

'I'm happy, and I'm passing. That's all that matters!': Exploring discourses of university academic success through linguistic analysis

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ABSTRACT

'Student success' is a key driver in higher education policy and funding. Institutions often adopt a particular lens of success, emphasising 'retention and completion', 'high grades' 'employability after graduation' discourses, which place high value on human capital or fiscal outcomes. We explored how students themselves articulated notions of success to understand how these meanings aligned with the implicit value system perpetuated by neoliberal higher education systems. Qualitative data collected from 240 survey responses in the first phase of a study, were analysed using APPRAISAL, a linguistic framework to systematically categorise evaluative language choices. This paper focuses on questions eliciting students' articulations of success. Neoliberal discourses were challenged by these students, who were first-in-family at university, with success expressed in a personal and generational sense rather than solely meritocratic terms.

Key words:

Student success; APPRAISAL; first-in-family; neoliberal discourse; higher education; discourse analysis

1 Introduction

This paper will explore notions of 'success', specifically how students from six Australian universities characterised success in higher education (HE). These students were all first in their families to attend university, which meant that they were the first out of siblings, children, parents and partners to enrol at a HE institution. While success in the context of Australian HE is measured using performance indicators such as graduate outcomes (employment, student satisfaction), rates of attrition and global university rankings (Yezdani 2018), individual student perspectives of success are far more likely to be multifaced, and thus not as clear-cut as performance indicators might indicate. As key stakeholders to whom institutional discourses of success are directed, the question is raised as to how these students perceive and actually experience success. We argue that close linguistic analysis is key to gaining a better understanding of what success actually means to individual learners. It seems particularly important to explore this from the perspective of students who do not have a family biography of university attendance, and thus do not have intergenerational knowledge of university study to draw upon for their conceptions of academic success (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty

2017). Using an APPRAISAL¹ approach to analysis enabled student responses to be explored on a multifaceted level and provided a nuanced understanding of how perspectives of success do not necessarily conform to institutional or dominant policy discourses. The focus in this study was on those students who were nearing completion of their undergraduate degrees, in their final year or semester of study. In a meritocratic system, such a group would automatically be regarded as 'successful' with graduation in sight and the opportunity for enriching employment imminent. Yet, this project was interested to explore how it was that individual learners articulated notions of success and adopted various attitudinal stances in relation to success in these latter stages of study

In this paper we present perceptions of student success through analysis of the evaluative language choices students made in qualitative survey comments when prompted to consider their successful selves. These comments were examined using the APPRAISAL framework, which is offered within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) – a theoretically grounded model of language use in context. Attitudinal meanings in linguistic expressions of emotion, opinion and evaluation affect how individuals align or disalign with particular values and indicate degrees of commitment to these value positions. When meanings are upscaled the effect is to 'strongly align the reader into that value position' (Martin and White 2005, 152), and when downscaled the speaker/writer construes less affiliation to that stance. In this paper we explore how attitudinal stances are variously aligned or misaligned to popular discourses around, and perceived expectations of, what constitutes 'success' for students who have no familial history of university attendance.

1.1 Appraisal

The APPRAISAL framework offers a systematic process of analysis through an array of descriptive categories, providing a robust method of analysis in which patterns in language informs emergent themes. APPRAISAL is a framework within the interpersonal metafunction of the SFL model which is concerned with how social relations are enacted (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). The particular focus of APPRAISAL is on how language is used to make evaluations, adopt stances, construct textual personas and social alignments, and manage interpersonal positionings and relationships (Martin and White 2005). APPRAISAL is best modelled as a system network (see figure below), which builds a model of differences, including positive/negative polarity, and allows insight into meaning through the linguistic options speakers or writers choose.

¹ APPRAISAL appears in capitals, sub-systems (such as Attitude) and categories are capitalized to denote technical usage

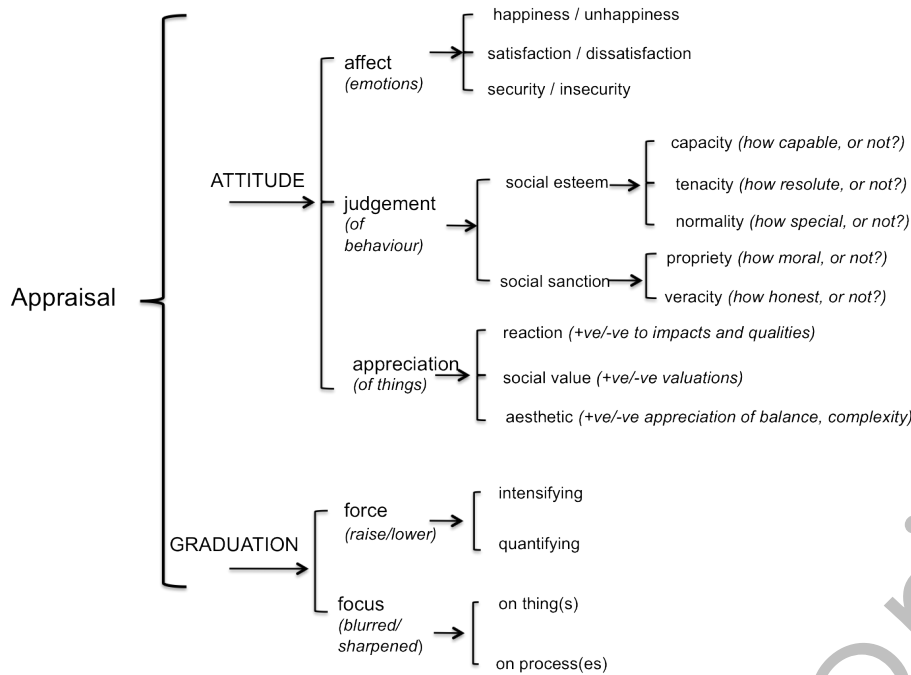


Figure 1: Simplified APPRAISAL network showing Attitude and Graduation only² (adapted from Martin and White, 2005)

The APPRAISAL framework is a robust analytical scheme for evaluative language use and has been used in many and varied research contexts worldwide (see Su and Bednarek, 2018). For the analyst, the system network offers increasing delicacy in coding, working from left to right in the system of choices.

The descriptive categories offered within APPRAISAL can greatly assist in coding survey responses, which are typically short. As noted in Stewart’s study of survey feedback from first year students (2015, 2) our survey responses also shared similar characteristics to spoken discourse such as single words, broken clauses or extended clauses lacking in sentence structure. For the purpose of this paper, we focus analysis on the sub-system of Attitude – language choices in which attitudinal stances were made in regard to notions of success. This allows us to describe linguistic resources that respondents used to position themselves in relation to discourses of success or communities in which these discourses occur, and involve *affect* (feelings, emotions), *judgments* (of behaviour - moral, ethical admiration/criticism), or *appreciation* (aesthetic assessment / valuation, worthwhileness of things). Attitudes can also be realised in linguistic choices which are explicit (inscribed) or less explicit, implicit (evoked) which rely on ‘insider’ understanding or shared knowledge of the intended meaning or significance.

The sub-system of Graduation interacts with Attitude through upscaling or downscaling the force or focus of meaning to ‘greater or lesser degrees of positivity or negativity’ (Martin and White 2005, 135) (such as, extremely / slightly foolish; many / few problems). Grading of meaning can also be infused in a single lexical item (e.g. disastrous, passionate), or through

² Two of the three Appraisal categories - Attitude in particular, and Graduation - are included in the figure above as these were relevant to the data analysed. The third category of Engagement was not used in the analysis

repetition of the same lexical item or through listing semantically related terms in close proximity to build a prosody of meaning (Martin and White 2005).

At this point we declare our subjective reader positionings. Both authors are female who undertook university studies as mature-age students with young families and work commitments. Author 2 was the first in her immediate family to attend and graduate from university, and we are both from what could be classified as working class or less affluent backgrounds. As such many aspects of how success is defined and experienced by survey respondents are within the realms of our individual experiences. It is from these positionings that we analyse the evaluative language used by students when describing their perceptions of success, and acknowledge the impossibility of objectivity, given that both authors and readers bring their own social subjectivities to the text (Martin and White 2005). Finally, we draw attention to an assumption framed in the survey questions that success is socially desirable, thus we explored how students' responses ranged on a continuum of dis/alignment relative to such assumptions.

It is hoped that our findings encourage critical discussion on current discourses around what is regarded as success, particularly with the increasing numbers of students entering HE who are first in their families to do so.

This article will firstly explore the particularities of the Australian HE environment and describe how the sector has increased in size and diversity, particularly in the last decade. Understanding this context provides insights into the particular issues faced by students from recognised equity groups³, particularly those who are the first in the family to undertake university studies, many of whom were intersected by a range of equity categorisations. The Australian experience is not unlike that of other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations in terms of increasing enrolments of students with no familial history of university or college, due to widening participation policies (OECD 2016).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Student demand, diversity and departure in the Australian HE system

Over the last decade the number of university students in Australia has increased significantly. In 2017, students attending university were recorded as just over 1.3 million, with over one million being Australian nationals. These enrolment figures grew consistently in the preceding years, for example between 2006-2011, the number of 20-year-olds attending university or other tertiary institutions, increased by 4% (Parr 2015). This growth also reflects the greater diversity of people now accessing the higher educational system. One of the more significant of these groups are those from low socio-economic (LSES) backgrounds with recent statistics indicating that over the last decade, LSES participation in university increased by 50% (Universities Australia 2017).

³ In Australia there are six identified equity groups that include students: with a disability; from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; from rural and isolated areas; from a non-English-speaking background; women in non-traditional areas of study; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

While it is not possible to state categorically why numbers have increased, this growth can be partially reflective of the policy directives from the The Review of Australian Higher Education, led by Denise Bradley (2008). Based on the recommendations, a number of participation targets were established including increasing enrolments of students from LSES backgrounds attending university to 20% of the total population by 2020. As mentioned earlier, such participation goals have not been limited to Australia with countries across the OECD establishing similar goals in relation to wider university participation.

While growth in student diversity seems a positive development, it is vitally important to retain these students to the completion of their degrees. Within Australia, student departure rates from university have remained constantly high; in the period from 2005–2015 attrition remained consistent at just over 15% (Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) 2017). There is also a strong correlation between attrition and SES status, with students from the more economically disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing lower rates of degree completion (HESP 2017). The reasons for this departure are manifold and often context specific, reflecting ‘both student characteristics and their responses to the specific institutional culture and environment’ (HESP 2017, 24).

For many students, university is not a familiar or inviting environment, with individuals from more diverse backgrounds often feeling little belonging within this environment (Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003). As entering university has been likened to entering a foreign or unfamiliar country, a feeling of disconnection is not surprising (O’Shea 2016). Beginning students are usually expected to master a new and somewhat alien language (White, Mammone and Caldwell 2015) while simultaneously adjusting to an environment where accepted behaviours may be somewhat ambiguous or simply invisible (Lawrence 2002). For those students who do not have a family tradition of attending university then this situation may result ‘imposter’ like feelings, which may lead to thoughts of departure.

2.2 *First in family students and HE participation*

One cohort regarded as being at greater risk of attrition and also frequently intersected by various equity categories, are those students who are the first in their families to attend university (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013). Without a family biography or tradition of attending university the lack of an educational memory may limit these learners’ ‘insider knowledge’ or understanding of the educational setting (O’Shea, et al. 2017). Similar observations are echoed by other research (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek 2007), with such difference in experience described as ‘less tacit knowledge of and fewer experiences with college campuses and related activities, behaviors, and role models compared with second-generation college students’ (Kuh et al. 2007, 61).

However, too often dominant discourses position students from more diverse backgrounds as somewhat problematic, a deficit position that fails to appreciate the cultural wealths or skills of these learners (O’Shea 2016). Smit (2012) argues that deficit framing ‘focuses on inadequacies of students and aims to ‘fix’ this problem’ (369). Such emphasis on the individual does not acknowledge constraints imposed by the stratification of educational systems, rather it perpetuates the concept that ‘challenges and failures experienced by students ... are the “fault”

of students who are deemed “in deficit” (McKay and Devlin 2016, 347). A focus on lack then obscures what assists students to achieve and how they themselves may consider success (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013, 331; O'Shea et al. 2017). In this meritocratic system of HE, success is often determined by overall marks or grades on exams and assignments. However, success is actually more amorphous than grades, and thus what it is that defines a *successful student* needs to be more broadly conceived, particularly in the context of neoliberalist universities, which operate ‘through discourses of competitiveness, marketisation and standardisation’ (Mulya 2019, 86). The following section will explore conceptions of educational success before moving onto explore how the APPRAISAL system of analysis has been used to unpack the rich and embodied ways that one group of first in family students understood ‘success’.

2.3 *Negotiating success within the university*

In the last decade a gradual shift in the discourses surrounding university participation and academic success is reflected in OECD policy indicating a ‘deepening contradiction in the discourse concerning the private and public benefits of higher education’ (Hunter 2013, 707). This shift is characterised from a ‘demand-driven massification’ focus in early widening participation initiatives to a more individualised focus on how university participation and success allows us to compete effectively in the globalized ‘knowledge based economy’ (Hunter 2013, 714). In the latter scenario, it is imperative that countries ‘expand their knowledge development and innovation capacity to be competitive and maintain economic growth’ (Hunter 2013, 714).

Similar underpinning discourses are apparent in university policy and practices i.e. graduate employability is one of the key performance indicators for the sector (QS 2017). Yet adopting such normative measures excludes those who may have alternative or less tangible understandings of success. Sullivan (2008) argues that it is vital that tertiary institutions adopt diverse definitions of success ‘that acknowledge the unique complexities, challenges and material conditions’ (629) of existing student populations.

Yazedjian et al. (2008) found that even high achieving students had ‘multifaced’ perceptions of success and frequently included preconceived ideas which had to be amended to match expectations upon arrival at university. Grades were sometimes regarded simply as necessary to complete subjects, or essential for a sense of ‘self-worth’ (145). However, Yazedjian et al. (2008) also point out that what constituted a ‘good’ grade varied with little continuity of understanding. For these younger learners, understandings of success seemed intrinsically bound up with personal development of the self and also their perceptions of future selves.

The analysis outlined in this article sought to deeply explore how language choices provide insight into students’ attitudes towards success. The particular approach adopted and the details of the analysis are outlined in the next section.

3 Data and methods

The data presented in this paper is from an anonymous survey, and represents part of a broader study exploring persistence strategies and behaviours of first-in-family students who are in the latter part of an undergraduate degree. This data is being explored in a multi-variegated way in recognition that framing data in relation to various and diverse conceptual lenses can assist in breaking through the 'ordinariness of routine events' (Charmaz 2006, 53). The qualitative research design of the broader study included surveys and interviews from students who self-identified as first in their immediate family to participate in university study and who have completed at least two full-time years of an undergraduate degree (or part-time equivalent). Only the survey data will be drawn upon for the purposes of this article.

To achieve the objectives of the broader study on persistence strategies the survey questions focused on five key themes:

- Self-reflections on key personal qualities/characteristics: influence on their participation/expectations
- Reflections on HE experience
- Reflections on family/community support
- Reflections on HE participation and institutional support
- Perceptions of how other students managed their university studies/commitments (or not)

3.1 Recruitment

Students were recruited mainly via email and could choose to complete an anonymous online survey or participate an interview. The study has ethics approval from the lead institution (HREC 2017/078) and met all additional requirements from participating universities. Permission for the research was sought and gained from senior executives at the institutional level based on ethics approval from the lead institution. Once gained, we contacted key personnel, usually nominated by the institution, who would distribute the email on behalf of the researchers or via other channels (such as student newsletter or digital screen advertising). None of the students were known to the researchers. Data collection phases involved a number of Australian universities in 2017 and is expanding to institutions in Ireland and the United Kingdom in 2018.

3.2 Process for analysis

This paper focuses on survey data collected in the first phase from 240 surveys of first-in-family students from six Australian universities. Data was downloaded from SurveyMonkey™ into Excel in preparation for analysis; surveys not meeting the criteria (i.e. not first in family, not in second or more year of study⁴) were removed. Responses to the two questions relating to success were then exported and those with skipped responses to both questions were removed. The questions are: 1) *Would you describe yourself a successful student?* [yes/no/unsure]; and

⁴ As the time of data collection was close to the mid-point of the academic year, those who indicated they were in their second year of study are included in this analysis as they would be at the midway point in their undergraduate degree (i.e. usually 3 years in Australia)

2) *How do you characterise success both in the university environment and after graduation?* [open]. Responses were given a unique identification code (eg F45, A06) denoting the institution and the response order. A total of 183 survey responses formed the dataset for analysis. A significant number of participants (n=174/183) provided qualitative comments to the second question.

The prepared dataset was then transferred into an APPRAISAL Analysis Excel template, with dropdown category lists and formulas for coding frequencies. This template allows for multiple coding of single responses, if more than one APPRAISAL category is identified.

The responses were read through a number of times in their entirety, and notes made before categories were allocated. The first author has considerable experience in this process (see Delahunty 2012, 2018; Delahunty, Jones & Verenikina 2014), guided by Martin and White (2005) and the assistance of the APPRAISAL Analysis community, if necessary. One by one each response was coded for Attitude and positive/negative polarity. Graduation categories were applied, but only to the texts appearing in the findings. Because evaluative language choices vary in intensity, with prosodic meaning extending across a whole text, or in a single word, the unit of analysis may be at the word level (e.g. *hero; disdain; accolades*), at the clause level (e.g. *the future looks bright*) or may extend over several clauses or more. (Martin and White 2005).

The attitudinal lexis in these comments explored through the APPRAISAL framework enabled us to build a systematic description of how these students adopted particular attitudinal stances on success. In the next section we present the findings and discussion of the analysis. (Note that we use 'text' when referring to analysed survey comments)

4 Findings

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Demographic information provided by the respondents indicated a wide range of diversity. In terms of equity groupings (see Footnote 3) (more than one category could be selected) eight identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 10 as having a disability, 68 from low socioeconomic circumstances, 71 from rural or isolated areas, 14 from non-English speaking backgrounds and 3 from refugee backgrounds. A further 38 selected 'Other', providing additional information about their circumstances, such as being or coming from a single parent, divorced, working parent, dysfunctional or migrant families, being an early school leaver/worker or identifying as LGBTQI. The majority of respondents were female (n=158, 86%) and the remainder male (n=25, 14%). There were a greater number of females than males who participated in this study, This is not unusual in qualitative studies where women tend to be more represented (Plowman and Smith 2011). The data for this paper has not been analysed in terms of gender; this will form the focus for another article examining how gender discourses impact upon the choices and perspectives of the male and female participants in this study. The age range most represented was 21 to 25 (n=69, 38%) of the total, although those in the 26 years and older range collectively represent 45 percent (n=72). Breakdown of age range and universities is provided below:

AGE RANGES	# responses	%	UNIVERSITIES	# responses	%
18 to 20	32	17%	Uni A (WA)	56	31%
21 to 25	69	38%	Uni B (Qld)	11	6%
26 to 30	31	17%	Uni C (NSW)	11	6%
31 to 40	31	17%	Uni D (NSW)	39	21%
41 to 50	13	7%	Uni E (Vic)	33	18%
51 plus	7	4%	Uni F (Qld)	33	18%
	183			183	

Table 1: Breakdown of age ranges and universities

Most participants (n=148, 81%) selected *yes* to the question: *Would you describe yourself as a successful student?* However, seven percent (n=12) responded in the negative and 13 percent (n=23) were unsure. The distribution of *yes*, *no* or *unsure* to being successful is summarised in Table 2. The proportion of *no* and *unsure* (20%, n=12 and 23 respectively) was unanticipated particularly given that the majority of students in this data subset were already in their third year or more of study (see Table 3).

Do you consider yourself a successful student? (across age ranges)

	YES	NO	UNSURE	TOTAL
18 to 20	27	2	3	32
21 to 25	53	6	10	69
26 to 30	22	2	7	31
31 to 40	28	1	2	31
41 to 50	12	1	0	13
51 plus	6	0	1	7
	148 (80%)	12 (7%)	23 (13%)	183

Table 2: Distribution of 'successful student' responses across age ranges

UNSURE and NO responses by year of study across age ranges

Age range	2nd year	3rd year	4th year	5th year +	Total
18 to 20	1	3	1		5
21 to 25	3	2	8	4	17
26 to 30	2	2	3	1	8
31 to 40	1	1	-	1	3
41 to 50	-	1	-	-	1
51 plus	1	-	-	-	1
	8	9	12	6	35

Table 3: Distribution of *Unsure* and *No* responses by year of study / age range

4.2 Qualitative findings

Fine-grained analysis guided by APPRAISAL revealed 359 instances of attitudinal categories across the 174 survey comments (hereafter 'texts'), as many contained more than one evaluative meaning. Attitudes were mostly positive (93%), with some negative (7%). Across these instances, all three categories of Attitude were represented: Judgement (237 instances), Affect (83) and Appreciation (39), with sub-category coding frequencies summarised in Table 4:

Judgement	237	Affect	83	Appreciation	39
Capacity	166	Satisfaction	57	Valuation	29
-ve capacity	8	Dissatisfaction	-	-ve valuation	6
Tenacity	53	Happiness	15	Balance	1
-ve tenacity	3	Unhappiness	-	-ve balance	1
Normality	2	Security	9	Complexity	1
-ve normality	4	Insecurity	2	-ve complexity	-
Propriety	-			Impact	1
-ve propriety	1			-ve impact	0

Table 4: APPRAISAL categories and sub-categories coding frequencies (-ve = negative)

From Table 4 it can be seen that students predominantly expressed success as assessments of behaviours - how self or others 'measure up' in the esteem of their community (White 2015). This was most often in terms of expressing admiration for competence (Capacity) and psychological disposition (Tenacity), and to a much lesser degree, as criticisms of these behaviours. Students expressed emotion (Affect) towards how their participation or aspirations of success made them feel such as satisfaction, happiness and confidence (Satisfaction, Happiness, Security), including some insecurity or lack of confidence. They also made assessments of the social value of success and university study (Appreciation) both positively and to a lesser extent, negatively. Collectively, students' language choices were inclined towards a positive stance on success.

4.3 Qualitative Analysis and Discussion

In this section we present the qualitative analysis together with discussion of the analyses for ease of reading. For all the texts presented in sub-sections 4.3.1 to 4.3.4, respondents indicated 'yes' to describing themselves as successful.

4.3.1 Success: being competent and persistent

Notions of success were predominantly expressed as assessments of behaviours and emerging competencies of 'the successful student'. This included admiration for personal characteristics, qualities or achievements. The following texts⁵, coded as Judgement:capacity, typify many of the responses referring to competence, or how the successful student 'measures up':

(1) Success ... to me is to be able to speak and have my views treated with respect and to be able to participate [↑ repetition] in an interesting discussion. (A36, Female, 51+, 5th year+, Disability, LSES, Rural/Isolated)

(2) to achieve the level of academic results one has aimed for ... To feel challenged [↑] by the degree of difficulty of the studies. (F41, Female, 51+, 4th year, Rural/Isolated)

(3) My definition of success would be to engage fully [↑] with Academia and the wider world (C06, Male, 51+, 4th year, Disability, LSES⁶, Rural/Isolated)

⁵ Note: Graduation lexis is underlined; meaning upscaled indicated as: ↑ / and downscaled as: ↓. Participant code and summary demographic information is also included

⁶ LSES: Low Socio-Economic Status -participants self-selected this category as indicative of their background or circumstances

Each of these texts express admiration towards success, and by implication, the successful student in relation to community values and expectations. Admiration is heightened [↑] through various linguistic devices. Firstly, the repetition of 'to be able to ...' in (1) gives emphasis to the idea that competent students have the skills to participate in discussions, in which their views are esteemed. The infinitive form 'to be able to' also gives the sense that this is not lived experience for this student, but rather, is aspirational. In (2) 'feeling challenged' realises a positive meaning (contrary to the norm). This is proposed as admirable because of the high level of competence required to meet the challenge of study which becomes increasingly difficult. Likewise, in (3), the capacity of a successful student to 'engage fully' not only with academia but the wider world, adds more strength to the meaning than if this student simply expressed this as 'engage with academia' which is absent of evaluative language.

Psychological dispositions such as persistence or determination were also mentioned 53 times (coded as Judgement:tenacity). This frequency indicates that respondents consider behaviours of tenacity are associated with being or becoming a successful student, as the following texts show:

(4) Success to me means not giving up [↑]. I class myself as a successful student because despite the challenges [↑] life has thrown at me - too single parent, no income, away from family, another baby, postnatal depression [↑ semantic repetition], I've not yet ever handed in a late assignment or failed a subject [↑]. I just keep going [↑]. (F21, Female, 26-30, 5th year+, Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Student, Rural/Isolated)

(5) Success for me - is the ability to follow one's dream after working through all the blood, sweat and tears [↑]. (D23, Female, 18-20, 3rd year, NESB)

There is little doubt that sheer grit and determination is the overall meaning embodied in these texts, particularly in (4), which is grounded in personal experience, indicated most obviously by the inclusion of self (I, me, myself). Some attitudinal lexis (e.g. 'not yet ever handed in a late assignment') is explicit, while in (5) the meaning is implicit (e.g. 'blood, sweat and tears') as it relies on the reader/hearer being familiar with this as a metaphor for sacrifice, determination and hard work.

In these responses self-admiration for persisting is upscaled particularly in (4) where a prosody of persistence – 'not giving up ... I just keep going' - builds through semantic repetition of different challenges this student has faced, which are then explicitly named. Her self-admiration is further strengthened by 'not yet ever' being late or failing 'despite' the obvious challenges. In (5) 'all the blood sweat and tears' raises the level of self-admiration this student has for her tenacity, but loses this impact if the metaphor is not understood by the reader/hearer. Each of these meanings serve to align the reader to the same value positions, that is, we too are likely to feel admiration for their show of determination, and by implication, for other students who likewise, show these kinds of persistence.

Overwhelming, this analysis shows that competence and determination are the most highly esteemed characteristics of the successful student. Although each considered themselves as

successful, very few mentioned grades or other measurable achievements. While it might be assumed that grades are important, their reflections on success are clearly focused on the personal development that university experience has provided (Yazedjian et al., 2008). These language choices are highly subjective and seem to deviate from the objective performance indicators so characteristic of HE discourses of success. For example, being determined was often mentioned before grades, such as this student in her 4th year articulated, '*Success in uni is the ability to keep going despite any challenges, getting a minimum of passes to lead to graduation*' (A23, 18-20, rural). These findings do not align with neoliberal discourses of success which position students as 'competitive and self-interested' (Mulya 2019, 88).

4.3.2 *Success: satisfaction, happiness and security*

Some students expressed emotion when reflecting on their successful selves. This was frequently and often overtly expressed, mostly as a sense of satisfaction with what they were doing and/or achieving, and not necessarily grade-focused (coded as Affect:satisfaction),

(6) I think that when you are passionate [↑ infused] about your field of study, you perform better [↑] and are more eager [↑] to leave university and make your mark on the world [↑] [satisfaction] (A46, Female, 21-25, 4th year, Rural/Isolated)

(7) Being able to do what you want and support yourself. Live the life you want and have the means to do it [↑ semantic repetition] [satisfaction] (B19, Female, 21-25, 4th year, Migrant family)

Infused meaning is a lexical device whereby emotion is upscaled, such as in the word 'passionate'. In (6), being passionate is associated with a deeper sense of satisfaction with the potential impact that this has on both personal development and on 'the world'. Making one's 'mark on the world' also upscales the meaning of the potential impact, which has aspirational connotations. In (7) semantic repetition is the linguistic device used to emphasise the satisfaction that this student aspires to, that is, higher education offers the opportunity to be self-determined and financially independent.

To a lesser extent, happiness and security were other emotions expressed, particularly when students reflected on their own experience and looked ahead to the future⁷,

(8) Success to me is being proud of the person you show up to be every single day [satisfaction ↑]. Success is having the opportunity to do what you love and to live a life free from 'what if's' and financial stress [security ↑]. It's happiness and contentment. [happiness, satisfaction] (C11, Female, 21-25, 3rd year, LSES, Rural/Isolated)

(9) Being able to have the freedom to choose [↑] my lifestyle [security] (F02, Female, 26-30, 5th year+, LSES, Rural/Isolated)

Both of these texts indicate, through lexis of emotion, the importance of security in terms of financial security and freedom of choice. In (8) the emotions expressed are intensified through

⁷ Analysis shown in [square brackets]

not only 'being proud' of yourself, but of your personal ethos and consistency 'every single day' (i.e. not just 'every day'). The potential to be free from uncertainties and financial-related worries is expressed as feelings of security.

So far, in these texts success has been defined in positive ways that do not seem to challenge or disrupt the 'status quo' or normalised meritocratic understandings of success. However, in the following texts, while happiness and security are evident, these students indirectly challenge popular notions of success and thus, distance their affiliation with these notions,

(10) I'm happy, and I'm passing. That's all that matters [↑ Focus]. [happiness, satisfaction] (*D52, Male, 21-25, 3rd year, LSES, Rural/Isolated*)

(11) Personal growth is my Success. To finish the degree is just a bonus [↓] as it has taken me 9 years to finish. [satisfaction] (*A75, Female, 41-50, 5th year+, LSES*)

Taking a stance which is different to popular notions of success is achieved linguistically by emphasising in (10) that happiness and satisfaction is 'all that matters'. 'All' signifies the maximal extent of the writer's investment in this value position (Martin and White 2005, 139), with the meaning that these qualities are sufficient; that there is nothing else needed. Taking an alternative stance is realised differently in (11), in which the student downplays completion of the degree as 'just' a bonus. This is in comparison to the satisfaction of personal growth which, for her, is the more significant indicator of success. Language choices to define success such as '*Independence, ability to sustain yourself, happiness, contributing to society*' (A02, female, 21-25, 4th year) or '*Being happy and confident in myself which enables me to pursue my interests and passions*' (F13, female, 41-50) largely defy absolute or objective measures of success in HE, particularly if the degree itself is not the sole focus of achievement. These findings demonstrate experiences of success as diverse, unique and complex, which supports Sullivan's (2008) argument for tertiary institutions to adopt alternatives to popular conceptions of success.

The next section moves to analysis of responses which are not assessments of behaviour nor expressions of success as emotion, but how students perceive success in terms of its social value.

4.3.3 *Social value of success*

To a much lesser extent than the previous analyses showing Judgement and Affect, students reflected on success in inanimate terms - as having a social value (coded as Appreciation:valuation). Success was often equated with 'good' grades, or a 'good' job as well as opportunities to apply knowledge in other contexts. Typical responses include:

(12) Good grades, admission into honours programs. Good job, promotions, effective practice (*A03, Female, 18-20, 4th year, Single parent family*)

(13) good grades and all goals achieved in particular overcoming [↑] self doubt and low self esteem [satisfaction] (*A38, Female, 41-50, 2nd year, Migrant family*)

Linguistically, repetition of 'good' across writers and texts raises the collective force of these things as indicators of success (Martin and White 2005). In addition, for the student in (13) achieving measurable outcomes has come with extra benefits, expressed as emotion (Affect) - the sense of deep satisfaction in 'overcoming' personal barriers. While these findings reflect in part neoliberal views of success as individual performance and employment status (Mulya 2019), as a proportion of the total evaluative language choices, success as a social value is not the most esteemed. We argue that even though students tended not to be explicit their articulations of the social value of university these values are possibly implicitly held. It is interesting to note however, that in relation to their own conceptions of success, HE tended to be perceived as a vehicle for experiencing success, but in very subjective ways. This is also clearly demonstrated by other students who state that success is '*accomplishing a desired goal or outcome. No matter the amount of times I attempted to begin a course I was successful because I reflected and found what was right for me*' (E20, female, 21-25, 4th year) or '*Success comes from learning*' (E36, male, 26-30, 3rd year, disability).

We now consider some alternative responses to the notion of success, which reflect critical evaluations of the notion of success.

4.3.4 *Success is not*

A number of students defined success in terms of what it is not, rather than (or in addition to) what it is. This was achieved variously through creating contrasts via positive-negative lexis and using the resources of graduation to raise or lower the force of their opinions which reveal aspects of success considered worthwhile. The coding of negative Appreciation of social value (Appreciation:valuation) occurs in the following examples where a contrast is proposed,

(14) Success is doing something I love, even if [↑] I can't always support myself that way. I would like to become entirely [↑] self-sufficient monetarily. [contrast] I don't think [↓] success is 2.5 kids and a house (C05, Female, 26-30, 5th year+, LSES, Rural/Isolated)

(15) Success is in trying hard [↑] - knowing you won't feel any regret because you have given it your everything [↑]. [contrast] Success does not necessarily [↓] need to be measured in having a good job or continuing on to doing your masters! [↑] (A27, Female, 31-40, 4th year, NESB)

In (14) and (15) both these students resist popular notions of success, which they perceive to be expectations around evidence of financial prosperity (i.e. family and a mortgage), a 'good' job or further study. They deliberately downplay these notions through negatives: 'I don't think' and 'does not necessarily', which lowers the force of meaning and positions their held values outside of perceived norms. The use of the exclamation mark at the end of (15) has the effect of emphasising this student's downplaying of success, and thus emphasises her value commitment to an alternative view of success.

Another student described success as what a successful student does *not* do, coded as Judgement of capacity,

(16) Success is finding things that interest you and pursuing them. Not just [↓] going to university because you have to, but [counter-expectancy] going because you learn things that make you curious and inspired. It's not necessarily [↓] about getting great grades **or** succeeding all the time, but [counter-expectancy] about learning from your mistakes and becoming more resilient. (*A33, Female, 26-30, 5 years+*)

Similar to previous texts, contrasts are created through the interplay of positive-negative lexis, lowering or raising force, counter-expectancy, semantic repetition, which enables writers to reveal more nuanced meanings. In (16) the repetition of counter-expectancy ('but'), alerts the reader twice that attitudinal values regarding motivations and achievements at university are at stake (see Martin and White 2005, 67). An effect of contrasting negative-positive lexis may also be as a device to preserve a degree of modesty when directing praise towards self. This also may show some resistance to neoliberalist views focused on self-interested performance and competitiveness (Mulya 2019).

Reluctance to consider oneself as successful was evident in students' selection of *no* or *unsure* to the survey question: *would you describe yourself a successful student?* In the next sections, analysis of attitudinal lexis in these texts is fundamental to gaining a deeper insight into how success was understood and defined by 20 percent of respondents.

4.3.5 *Uncertainties about successful selves*

The thirty-five students who selected *unsure* or *no* to describing themselves as successful, defined success mostly in positive terms, however, some did not. This section will focus on examples from this data subset of the disjuncture between common conceptions of 'success' and those favoured by some of the participants.

The presence of counter-expectancy appears through lexis such as 'although' 'but' or 'however' and alerts the reader that attitudinal values are in the balance (Martin and White 2005), which may also foreshadow negative evaluations. In terms of attitudinal stance, some texts are self-critiques of perceived capability in terms of 'measuring up' to notions of success. The explicit negative lexis (e.g. unsuccessful, not good enough, struggled) in the following texts leave the reader in little doubt that these students feel some disappointment (coded as Affect:insecurity)⁸:

(17) I am successful because I have maintained a high GPA, although [counter-expectancy] I feel like I am unsuccessful [insecurity] at being a student because I think that the results I get are not good enough considering the amount of time I devote. (*F40, Female, 26-30, 4th year, LSES, Unsure*)

(18) I feel as though I could be successful [insecurity], but [counter-expectancy] I know I have struggled and couldn't say I'm the true definition of success. (*D55, Female, 18-20, 3rd year, LSES, Unsure*)

While (17) begins with self-admiration of grades, this is juxtaposed with feelings of insecurity about whether the grades actually reflect a value commensurate with effort. Similarly, the writer

⁸ note: *no/unsure* responses have been added to the demographic information

of (18) feels as though she *could be* successful, yet the fact that she struggles, indicates some insecurity around this notion as each are offered as mutually exclusive. In the next part of her response she includes a definition (perhaps her 'true definition?'), which also may have an implied meaning of 'this is not me' (coded as +ve Judgement:capacity:invoked):

Success is completing assignments, not leaving them to the last minute, and being aware of everything that needs to be completed (D55)

The prosody of meaning and the value position taken in both of these examples indicate some reasons why students may not be comfortable with self-identifying as successful. Discourses favouring self-interested achievement and competitiveness position learners in hierarchical relations which can be polarising (Mulya 2019). For those students from diverse backgrounds, many of whom may already have a lower sense of belonging within an institution (O'Shea et al. 2017), there may a tension between naming themselves as successful in terms of what they consider as being the expectations of the institution (McKay and Devlin 2016). Choosing lexis which reduces the suggestion of self-promotion might be one strategy that allows these learners used to straddle conflicting or competing worlds including the different worlds of participating in family/community and academia (O'Shea et al. 2017).

4.3.6 *Success: defined and embodied*

Even though students in this data subset were unsure, or did not consider themselves successful, many defined success positively. This was most often through overtly naming the capabilities and achievements of someone considered successful, coded as Judgements of their capacity, such as:

(19) Success is ... getting high grades, after graduation success is more getting into a career you desire, and not just having to take the first job available. (F25, Male, 26-30, 3rd year, Rural/Isolated, Unsure)

(20) Achieving a satisfactory result in all units, not failing any. I've failed and redone many. (A56, Female, 21-25, 5th year+, LSES, No)

Defining success also evoked emotion for some students. As the following texts demonstrate, success is experienced through feeling a sense of satisfaction or happiness [Affect], such as:

(21) I define success at having holistic happiness - being happy [happiness] with what you're doing and being excited [happiness] to wake up every day and go and enjoy what you do [satisfaction] (D03, Female, 21-25, 4th year, Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander, LSES, Unsure)

(22) Success is our happiness in what you give and receive from the world. If you're happy [happiness] and have goals in many small things in your daily life [satisfaction], you will have success! (D12, Female, 18-20, 3rd year, Unsure)

Many of these students also expressed admiration for the level of resolve or determination needed to pursue and achieve goals at university, often whilst managing other aspects of life (coded as Judgement:tenacity),

(23) Completing assignments to the best [↑] of your ability with optimal time management, whilst also [↑] doing hobbies and making time for friends. (F30, Female, 21-25, 4th year, LSES, NESB, Unsure)

(24) I define success as achieving what you set out to achieve, regardless of [↑] others standards. This applies to both now and after graduation. I may not have HD marks for paper, but I have HD life experience! [↑] (E21, Female, 21-25, 5th year+, Unsure)

In (23) and (24) being determined in study is also a quality carried through to other aspects of life, such as maintaining social activities or focusing on your own goals and not others' expectations. The repetition of 'HD' in (24) and the juxtaposition of no HD marks with possessing HD life experience together with the exclamation mark, gives extra emphasis to the esteem held by this student in being one's own version of success. These students broadened their definitions of success to include other aspects of life rather than a focus on success at university exclusively.

Finally, negative appraisals towards success were uncommon, however one participant articulated disinclination towards success:

(25) I do not bother [↓ infused] with success (C10, Male, 41-50, 4th year, No)

From an analytical perspective we cannot be certain of whether this negative attitudinal stance is directed towards the idea of success or the process of attaining it. However, the selection of 'do not bother' points the reader towards the feeling of disinclination. This is a strategy where the reader is positioned as 'having no argument with the assessment and allows the assessment to be assessed itself' (Don 2016, 13). Alternatively, if we consider 'not (to) bother' as the writer sanctioning a kind of behaviour, he is directing positive moral admiration towards himself and others who hold similar emotions (Don 2016, 13) (coded as Judgement:social sanction:propriety). In other words, the writer expresses admiration for himself and others like him who also are not inclined towards the idea of, or the process of pursuing, success. This text is at odds with the assumption that success is socially desirable – an assumption inherent in the survey questions. Extending another interpretation from this attitudinal stance is that this student evaluates success, or the pursuit of it, as shallow, or of having little value, particularly if we take the meaning as 'success is not worth bothering about' (analysed as -ve Appreciation:valuation).

The responses in this data subset provided a rich understanding of success by those who could not yet identify themselves as successful. From these texts we have shown a level of mismatch between what is perceived as being successful and how one measures up to this perception, as well as uncertainty about whether being successful as a university student will provide the anticipated rewards after graduation. Success is also experienced as emotion (intangible), is

'measured up' through tangible outcomes such as grades and employment, as well as in levels of defiance towards pursuing success as popularly understood, accepted or defined. Similar to students who defined themselves as successful, these findings do not align with neoliberal discourses of success. These findings point to success as a 'slippery' concept that can be destabilised and re-imagined by those engaging in HE rather than solely reliant on dominant discourses.

5 Conclusion

The analysed responses in the findings show that these students reflected on success embodied as deeply personal and emotional, with self-admiration also invoking in the reader similar esteem when considering the behaviours of how capable (capacity) and how determined (tenacity) students are as they develop and persist in their study (Martin and White 2005). While there is little doubt that grades are valued by some as markers of success, these 'measurables' or commonly held notions of success occupy a small space of what success means for these students. While in the early years of higher education study, previous research has shown that first-in-family students often consider success in terms of gaining entry into university (O'Shea et al. 2017) and then making it through the first year (O'Shea 2009), the students in this study placed more emphasis on immeasurable qualities that resist notions of self-interested achievement and competitiveness (Mulya 2019).

In analysing the attitudinal categories around perceived academic success, the APPRAISAL framework enabled a focus on the evaluative language choices made by students. Our analysis clearly indicated how perceptions were not neatly aligned to more popular discourses of HE success (Walker 2008). For many of these students, 'success' was a contested term that evoked linguistic choices indicating a dichotomy between what the institution largely perceives as success and how these students measured themselves (and others) in this regard (Yazedjian et al. 2008). Privileging the student voice from the experiential perspective, as this paper has, is crucial to identifying incongruences of success which retain fluency in institutional discourses.

While using only survey data precluded further probing for meaning, this limitation will be attended to through similar analyses of interview data from later phases in the broader study. However, the key value of this analysis is that the survey responses provide valid insight into student experience (Stewart 2015) and together create a collective story. Thus, individual voices in the survey responses, as a collective story, can *normalise* and *galvanise* those who may see their own story within it: 'that's my story, I am not alone' (Richardson 1990, 26). As part of this collective story, students identified the complexities of success, in terms of what a successful person does and/or achieves (or not), the qualities a successful person displays or develops, the feelings and emotions that success evokes (either from lived experience or hypothetically), assessment of the characteristics of success, and success in terms of what it is not, sometimes even questioning its value. For these students, tangible 'evidence' of success such as grades or employment comprised only part of their definitions. Of equal, if not more importance, were qualities such as perseverance, development of capabilities, quality of life, lifelong learning, satisfaction, giving back to society, confidence and happiness.

Neoliberal discourses are increasingly being adopted by universities with university discourse 'becoming more promotional and more similar to business discourse' (Kheovichai 2014, 372). Such focus on gaining market share with economic and financial rationality is at the expense of 'democratic practices, cultures, institutions, and imaginaries' (Shenk 2015, 1). When framed in this way success is considered in terms of economics in an increasingly competitive market, rather than in the embodied and deeply experiential terms suggested by the language choices used by the students in this study.

Given the existing vulnerability of this first in family cohort, we suggest that focus on fiscal or employability outcomes serves to disadvantage learners who have few or no transgenerational family scripts relating to university participation (McKay and Devlin 2016; O'Shea et al. 2017). For those students who have no apriori understanding or experience of the HE environment, conflict around normative constructions of success may ensue (O'Shea et al. 2017), evidenced in the linguistic choices of those students who were either unable or unwilling to identify themselves as successful.

As Richardson (1990) argues, new narratives are borne from collective stories deviating from the norm, and that 'new narratives offer the patterns for new lives' – a transformation which then becomes 'part of the cultural heritage affecting future stories, future lives' (26). The hope is that this collective story of how success is perceived and experienced, raises our attention as educators and policy makers, of student notions of success. Our detailed and systematic description show that student articulations of success are often at odds with neoliberal values. We hope that insights gained from this study will render the possibilities of collective solutions through reference to actual narratives of students and their university participation.

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