes to units, paying fees, tracking next steps and other such student functions tend to be clunky and are error-prone. The same, or worse, problems exist with behind-the-scenes professional staff work such as making and confirming graduation lists.

These problems multiply. Students need to contact university staff to query information which should be readily available and transparent. Student complaints indicate that they often receive form responses which do not answer their specific questions. Personalised help-lines are open, at some universities, only during banking hours which is when mature students are themselves working. When students do receive the information they require – after substantive delays - the problem has often escalated in that deadlines such as census dates have passed.

Resolving the systems problems through business analysis, improvement and newly installed or upgraded technical solutions is a medium-term treatment. Vendors and in-house information technology teams are innovating effective new solutions which are making large-scale improvements to university processes and interfaces.

Universities cannot stand-by and wait until the technology catches-up and the solutions are in-place. Thousands of enrolled students are currently participating in their education using the systems we have in place now. The responsibility is therefore on the student service team members to ensure that they are providing as direct, responsive, timely and supportive help as they can. This may mean removing encumbrances of process to put a higher percentage of the team on the task of directly supporting students.

The other implication for student services staff is the need to stay tuned to proactive solutions. A metaphor may support shared understanding. People are walking along a river-side park path. They start to notice fully clothed people floating along calling out for help. They begin pulling panicking people out of the river. One of the people on the path decides to take a different approach. She walks upstream to try to figure-out why people have fallen into the river. She discovers that there is a hidden hole in the walking-bridge across the river and that people are falling in. She puts up a sign alerting people to the hole until the engineers can come fix the bridge.

In the context of business systems, the people floating down the river are the students urgently needing help. The people pulling them out of the water are the student services staff. The manager, however, organises practical how-to videos to show students how to enrol in units, until the system is upgraded (see Cook et al., 2021).

6. Employability is core to student ambition

Staff must recognise that career ambitions are the main reason why people choose university.

Student concern about employment outcomes is not a new phenomenon. For example, in 1906, Converse published a paper about university training for business and industrial careers. The paper discusses the dichotomy between producing job-ready graduates with the technical skills needed for employment in specific industries and developing generic skills such as learning and thinking. Offer (1916) wrote that universities were not “measuring up” to meeting their students’ educational needs, thus deriving unsatisfactory graduate employment outcomes. He recommended cooperative education, in which graduates combine working full-time in-industry with complimentary in-house instruction. Donald (1930) wrote about the transition from university to the workforce as problematic.

The common ground between the articles published in the early 1900s and those written in the last decade is a positioning of employability as a fundamental part of the university student learning experience. In other words, these authors share the perspective that the curriculum, teaching approaches and learning experiences need to be designed in ways which develop the employability of the student, creating the empowering conditions for positive graduate employment outcomes. A term which is emerging in the published higher education literature to describe this embedded approach (Kinash et al., 2021), is curricular employability.

While the university cannot control the labour market, it is responsible for ensuring that students are substantially more employable as a result of having a university student experience than they would have been had they not had that experience.

The three primary ways that universities can manage the student experience to increase the positive impact on graduate employability and careers is by:

- a) Co/curricular employability - Empowering and supporting educators to make curriculum relevant to careers, to foster student employer/industry networks and to teach in ways which build students’ employability skills.
- b) Raise student awareness - Being explicit about the ways in which curriculum, teaching and assessment are making students employable, so that students can make-the-connection and thereby benefit (see Kinash et al., 2016).

- c) Intentional strategies – Universities which put explicit employability strategies into place, with and for students, have higher degrees of impact on graduate career success (see Kinash et al., 2017c).

7. Student cohorts have fluctuating and diverse expectations

One of the key mechanisms of personalising learning journeys is recognising the needs and expectations of student cohorts, including the most common contemporary student profile as mature-aged, female, having already entered a workforce and with dependents and other life responsibilities.

Students are diverse and one university size therefore does not fit all. Many school leavers seek a connected, on-campus experience with high social expectations. Many thrive in Residential College accommodation. For most, their graduate employment will be a first career. Mature-aged learners are more likely to study primarily, or entirely, online. They may have far less time for study and for extra-curricular activities. They are often more goal-oriented and may be seeking a promotion or a change of career. Equity means that students are not treated the same, but that they are given the supports they require to succeed.

Students, and particularly vastly different student cohorts, cannot be treated in the same way (see Kinash et al., 2017a). Supports which are likely considered helpful by one group may be considered intrusive or insulting by another. It is vital that evidence is used to determine which approaches, including communication types, work for which students and to respond accordingly. Furthermore, it is essential to listen to students so that responses are as bespoke as possible.

An area of education scholarship which has improved university practice for diverse learners is universal design for learning (UDL). The concept of universal design comes from architecture, whereby flexible, proactive designs are customisable and meet many needs. The classic example are mechanised countertops which can easily be raised or lowered, so that they are at the right height for people in wheelchairs and those who are ambulatory. Likewise, in education, thinking ahead means that educators can meet the needs of diverse group of students who are learning together.

The three main tenets of UDL are multiple means of representation, engagement and expression. Representation stands-for what the educator does. When applying multiple means online, for example, the educator presents the same content using various modes, such as written lectures, video demonstrations and application exercises. Multiple means of engagement recognises that diverse student cohorts are motivated in different ways and have varying time to allot to their education. It is important, for example, to recognise that some students are only going to engage with the course materials which are explicitly assessed and others by elements which are tagged as career-relevant. Finally, multiple means of expression is what the students produce and contribute, or in other words how they evidence their learning. Educators who subscribe to UDL encourage students to address the learning outcomes in unique and customised ways, which can often be multi-purposed as useful artefacts within the jobs many learners have while studying.

8. Learning journeys must be personal and authentic

Diverse student journeys can and should be conceptualised as a metro-map with multiple entry and exit points, routes, pathways and station supports along the journey.

Professor Brigid Heywood, Vice-Chancellor, UNE visualises the student learning journey as a metro-map. Picture differently coloured train lines. The student can easily transfer from one line to another. Picture the stops along the way, such that students have bespoke entry and exit points and transitions. There are stations along the way, where students can upgrade their transit card and request direction and help. There are electronic touch-screens at the stations where the student can navigate and chart their journey. They can enter a chosen destination and obtain specific instructions about how to get

there. They will find out what time the next train arrives and what time they will reach their destination. Once on the train, there are announcements and visible maps to keep track. They can also follow along on their mobile devices. The train ride is a pleasant experience, where people know they are welcome and they connect with diverse and interesting people along the journey. This approach is what our University is on the journey to creating so that our students are [Future Fit](#). The implication for university practice is that the whole staff must be committed to making such a cohesive vision work. Everyone must consider the students first and support a bespoke and excellent student journey.

Another metaphor may be useful to illustrate the importance of personalisation. I took a gap-year trip with a couple girlfriends, back-packing through Europe and a few other neighbouring countries. We ventured into northern Africa into the fascinating country of Morocco. I was fascinated by the wares of the colourful markets in the cities' medinas. One of the stands particularly caught my attention. It was dentures. People would have their teeth pulled-out and would then go to the market to try-on dentures. The dentures looked like they were made from clay moulds with teeth – probably the non-rotten ones pulled-out from other mouths – stuck into them. The dentures looked incredibly uncomfortable and I could not imagine trying to chew with them. Consider the way in which dentures are made in developed countries. They are designed to precisely fit the size and shape of one mouth and customised and fitted until as comfortable as possible.

While this metaphor is extreme, we must continuously ask ourselves at universities which type of metaphoric denture experience we are practicing among our students.

9. Student engagement is the threshold for learning

Engagement requires reciprocal connection and means both that students are fully present in the university experience and compelled to contribute to communities within and beyond.

The UNE definition of student engagement is a set of cohesive strategies, enabling learners to make their mark on the world, and the connected University experience to make its mark on our students (Definition derived from an adapted passage in *Miss Benson's Beetle*, by Rachel Joyce).

Spoiler Alert – In Joyce's book, the main character Miss Benson is on a life-long quest to see the golden beetle. Her intention is to capture and euthanise a number of the beetles and bring them back to the Natural History Museum as her lifework legacy. However, when she finally finds them, surviving many traumas to do so, she is in awe. She allows the beetles to land on her hand and to fly away again. She realises the mark that seeing the beautiful creatures makes on her, and the value of the journey and friendships she makes along the way. She acknowledges this as equally meaningful to the mark she might make on the world through the discovery of the beetles and provision of evidence.

This is a powerful analogy for student engagement. UNE wants students to be open to the experience, whether that experience is online or on-campus or a blend. UNE wants students to feel a sense of belonging and accept an invitation to allow the university student experience to make its mark on their lives. At the same time, UNE wants to manage that student experience, including through connection with industry and innovation, so that our graduates are empowered to give-back and lead – so that our graduates make their mark on the world.

The UNE student engagement principles are as follows and implementation of these principles informs the implications for university practice.

- a) The main purpose of student engagement is to enable learners to flourish during, and through, their education.
- b) Engagement as students, foregrounds engagement as citizens beyond the experiential boundaries of University and the temporal boundaries of graduation.

- c) Employability-skills of leadership, problem-solving, teamwork and communication skills are developed through student engagement.
- d) Student engagement overlaps with student motivation, in that people are driven to succeed when fully involved in the endeavour.
- e) Student success and student retention are positively correlated with student engagement.
- f) Students who are engaged in, and through, their experience are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the University and to be satisfied with their overall student experience.
- g) Co-contribution is a key component of student engagement, such that students are encouraged to think creatively, and design and enact their ideas as partners with University staff and community members.
- h) Students are to receive full acknowledgement and credit, including as authors, of their co-contributions.
- i) Power imbalance is to be watched-for, identified and ameliorated-against at all times.
- j) Where possible, student engagement is to be an embedded part of the main course-based University experience, rather than bolted-on or requiring extra hours which would prohibit the participation of many students.
- k) The three stakeholders in student engagement through UNE are: (a) the students; (b) members of the community-at-large, including but not limited to employers; and (c) University staff, including educators.
- l) The benefits of engagement extend to all three stakeholder groups.
- m) Authentic engagement is multi-directional and reciprocal in that all stakeholders need to participate and contribute.
- n) Student engagement is for All UNE students whether online or on-campus/es or attending a Country University Centre, whether domestic or international and whether pathway, undergraduate or postgraduate.
- o) Widening participation in student engagement strategies of students from equity groups is prioritised and enabled. This includes, but is not limited to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from homes of low socio-economic status, students from regional, remote and rural communities and students with disabling conditions (see Kinash et al., 2015a).

10. Retention is more than whether a student stays

For students to stay-with-their-studies and complete their degrees, needs associated with study, work, family, and finances must be met.

The final section of this paper addresses student retention. Student retention is a vital consideration of universities and must be addressed in-concert across the entire student experience. Retention is everyone's responsibility.

This section on student retention comes full-circle to the first principle of student experience. As explained above, students do not step outside of their complex lives and into university. They take their life responsibilities with them and must maintain multi-faceted roles beyond their studies. Universities who report high student retention rates support their students' needs for study (academic success), family, work and finances.

The [TEQSA Good Practice Note on Retention](#) identifies nine key factors which can be improved to support students to complete their degrees.

- a) The appropriateness of students' preparation for higher education and how they are selected for admission
- b) Comprehensiveness of orientation and transition to higher education study
- c) Clear and user-friendly enrolment processes

- d) Design of the curriculum
- e) The importance of early identification of students at risk of discontinuing their studies
- f) Academic student learning support
- g) Student welfare support
- h) A sense of connectedness to the institution at which they are studying
- i) How well different student backgrounds are catered for

These nine points echo the nine themes addressed throughout this paper and form a summative conclusion.

Conclusion: Where to from here?

These ten principles of university student experience join-up to form a practice framework. This framework is more important than ever for two reasons. First, after more than two years living with a pandemic, people are craving connection, purpose, focus and hope. Well-designed education can meet all of these needs. The definition of student engagement presented above described the importance of experiences which make-their-mark on the person and enable the person to make-their-mark on the world. Thoughtful university education does both.

The second reason why a principle-based university student experience practice framework is critically important now is because many countries, including Australia, do not have national government leadership to inspire and focus our work. In 2021, the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching cut the final remaining tendril of unified national leadership, provided as Australian Awards for University Teaching. It is not clear whether the Australian government recognises universities as a national treasure and mechanism of human capital and global standing. In the absence of clear sign-posting and national leadership from our government, it is important that universities find their own strength and focus, as a united industry. One way in which we can continue forward-momentum, for our students, graduates, staff and communities, is by adopting our own practice-based frameworks grounded in shared principles.

Conflict of interest

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