***Getting through the day and still having a smile on my face*! How do students define success in the university learning environment?**

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Abstract

The expression 'student success' has gained traction in the university sector and has been applied to various aspects of the higher education learning trajectory. Yet, 'success' is an amorphous term that means distinctive things to various stakeholders in any educational undertaking. When the literature on this field is examined it is surprising that the ways in which students themselves articulate success within university has rarely been explored in qualitative depth. This article details a study that sought to understand how individual learners reflected upon success and applies the work of Sen (1992, 1993, 2003) to explore how understandings of this concept might be used to enrich and inform the higher education environment. The participants were all first in their families to come to university and approaching completion of their degree studies. This article draws on surveys and interviews to discuss students' conceptions of 'being successful' in response to explicit questions on how they defined 'success' and whether they personally regarded themselves as successful in their student role. The deeply embodied ways students referred to success, often contextualised to their particular biographies and social realities, can inform how institutions better engage and support first-in-family students.

Keywords: student success; capabilities approach; qualitative research; widening participation

Introduction

What is success at university? A Google™ search produced 378 million results, indicating the popularity and frequency of this question, but also suggesting that defining and achieving success are not clear-cut. Not surprisingly, 15 of the top 20 Google hits were compiled by various universities. There can be little doubt that universities have a vested interest in both defining and measuring academic success in terms of grades, completion, graduation and beyond, to ensure viability and market

share, amongst other motivations (Hanover Research, 2014; Beneke, 2011).

While educational milestones in terms of academic performance and results are undoubtedly important for students (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015), this paper seeks to deeply explore the complexities of how students define success, in a nuanced and richly descriptive manner. By exploring the embodied nature of success and the variety of meanings it can engender, this paper will contribute to broader perspectives on students' motivations and aspirations around attending university. Such insights are particularly important as universities attract an increasing diversity of students with a greater multiplicity of rationales and motivations underpinning their participation in further education. Better understanding of what students desire from their university experience is fundamental to creating a clearer alignment between the goals of the institution and those of the individual.

Drawing on survey and interview responses from students in the latter stages of their degrees, we focus on how these learners articulate success. In particular, how success takes on an array of meanings ranging from contributing to a better world (May, Delahunty, O'Shea & Stone, 2016) through to tangible (e.g. grades, career) and internal indicators (e.g. personal growth, confidence), at times with connotations that diverge from, and even disrupt, more traditional neoliberal individualistic discourses.

Defining success within academia

Even a cursory glance at the literature related to academic or student success reveals how the term has a multiplicity of definitions and measurements. Collectively, success is defined variously as academic achievement or graduation outcomes (Oh & Kim, 2016), attaining a necessary volume of knowledge (Sullivan, 2008) or progressing through a degree program in an independent linear and uninterrupted manner

(Leathwood, 2006). Beilin (2016) argues many definitions of educational success assume a type of 'contract' between a student and institution, whereby students are judged on their performance of certain tasks and if deemed satisfactory 'they will be granted varying levels of approval and ultimately a diploma…that presumably bestows on its possessor increased power (in the form of social and cultural capital, and in the form of credentials)' (p. 16).

In the current neoliberal context (Beilin, 2016), meritocratic understandings of student success dominate in the global university sector. Neoliberalism essentially imposes an economic prerogative on all aspects of human life, and entails 'viewing the world as an enormous marketplace' (Shenk, 2015, p. 2). Under neoliberalism the individual student is positioned as the consumer, and education as the product, which post-graduation leads to higher fiscal returns.

The underpinnings of neoliberalism are clear in public discourses around higher education (HE) attendance, which have made a notable shift in emphasis to the more public benefits of university attendance (Hunter, 2013). Externalisation of success factors is largely manifested through reference to employability, wealth imperatives and productivity. However, this focus often masks the more personal or social impacts of the endeavour, which may go unacknowledged. By exploring how students themselves understand their success or achievement within university, this paper seeks to challenge this 'discursive framework' that largely conceives of knowledge and learning in fiscal terms (Beilin, 2016, p. 15).

Sen and the neoliberal discourse of success
Definitions of success that are embedded within a meritocratic achievement model often rely on psychological testing. This includes psychometric assessment of intelligence levels, predictive tests and also those that attempt to identify particular qualities or skill

sets that can assist in the achievement of success. Such approaches do not consider how external forces might impact student understandings of success. These include 'cultural and structural dimensions' (Oh & Kim , 2016) such as socio-cultural location, ethnic affiliation and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2015), which may combine in dynamic ways to define how success is understood and enacted at a local level. By drawing upon the work of Sen (1992, 1993, 2003), we explore how one group of first-in-family students reflected on success at university.

Amartya Sen is both an economist and a political philosopher with a focus on the evaluation of human wellbeing. Sen's approach moves away from equating personal wellbeing with the ownerships of material wealth, certain lifestyles or standards of living. Instead, Sen argues that we need to consider ways in which each person is 'able to be or do' or 'the freedoms [people] actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value' (Sen, 1992, p.81). By applying the Capability Approach, success can be more broadly conceived as reflecting a person's achievement of 'valuable functionings' (Sen, 1993). These functionings are recognised as outputs and outcomes that are regarded as being important and beneficial to individuals themselves. As Sen (1993) explains:

> The Capability Approach to a person's advantage is concerned with evaluating it in terms of his or her actual ability to achieve various valuable functionings as a part of living (p. 30).

The next section explores how understandings of success are framed specifically in relation to a group of students in the latter stages of their degree who are first in their families to come to university. Oh and Kim (2016) point out that success is more appropriately defined at a close-up micro-level in order to account for its 'multifaceted, fluid and at times, unpredictable' (p. 288) nature. However, focussing on the first-in-

family cohort does not assume a commonality of experience but rather that this is a group frequently intersected by a diversity of recognised equity categories (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017). Such intersectionality means that first-in-family students are likely to encounter additional obstacles and complexities on their journey into and through university studies. Given that first-in-family student enrolments remain significant, nuanced interpretations of the term 'success' will allow for more informed recommendations for supporting and engaging this cohort.

Academic success and first-in-family students

The term 'first-in-family' has been variously defined and is largely predicated on the educational biographies of parents. For the purposes of this article and the associated research, we are referring to those students who are the first in their immediate family including parents, partners, children and siblings to attend university. Essentially, this cohort does not necessarily have ready access to what Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) refer to as familial 'inheritance codes' (p. 57) around education, which often means that these individuals are 'break[ing] the intergenerational cycle' of university non-attendance (Gofen, 2009, p. 104). This is not to imply that this is a homogenous group but rather to draw attention to the possibility of gaps in knowledge or capitals when compared to other student populations.

Simply attending university for these learners may of itself represent a high degree of success, as they step over the threshold of academia, signifying an enviable level of achievement to those watching on the sidelines (O'Shea, et al., 2017). How then do such students negotiate success within the university landscape as they proceed through their degrees and contemplate graduation? An earlier study (O'Shea, 2009) conducted with a first-in-family female cohort in the first year of study, indicated how simply 'getting through' the year was an indicator of success.

Equating 'success' with 'passing' in the first year is perhaps not surprising when we consider that many first-in-family students may regard themselves as 'imposters' who have a limited sense of entitlement to actually attend university (O'Shea et al., 2017). Low levels of belonging are similarly noted by Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) in their review of research conducted over the last two decades with first-in-family students across Canada, UK, Germany and the US. These authors also note that the imposter perception is compounded by other common characteristics including proportionally higher percentages who work whilst studying and who are more likely to live off-campus. Again, we acknowledge the heterogeneity of first-in-family students but also recognise that there are commonalities that may hinder the academic success of this cohort and potentially lessen engagement with the institution. Dumais and Ward (2010) further explain:

> …the underlying idea is that first generation students do not have the same sense of entitlement or belonging as non-first generation students. Without having a ''feel for the game,'' these students are at a disadvantage relative to their non-first-generation peers; even if they do possess cultural capital, it is possible that they will not activate it in a way that will help them. (p. 250)

Personal or social issues encountered by various first-in-family cohorts have also been documented in the literature. For example, Bryan and Simmons (2009) highlight how 'management' of family, poverty, identity and the university experience had an impact on the achievements of their first-in-family participants. Thomas and Quinn (2007) expand upon this by identifying how this cohort often have to complete additional but invisible work to succeed, including the need to 'perfect themselves as educated and employable; reassure the family that they have "invested wisely"; open up the aspirations and horizons of the family and its community; represent a triumph of social egalitarianism and "prove that everyone can make it" (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p. 59).

However, what remains unclear are the ways in which first-in-family students overcome these issues and enact persistence within university. Focussing on how 'success' is translated at an individual level foregrounds the embodied and contextual nature of participation perspectives often absent from dominant political and educational discourses.

Research design and context

The research reported in this paper is part of a much broader study exploring persistence strategies and behaviours of first-in-family students in the latter part of an undergraduate degree (O'Shea, 2017). The findings focus on data collected between April and May 2017, from students across five Australian universities. In line with Ethics Approval (HREC 2017/078), students were recruited by email or other means, as negotiated with each institution.

Criteria for involvement was that students be first in their immediate family to attend university, and in the latter stages of an undergraduate degree with completion of at least two years of full time study (or equivalent). Students self-selected their participation by either completing an anonymous online survey or contacting the researchers for an interview. 21 interviews were conducted and 160 surveys returned, of which 18 were removed as respondents were not first-in-family or were only in their first year of study. Table 1 below summarises how data was distributed across the various institutions and states:

Table 1: Data Collection Summary

Institutions: data collected in April and May 2017	Surveys #	Interviews #
Institution 1 (City, WA)	67	15
Institution 2 (Regional, QLD)	13	3
Institution 3 (Regional, NSW)	11	0
Institution 4 (Regional, NSW)	33	2
Institution 5 (Regional, VIC)	18	1
TOTAL	142	21

Demographic information

Of the total number of students who participated, the majority were female (85% survey, 71% interviews), and most were aged over 21 (78% survey, 82% interviews) with a large proportion of survey respondents being in the 21-30 age range (40%) while 43 per cent of interviewees were over 41. Most were studying full-time (78% survey, 71% interviews), and only a quarter were accessing welfare or scholarship funding (25% survey, 24% interviews). The majority of survey respondents had no children (79%), while 67 per cent of interviewees had one or more children.

Both survey respondents and interviewees self-identified a range of backgrounds and circumstances, Table 2 (below) provides a summary of these:

Table 2: Student Demographic background

Student background*	Survey responses (n= 179)		Interview responses (n=23)	
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	6	3%	0	0%
Disability	8	4%	4	17%
Low SES	50	28%	10	43%
Rural/Isolated	45	25%	3	13%
NESB	15	8%	2	9%
Refugee	3	2%	1	4%
Other	18	10%	0	0%
Not applicable	34	19%	3	13%
*Note: more than one category could be selected				

Further explanation for 'other' included coming from or being a single parent family, living away from home, uncertainty about being low SES ('definitely by no means rich').

The guiding questions for the survey and interview were the same, however interviews allowed for deeper exploration of experience. Equally, the surveys returned rich qualitative data, although not of the same complexity. Using the same questions ensured uniformity in the data collected. After eliciting demographic information, the questions covered three broad areas: self-reflections as a student; reflections on higher

education; higher education participation and support from family/community, the institution and others. Responses explored in this paper relate to questions about success: *Would you describe yourself as a successful student?* and *How you do characterise success at university and after graduation?*

The interviews were transcribed and imported along with the survey responses into NVivo 11. Both investigators conducted line by line coding independently, each applying an inductive analysis of the text with continual reflective memoing. The two investigators then engaged in cross-comparative analysis of emerging themes, which allowed each of the themes to be challenged and interrogated from a variety of perspectives. At this stage, some of the themes were collapsed or eliminated, resulting in four core themes relating to the concept of success as defined by the students themselves. As mentioned, this process was further informed by the theoretical lens that was applied to the data, drawing on Sen's work with the Capability Approach, analysis was underpinned by an understanding of success as being an individual learner's opportunity to achieve personally validating outcomes (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

The words and phrases used by the respondents have been exactly reproduced in the following sections and each participant has been de-identified through pseudonyms (interviewees) and respondent code (survey). As mentioned, each participant was invited to self-identify demographic information and this detail is provided with any quotes used along with age, year of study, gender and family particulars, where given.

Findings

In both interviews and surveys, participants were asked if they would define themselves as 'successful students'. Given that these students were all in the latter stages of their degrees and close to graduation, it is interesting that a significant number were either unsure or did not identify themselves in terms of being 'successful'. In interviews, just

under half (n=10) were uncertain of their 'success'. While 81 per cent of the total

survey responses (n=92) answered affirmatively to being successful, a further 22

responses were either unsure or unequivocally negative in their reply, with an additional

21 who skipped the question. This indecisiveness or ambiguity was elaborated upon in

interviews, for example Jennifer who reflected how: *'I haven't really failed a subject I

think that's successful'* (28, 3rd year, online, LSES, married). The use of the tentative 'I

think' indicates a level of uncertainty concerning the most appropriate measurement of

success. For another student, Lucas, it was slightly more complicated as he explained:

> I'm still here, I'm still going – I'm not failing which is good but then I suppose to
> say I'm "successful" because I'm not failing is kind of a bit selfish for people that
> have certain situations that force them to drop out (20, 3rd year, on-campus, LSES,
> single)

The question also prompted a level of insecurity for some, such as the survey

respondent who compared success to high achievement '*completing everything on time

while producing high quality work'* in contrast to his personal perceived lack, '*I feel like

I'm drifting through uni'* (D13, male, 21-25, 4th year, NESB, single, no children).

Others showed a degree of self-deprecation despite evidence of achievement. One

interviewee, Danielle in her final year of study, seemed reluctant to acknowledge her

success:

> Unwillingly, yes [I am successful] but that's just, you know, like I said, I don't
> really like to toot my horn, but looking at what I've done and achieved and how
> much people have said to me, like, "You're doing really, really well" (32, 3rd year,
> LSES, single).

These and other responses indicated how success was understood in relational and

contextually rich ways rather than the abstract notions of success often favoured in

institutional policy. The need to interpret 'success' as meaning more than simply

achieving high grades or gaining employment post graduation was manifestly apparent when students were asked to describe how they translated success both within the university environment and also, post-graduation. These responses have been analysed under the following broad themes that emerged:

- Success as a form of validation

- Success as defying the odds

- Embodied and emotional success

The final theme discussed relates to 'what success was not', with students adopting a comparative stance to explain what success meant to them personally.

Success and validation

Success is clearly more than just achieving high marks or grades. Interestingly for these students, success was also measured by and relied upon the type and level of validation received within the university. Success for some was defined as being able to positively negotiate feelings of otherness and difference, an overriding sense of being an imposter. Danielle explained how she tentatively defines herself as being successful, largely based on external validation received from those close to her and also, from lecturers. For Danielle, the latter was largely derived from assignment feedback, which served to reassure her that she was indeed achieving an acceptable standard:

> '…having lecturers say, you know, like "This piece of work was so good that you
> should actually use it in real life, like submit that to a government committee" –
> that's the best feedback that I could ever get in my life.' (32, 3rd year, online,
> LSES, single)

For Danielle, marks were only translated meaningfully in a relational context where additional feedback enabled a deeper understanding of how success could be

understood. Her level of uncertainty about how numerical marks equated to success was palpable in her narrative, giving insight into how influential lecturer feedback and validation can be, '*that makes me think that yeah, you know, I am actually really successful in what I'm doing*'.

Without constructive or useful feedback many of these students (despite being quite advanced in their degrees) retained a level of uncertainty about whether they were indeed successful. When asked if he would define himself as successful, Robert stated *'I don't know'*, despite achieving high grades. It was the lack of constructive feedback that Robert lamented:

> The only feedback you get are the comments on what you've done and so it's hard to perceive your progress because what the tutors tend to do is focus on what they see that is wrong with it rather than what's right with it. (51, 4th year, online, single, one child)

The need to measure success by more than just grades was similarly echoed by other interview participants. As Paz explained:

> I made some Vice-Chancellor's list which puts me in the top one percent of the whole university but all that makes we wonder is how did I get on the Chancellor's list and what percentage is that? I don't know who a Vice-Chancellor is. (Paz, 43, 4th year, online, single).

Not having a significant other or ready access to a familial network does mean that first-in-family students may require additional and more overt forms of validation than that provided by marks. Despite being near the end of their degrees and many poised for graduation, a number of students were still uncertain about their level of success and seemed confused about how this could be defined. This may suggest that success as normalised within university discourse is a privileged ideal, partially reliant on the possession of certain cultural and academic capitals. Learners with a family history of

university attendance may experience a high sense of entitlement or belonging within the institution, and as a result may find the ways that success is measured within the institution both familiar and customary. In contrast, the students in this study seemed less well-informed about, and sometimes questioning of, the prevailing institutional metrics of academic success. Instead, some responses appeared to be locating success within frames with which students were more familiar, such as relationships. Equally, at times a subtle defiance to expected success 'norms' is evidenced, detailed in the next sections.

Success as defying the odds

Given the complex personal lives of these students, success was often regarded as an ability to simply keep going despite obstacles or barriers to participation, often expressed as self-praise; admiration for their capabilities or their tenacity to persist. For example, Dyahn responded positively when asked if she considered herself to be a 'successful student' and elaborated: *'I'm finishing uni which I think is quite an achievement with two children and working full-time. So that's what I would consider successful'* (25, 4th year, online, LSES, partnered, 2 children). For students from a refugee background, such as Labriesha, now in her Honours year, defying the odds took on a whole new significance,

> yes [I am successful] because I set my goal when I started studying, I said in three
> years I want to complete my Bachelor in Nursing, so I did complete that. Anyway
> I'm still continuing with it and I did it successfully, in the top 15 of students, so …
> I think that how I think I've been successful (31, 4th year, on campus, LSES,
> refugee, NESB, married, 5 children).

Survey participants also articulated success in terms of personal satisfaction with their own capabilities, for example,

> I am proud that I have managed to stay studying full-time … while managing a family, social life and maintaining a GPA I am happy with (B15, female, 31-40, 3rd year, LSES, rural, single parent, 2 children)

> being able to achieve and complete all requirements of my degree to the best of my ability and achieving grades beyond what I thought were possible for myself (C04, female, 31-40, 4th year, partnered 2 children)

In the following quote, Heather similarly rejected measuring success solely in relation to grades, instead describing how getting through the degree and 'completing it' were important success markers for her:

> It's about completing something that I never thought possible and the first person in my family to have a degree… (59, 5th year, online, single parent, 3 children)

For a number of these students, success was defined in terms of personal survival and resilience. Most were managing competing demands in often complicated lives; being in the latter stages of their degrees enabled them to reflect on success as a celebration of this. As Lara and a survey respondent explained:

> How would I classify "success"? Graduating and surviving without losing my marbles [laughing] ... Yeah, that's success for me – survival and having my mental health intact. (Lara, 46, 2/3 year, online, rural, LSES, partnered, 2 children)

> [success is] learning from your mistakes and becoming more resilient … being able to persevere despite wanting to quit many times (A33, female, 26-30, 5th year, single no children)

Similarly, success was often expressed through self-praise, particularly as participants reflected on their ability to achieve and persevere at university, as epitomised in this survey response:

> Success for me - is the ability to follow one's dream after working through all the blood, sweat and tears. Success isn't given but it's earned. (D23, female, 18-20, 3rd year, NESB, single).

The question of success generally evoked notions of the hard work needed to achieve it and the sense of pride that this engendered. For these participants, the future fiscal or employment benefits of academic success are only partially reflective of their sense of achievement. The student quotes draw attention to the internal workings of the individual and how education expanded their 'valuable capabilities and plural functionings' (Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015, p. 313).

The embodied and emotional nature of success

Examining the interview and survey data, the ways in which these students reflected upon success both pre- and post-graduation also referenced very emotional or embodied terms. Terms like 'happiness', 'enjoyment', 'being passionate', 'gaining respect' and engendering 'pride' abounded when participants were asked to describe what success meant to them. For example, across interviews and surveys, seven interviewees and 23 survey respondents equated success to a sense of 'happiness' or 'satisfaction'. The survey participants repeatedly described positive emotions engendered by thinking about success at university (**bolded** in quotes below):

> *Success is **loving** what you are doing...* (A45, male, 18-20, 3rd year, rural, NESB, single)

> *success is finding something that you **passionate** about , could [be] easy or hard and going after it until you get it. That's success* (A43, female, 21-25, 2nd year, refugee, single no children)

*I define success at having holistic **happiness** - being **happy** with what you're doing and being **excited** to wake up every day and go and **enjoy** what you do* (D03, female, 21-25, 4th year, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, partnered no children)

*Success in university is about being **passionate** about what you do* (A08, female, 21-25, 5th year, LSES, single)

Success after graduation was likewise defined as 'being ***happy** with whatever you are doing in life, or the job you have'* (D14, female, 21-25, 4th year, rural, partnered no children) or simply being able to '*keep **chasing your dreams** no matter where they lead you'* (A23, female, 18-20, 4th year, rural, single).

Language choices signalling emotions also characterised the interviews. At 55 and in his third year of a degree, Eddie defined his understanding of success as follows:

I characterise "success" by **happiness** and for me, happiness is being **happy** within yourself, **content** within yourself and **happy** in where you belong (online, LSES, single)

This sentiment echoed by Lisa, who when asked to reflect upon success after graduation, simply emphasised: *'...being **happy**. I would like to be **very happy**. Yeah, probably just be **happy** really...'* (21, 4th year, rural). Applying the lens of the Capabilities Approach allows alternative understandings of how individuals' flourishings are enabled through learning. The quotes above exemplify a counter narrative to meritocratic measurements that say 'nothing useful about individual experiences of higher education' (Walker, 2003, p.170)

What success is not

When analysing both interview and survey datasets it became evident that students had very clear ideas about what they considered 'success was not'. Their comments provide insights into how normative understandings of success (such as obtaining high grades or

passing exams) were somewhat challenged and disrupted. In defining what success was 'not' students frequently referred to popular discourses around getting good grades or employment but then countered these with alternative perspectives. In many cases, the students contextualised success through their own biographies and positionality. For example, Lucas explained how success was not only measured *within* the university environment but that simply getting to university indicated 'success' both for himself and those witnessing his progress:

> *I suppose just coming to uni already makes me successful in that front which is a good way to look at it I think. I'm already doing good things.* (20, 3rd year, on-campus, LSES, single).

Similarly, success after university was <u>not</u> simply about graduating and getting any job but instead by achievement in terms of specific types of employment or careers. Rather than being measured by the potential for income generation, success also seemed equally to be about 'desire'. Ruth aged 53 reflected on success as offering her the opportunity to *'to make a living doing what I love doing and that's writing.'* (3rd Year, online, partnered, 1 child). Similarly, Heather described how attending university was not *'just for a piece of paper'* but rather she regarded success as involving:

> … the opportunity to have a successful career and be able to contribute to society in that sense... I didn't actually graduate high school so for me, it's kind of that …celebration that I achieved something big, or bigger than what I have already achieved. (59, 5th year, online, single parent, 3 children).

Education student Paige characterised success in terms of the opportunity to have *'actually used what I have learned to teach somebody else',* concluding, *'so that would be a success'* (29, 4th year, online, disability, LSES). After graduation, making a contribution through passion for the work, rather than only high wages, was paramount

to Valerie's notion of success,

> [graduates] know … where they can bring about change – positive change – and
> that could be in working with an NGO, you know, where you are not paid a lot of
> money but where you're making a difference in a community level or a difference
> with marginalised people (50, disability, partnered 3 children)

Survey participants also gave some insights into what they believed success was
not. By taking a negative stance, the respondents rejected others' perceptions of success,
such as those influenced by popular discourse around success in terms of material and
measurable 'evidence'. For example, to the question 'How you do characterise success
at university?' some participants explained:

> Success does not necessarily need to be measured in having a good job or
> continuing on to doing your masters! (A27, female 31 to 40, 4th year, NESB,
> partnered no children)

> Success is … not just going to university because you have to, but going because
> you learn things that make you curious and inspired. It's not necessarily about
> getting great grades … but about learning from your mistakes and becoming more
> resilient" (A33, female, 26 to 30, 5th year, single no children)

> I don't think success is 2.5 kids and a house (C05, female, 26 to 30, 5th year, LSES,
> Rural, partnered, no children)

Discussion

The research presented in this article sought to deeply consider the situatedness of
learners who were asked to reflect on their perceptions of 'success' in their own lives
and contexts. The results are valuable, pointing to nuanced understandings of success,
such as a form of validation for their student status, recognition of their ability to 'beat
the odds', and as an embodiment of affective states or senses. We argue that these
students seemed to have varied 'yardsticks' against which personal success and

achievement were measured. This research points to the complex nature of these understandings and how different measurements of success might co-exist, albeit somewhat uneasily. Clearly the term 'success' encapsulates a range of connotations for learners and importantly, the HE sector has a valuable role in assisting individuals to operationalise their own desires, thereby facilitating achievement of their preferred human flourishings.

Drawing on the work of Sen, Walker (2008) argues that rather than consider ways to *widen participation* in university, it is more productive to consider how we might *widen capability* for all students - a perspective which overcomes the 'dysfunction' of the 'human capital agenda' (p. 274). An understanding of 'capability' rather than 'participation' acts to 'reclaim a hopeful language of equality and diversity' (Walker, 2008, p. 268). Such a perspective invites the HE sector to reframe what is valued in universities, shifting from a traditional focus on meritocratic goals to focus on what people themselves regard as being important or what supports 'a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being' (Sen, 1993, p. 30).

The findings demonstrate how valuable states of being are not only enabled through economic success but also through more embodied and communal states. For example, the celebration of contributing to individual and societal wellbeing surpassed mention of economic gains by participants in this study. This is not to say that the students in this study absolutely rejected notions of success valorised within the neoliberal university, but rather that such understandings frequently jostled, sometimes uncomfortably, alongside other more personal perspectives of achievement. These participants clearly articulated their 'expansive understandings of what is valuable in human lives' (Walker, 2008, p. 270) by referring to varied understandings of what it meant to be a 'successful' student. The Capability Approach focuses attention on the

need for higher education institutions to value and respond to this diversity, by working with students' desires and goals rather than assuming a top-down approach that focuses on various 'inputs' leading to 'desired outcomes' (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 2). Clearly, shifts in policy and discourse need to occur if HE is to create real opportunities for students to achieve **all** those things *they* consider of value. Drawing upon the work of Walker (2008) we propose a number of recommendations outlined below.

Firstly, the promise of secure employment upon graduation is no longer true (Healy, 2015) particularly for those students from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Lehmann, 2013). Similarly, graduates in certain fields earn less than those who entered full-time employment after school so the guaranteed economic return of university studies is not necessarily the reality for all graduates (Daly, Lewis, Corliss & Heaslip, 2015). This dysfunction means that current emphasis on employability needs to shift to incorporate a more inclusive understanding of achievement post-graduation. This might include a desired job or less tangible, but equally anticipated, forms of success. The various facets of success should then be equally acknowledged and celebrated in higher education rhetoric rather than an emphasis on fiscal gains. Such inclusivity serves to legitimise alternative perspectives of success and can thereby assist in deconstructing individuals' anxieties associated with 'being judged or seen as incapable' (Burke, Bennett et al. 2016, p. 43). Importantly, differing perspectives on the nature of success are not necessarily mutually exclusive but could be regarded as complementary goals, assisting people to achieve desired flourishings. Recognising the multiplicity of success within policy and popular discourse would go some way to achieving recognition of how understandings of success can be balanced. This recognition would simultaneously acknowledge the value of diversity in the university population as well as the heterogeneous nature of lived experience.

Continuing to retain this dominant focus on the private benefits of university has deeper and more insidious financial implications. If popular discourse on HE attendance only emphasises fiscal or employment outcomes then the responsibility for funding such activity similarly rests with the individual. Student debt in Australia continues to grow with current estimates over 50 billion dollars (Hoh & Carmody, 2017). Responsibility for the costs of study are shifting wholly to students, reflected in Australian political discourse and policy, with changes in loan repayments and fee structures imminent. This is alarming for all students but particularly so for its adverse impact on students from less-advantaged backgrounds (Spence, 2017). Shifting discourse around HE participation can assist in celebrating the more embodied and social outcomes of this educational participation; from emphases on often-illusive rewards, to acknowledgement of the wider more public benefits of attendance. We argue that this provides a more encompassing and valuable recognition of 'success'.

Related to the previous points are the opportunities that universities offer for 'genuine choice' for all students (Walker, 2008, p. 275). This is a deeper understanding of choice based on opening up individual freedoms and futures 'to have and do and be what they value being and doing' (Walker, 2008, p. 270). While choice cannot be a guaranteed outcome from university participation, pedagogies supporting and extending critical thinking and reflexivity fostering development of this critical capability, should be foregrounded in the HE sector. In O'Shea's (2014) research on female first-in-family students, the women interviewed positively reflected on university as offering a space to reflect and reconsider the possibilities in their lives, including reconsidering the constraints they had taken for granted. This enabled them to consider alternatives, which while not necessarily financially enriching, marked an emotional richness appreciated by these women. Importantly, HE institutions have the means to 'enable

independence in learning and criticality in new generations of learners, and the desire to produce rather than reproduce knowledge' (Walker, 2008, p. 277). This is a moral endeavour as well as an educational one, requiring proactive institutional engagement at the level of curricula, instruction and also, policy. Equally, as educators and scholarly practitioners in the field, we need to continually question our own assumptions around the role of 'success' in students' thinking and engagement, remaining mindful of the varied and embodied nature of this concept for diverse learners.

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