

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF STUDENT SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

*Tom Lowe**
University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth,
United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The term ‘student success’ has increasingly been used as the catch-all term for focusing on the student outcomes measures in higher education. In the English Higher Education context, the term is used as part of regulatory pressures by the Office for Students, to assess student retention rates across providers through Access and Participation Plans and annual reporting (B3). Student success has become an amalgamation (in strategies, job titles and now regulation) to address outcomes relating to retention, employability, access, widening participation and student satisfaction, prioritised by political direction and senior management teams. Although the definition and application of this key term differ in use at individual providers. With great pressure and dissonance surrounding this prominent term, this paper looks at the literature regarding what the term student success means in practice for students, academic programmes or professional services depending on the context.

Keywords: student engagement, student success, higher education, student experience

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, English universities once again received their guidance on completing their upcoming Access and Participation Plans (APP). As with almost every Office for Students document relating to the APP since its foundation, there was a great focus on student success. Since the first Office for Students publication in 2018 outlined “all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake HE... are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, Higher Education” (Office for Students, 2018, 14), the English University sector is now filled with student success strategies, initiatives and even staffing roles to support the agenda. This paper looks at the literature regarding what the term student success means in practice for students, academic programmes or professional services depending on the context.

*Corresponding author: e-mail: Tom.lowe@port.ac

Student success is a term which, as with ‘student engagement’ and ‘student experience’, is easy to get behind, although perhaps less interrogated. Student success is an amalgamation (in strategies, job titles and now regulation) of outcomes relating to retention, employability, access, widening participation and student satisfaction – as well as strategy, visions and actions prioritised by political direction and senior management teams. In the 2017 Higher Education Act, student success is defined simply as completing each year of study, and subsequently, a degree (Department for Education, 2017). However, the 2023 guidance for English providers for the Access and Participation Plans asks institutions to detail “how they can address the risk posed to fair access and successful participation by knowledge, skill and attainment gaps emerging across childhood by making meaningful and effective contributions to supporting schools to raise pre-16 attainment” (Office for Students, 2023, 4) – asking far more than just completing a year of study. Additionally, the document refers to “successful higher education participation” (Office for Students, 2023, 6) which could be interpreted in multiple ways.

With discussion set to continue in this space, this paper aims to explore the literature regarding what the term student success means in practice for students, academic programmes or professional services depending on the context.

LOOKING BACK OVER THE POND

The term student success has increasingly been used as the catch-all brand for focusing on the above outcomes and measures of higher education in the UK. The trends have already occurred in US HE, where student success has been a focus for more than 30 years, yet there is still a lack of agreed definition or area of focus, as well as a lack of student research regarding students’ definitions and indicators of the term. As English higher education begins a new era of focus on student success, the English sector, too, faces the same dissonance, with success’ is an amorphous term that means distinctive things to various stakeholders in any educational undertaking (O’Shea and Delahunty, 2018).

Higher education takes a lot of time (at least three years of an undergraduate student’s life), and if it goes wrong, students lose a lot – so lack of “success” is a risk for students and institutions. Students cannot simply repeat and reinvest the time/fee (Seidman, 2012), therefore a focus on meaningful student engagement as part of the success agenda to benefit students and institutions mutually. Student engagement is widely recognised as critical to student success in higher education – simply put, students who are engaged with their studies are more likely to be successful (Kahu and Nelson, 2018, 2).

As with student engagement, the nations that experienced a marketised and massified HE sector much sooner than the UK, for example the USA, have been discussing and focusing on student success far longer, with the

quandary of student success continuously noted as a challenge for all types US institutions (Kuh et al., 2011). However, it is clear that we must create the “conditions that foster student success in college has never been more important” (Kuh et al., 2011, 1), by focusing on student engagement and transition indicators, such as belonging, self-efficacy, well-being and positive emotion (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

THE PROBLEM IN DEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS

There are papers that have attempted to conduct a literature review to possibly define the term for higher education. Most notable is Weatherton and Schussler’s (2021) paper, which highlights that the “majority of articles discussing student success did not explicitly define the term” with 52 articles, of which 21 (40%) gave explicit definitions of student success and 31 defined student success implicitly through the variables they measured, often equating student success with quantitative student outcomes, such as exam scores and GPA (Weatherton and Schussler, 2021, 3).

Weatherton and Schuyssler also highlight that “theories of student success have changed over time” with dominant areas of focus on self-efficacy, identity, sense of belonging, social cognitive career theory and social interdependence theory (Weatherton and Schussler, 2021, 3). Importantly, in their study, they found that in the articles reviewed, only one article captured the students’ perspective of student success (Weatherton and Schussler, 2021).

Several definitions and factors are often cited, where in a UK context, Yorke and Longden’s paper (Yorke and Longden, 2004). Additionally and perhaps frustratingly, there is a great body of literature simply speaking widely about student success as a common goal, but with often no clear definition given (Wagner and Longanecker, 2016; Millea et al., 2018).

THEMES IN THE LITERATURE

RETENTION

One of the most prominent themes within the literature is a focus on retention and attrition (Yorke and Longden, 2004) as an indicator of student success (Curnock Cook, 2021). If a student does not graduate, most institutions do not see a student as succeeding with common definitions of “student success is that students earn grades sufficient to meet graduation requirements” (Kennedy and Upcraft, 2009, 31). This is highlighted today in the UK with the Westminster government in the Higher Education Act, success meaning simply completing the degree programme (Higher Education Act, 2017). In a marketised higher education sector, all parties (students, universities and government) support completing a degree, especially when dropout is

perceived as a failure (or wasted time/money by students) and a risk of income for universities. In the US literature, the retention theme is present, because retention has historically featured as a major area of enhancement in US HE – home of the phrase “College Drop Out” (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2001; Finn and Zimmer, 2012), where the English sector now in 2023 finds itself in a similar marketised situation pre-empting a focus on student success and inspiring this study. However, it can be argued that retention is the most simplistic form of student success – simply passing or completing – rather than recognising the rich individualist lives, goals and motivations of students and the complex nature and variant of higher education provision.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Another theme is academic achievement, which focuses on increasing grades in low-performance areas, such as certain subjects (such as the sciences), or certain unsuccessful classes or degree programmes (Pitts and Johnson, 2017). These two themes relate to one another with papers stating that if a student has good retention, their grades will be higher (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 2003) which again is a trend in the literature that none of the areas of focus are separate – they are inter-related which may suggest why this topic has been too complex to simply define so far.

Achievement in UK higher education has been reported to be a major motivator and cause of stress in students, especially relating to graduating with a “good” degree – normally a higher second first, or first class honours. Again, Kuh speaks of prioritising student engagement for student academic achievements, where universities need to consider different learners’ priorities and needs (Kuh et al., 2011). Academic achievement again is reasonably simplistic as a measure of student success, as well as elitist, not recognising that getting “into” higher education in the first place can be the highest achievement of a student’s life, and that passing is enough success for many students, while only some, perhaps more traditional students, are focused on the top grades. In the English higher education sector, this agenda is further complexified as the government has called national investigations into perceived grade inflation of degrees (Hinds, 2019), putting into question “improving grade” outcome initiatives.

GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

The third major theme relates to graduate employability, which continues to grow as a narrative in English higher education (Donelan, 2021). This is because “definitions of student success must be sensitive to economic realities and workforce development needs” (Kuh et al., 2011, 9) and higher education is often looked to by the government to resolve economic problems such as skills shortages. Students too are a key party focused on graduate outcomes of universities, with a recent polling company Youthsites researching over 100

full-time undergraduate students that more than three quarters (79%) of students feel confident they all get a graduate-level job once they finish university (HEPI & JobTeaser, 2020). Although the purpose of higher education is often debated and argued not to be about training the future graduate workforce, national studies cannot be ignored which repeatedly emphasise that students want to gain graduate employment success from their degrees (UUK, 2017; Unite, 2017).

STUDENT SUCCESS FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION STUDENTS

Focusing on student success for disadvantaged students from non-traditional backgrounds (a.k.a. Widening Participation students) features in the literature internationally, within wider calls for greater inclusion and equity in higher education (Cook-Sather, 2018). These moves follow research over decades reviewing that non-traditional students feel alienated in higher education institutions (Mann, 2001), have a lower sense of belonging (Islam et al., 2018) and face barriers to full participation, and therefore success (Austen et al., 2017). A great deal of work has already been conducted, particularly in the USA, relating to developing institutions to support and encourage student success (relating to several indicators) of certain student groups such as Black Students (Harper and Kuykendall, 2012), Indigenous Students (Mills et al., 2019) and certain demographics or community groups (Abdul-Raheem, 2016). The same developments are seen in English higher education with substantial activity led by national bodies and individual providers to focus on student success of Black Asian Minority Ethnic, mature, working-class male and disabled students to name only a few target groups (Office for Students, 2018). This is particularly critical to explore as many UK studies have noted that the above metrics of retention, academic achievement and graduate employability have evidenced national and local gaps between certain student groups (such as Black, Asian and Disabled Students) compared with white peers (Richardson, 2015).

BELONGING

Thomas (2012) highlights that a greater sense of belonging leads to greater retention and student success in higher education. “A need to belong – to connect deeply with other people and secure places, to align with one’s cultural and subcultural identities, and to feel like one is a part of the systems around them” (Allen et al 2021, 88). If belonging to the University or College has a substantial impact on student success, it is important to recognise that staff interactions that give students a sense of mattering (Tinto, 2012), processes along the entire student journey (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017) and barriers that prevent belonging and mattering for certain students (Islam et al., 2018) all

have an impact on student success. Wider student experience factors such as recreational sport and halls of residence and their impacts on student success (Sriram and McLevain, 2016) can also be considered.

THE DATA (ANALYTICS) HAS THE ANSWER

The theme of data or learner analytics programmes providing solutions for student success is prominent in the literature, as many universities (Calvert, 2014; Wagner and Longanecker, 2016; Drake and Walz, 2018; Devlin and Bushey, 2019; Kernohan, 2020). These systems not only allow institutions to check on a student's engagement, which often takes an initial focus on attendance or virtual learning environment interactions, but can also be used to look at student retention, impact evaluations and access to student services (Ada and Stansfield, 2017). Large-scale data systems offer staff the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the student's experience, which can be used in an effort to increase student success (Borden and Coates, 2017). More recently, this has been shown in the literature to have taken greater influence in the HE sector, as student numbers continue to grow, and subsequently, it becomes harder to physically observe individual student engagements and follow their achievement (Borden and Coates, 2017).

These data analytics systems offer one such potential opportunity to understand student behaviour, as the technology can analyse the data that correlates student engagement in particular areas with student success criteria (such as retention). Using this example narrative to understand student data can, therefore, be used to identify systems where if a student under-engages in these aforementioned areas for student success, warning systems can indicate that a student requires some form of supportive intervention (Brozina et al., 2019). However, scholars have also argued that a weakness in these systems is that it presupposes that high engagement will be an indicator of student success (Atherton et al., 2017). These systems have also been critiqued as they do not offer ethical opportunities for students to withdraw from their data being analysed (Wintrup, 2017). The technology could also create biases based on these analytical "scores" of engagement, which could work both for or against students in the mindset of the tutor, which could potentially exacerbate demographic divides (Borden and Coates, 2017, p.100).

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT SUCCESS

As highlighted above, the majority of definitions of student success are from a staff perspective, with "many are managerially orientated ... [where] ... a managerial perspective tends to lose sight of the student perspective that can be seen in 'persistence', 'completion' and 'success'" (Yorke and Longden, 2004). In Weatherston and Schussler's literature review on student success, they suggest that majority groups defining the definitions and

measures of success may exert “soft power” over minoritised student success (Weatherton and Schussler, 2021, 1) and highlight the problems of inherently suggesting “everyone knows” its definition (Weatherton and Schussler, 2021, 1).

The first of two studies have been found in the literature which ask students to define student success. One from the USA found themes that emerged across students’ responses included how participation in pedagogical partnership (1) fosters important affective experiences in relation to all faculty and to fellow students, (2) informs students’ academic engagement in their own classes and (3) contributes to students’ sense of their evolution as active agents in their own and others’ development (Cook Sather, 2018). Affirming and expanding established understandings of what contributes to student success presented in the literature on belonging, engagement and persistence, these themes have implications for how we might support the success of a diversity of students both within and beyond formal pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather, 2018, 1). The affective experiences, academic engagement and sense of agency students describe are inextricably intertwined (indicators of success) (Cook-Sather, 2018, 5). Including the perspectives of students from equity-seeking groups in discussions of student success positions us to better support the “becoming” (Gale & Parker, 2014) of a diversity of students in higher education and to make progress towards realising equality in outcomes for all students (Cook-Sather, 2018).

The second study, conducted in Australia, found that success took on an array of meanings ranging from contributing to a better world through to tangible (e.g., grades and career) and internal indicators (e.g., personal growth and confidence), at times with connotations that diverge from, and even disrupt, more traditional neoliberal individualistic discourse (O’Shea and Delahunty, 2018). The article applied a Capabilities Approach to understand how individual learners reflected upon success and how understandings of this concept might be used to enrich and inform the HE environment (O’Shea and Delahunty, 2018, 1062). Three key themes were highlighted in the responses from 163 students, including success as a form of validation – achieving grades; “knowing what I am doing”; success as defying the odds – keeping going despite adversity; personal survival; embodied and emotional success – including terms such as “happiness”, “enjoyment”, “being passionate”, “gaining respect” and engendering “pride” and finally the definition of what is not a success, such as failure or dropping out (O’Shea and Delahunty, 2018). For example, O’Shea and Delahunty (2018) found three themes of success that emerged from interviews with first-generation undergraduates: success as a form of validation, success as defying the odds, and success as positive feelings about one’s trajectory. They conclude that students’ voices and particularly disadvantaged students’ views of success must be taken into account, rather than being excluded from the decisions (O’Shea and Delahunty, 2018).

CONCLUSION

However we define, there are four key stakeholders to consider, who are (1) students, (2) institutions and (3) government (Yorke and Longden, 2004), yet looking at literature that attempts to list the indicators of student success, there is great variation creating conflicts between multiple definitions and the increased demand for the focused resource (Kuh et al., 2011, 7). It is hoped this paper provides some context to the complexity of the term and the differing perspectives the above stakeholders may have, to support strategy and planning for universities as they prepare their Access and Participation Plans in 2024 and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Abdul-Raheem, J. (2016). Faculty diversity and tenure in higher education. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 23(2), 53–56.
- Ada, M.B. and Stansfield, M. (2017) July. The potential of learning analytics in understanding students' engagement with their assessment feedback. In *2017 IEEE 17th International Conference on Advanced Learning Technologies (ICALT)* (227-229). IEEE.
- Allen, K.A., Kern, M.L., Rozek, C.S., McInerney, D.M. and Slavich, G.M. (2021). Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 87-102.
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 5, 518–529.
- Atherton, M., Shah, M., Vazquez, J., Griffiths, Z., Jackson, B. and Burgess, C. (2017). Using learning analytics to assess student engagement and academic outcomes in open access enabling programmes. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 32(2), 119-136.
- Austen, L., Heaton, C., Jones-Devitt, S., and Pickering, N. (2017). Why is the BME attainment gap such a wicked problem? *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 587. doi: 10.21100/jeipc.v3i1.587
- Borden, V.M. and Coates, H. (2017). Learning analytics as a counterpart to surveys of student experience. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2017(179), 89-102.
- Brozina, C., Knight, D.B., Kinoshita, T. and Johri, A. (2019). Engaged to Succeed: Understanding First-Year Engineering Students' Course Engagement and Performance Through Analytics. *IEEE Access*, 7, 163686-163699.
- Calvert, C. E. (2014). Developing a model and applications for probabilities of student success: A case study of predictive analytics. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 29(2), 160–173. doi: 10.1080/02680513.2014.931805
- Cook-Sather, A. (2018). Listening to equity-seeking perspectives: How students' experiences of pedagogical partnership can inform wider

- discussions of student success. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(5), 923–936. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1457629
- Curnock Cook, M. (2021). The UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: What do students need to enable their success? WONKHE. Available online at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-upp-foundation-student-futures-commission-what-do-students-need-to-enable-their-success/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%202029%20March&utm_content=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%202029%20March+CID_b6d5f993327f262c847139f941f81b13&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=sets%20out%20an%20ambitious%20and%20urgent%20agenda%20for%20future%20student%20success (Accessed April 12, 2021).
- Department for Education (2017). *Higher education and research act 2017*. Available online at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted> (Accessed July 13, 2020).
- Department for Education (2017) Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Available online at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted> (Accessed July 13, 2020).
- Devlin, M., and Bushey, H. (2019). Using data holistically to create a student success safety net. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 51(6), 17–25. doi: 10.1080/00091383.2019.1674096
- Drake, B. M., and Walz, A. (2018). Evolving business intelligence and data analytics in higher education. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2018(178), 39–52. doi: 10.1002/ir.20266
- Donelan, M. (2021). *Higher and Further Education Minister speech at Times Higher Education event*. Department for education.
- Finn, J. D., and Zimmer, K. S. (2012). Student engagement: What is it? Why does it matter? In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (97–131). Springer.
- Gale, T. and Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in higher education*, 39(5), pp.734-753.
- Harper, S. R., and Kuykendall, J. A. (2012). Institutional efforts to improve Black male student achievement: A standards-based approach. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 44(2), 23–29. doi: 10.1080/00091383.2012.655234
- Higher Education Policy Institute [HEPOI], and JobTeaser. (2020). *Open for business? Students' views on entering the labour market*. Higher Education Policy Instituted.
- Hinds, D. (2019). Universities told to end grade inflation. Department for Education.
- Humphrey, O. and Lowe, T. (2017). Exploring how a ‘Sense of Belonging’ is facilitated at different stages of the student journey in Higher Education. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 172–188.

- Islam, M., Lowe, T., and Jones, G. (2018). A “satisfied settling”? Investigating a sense of belonging for Muslim students in a UK small-medium Higher Education Institution. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 2(2), 79–104.
- Kahu, E. R., and Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(1), 58–71. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197
- Kennedy, K., and Upcraft, M. L. (2009). *Keys to student success: A look at the literature*. Hunter Publications.
- Kernohan, D. (2020). What data is useful for responding to Covid-19 risks? WONKHE [Online] 14th September 2020. Available online at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/what-data-is-useful-for-responding-to-covid-19-risks/> (Accessed October 18, 2020).
- Kuh, G. D. (2001). *The National Survey of Student Engagement: Conceptual framework and overview of psychometric properties*.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., and Hayek, J. C. (2011). Piecing together the student success puzzle: Research, propositions, and recommendations: ASHE higher education report, 116. John Wiley and Sons.
- Mann, S. J. (2001). Alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(1), 7–19. doi: 10.1080/03075070020030689
- Millea, M., Wills, R., Elder, A. and Molina, D., (2018). What matters in college student success? Determinants of college retention and graduation rates. *Education*, 138(4), 309–322.
- Mills, J. I., Bisbee, Y., Aston, B., Komlos, B. Z., Lokensgard, K. H., Carris, L. M. and Arouca, R. A., (2019). Institutional Commitments to Ensure Native Graduate Student Success. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2019(187), 79–91. doi: 10.1002/he.20338
- Office for Students (2018). *Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England*. Available online at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/> (Accessed July 29, 2020).
- Office for Students (2020). *Access and participation plans*. Available online at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/> (Accessed July 29, 2020).
- Office for Students (2023). *Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance*. Available online at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/> (Accessed May 23, 2023).
- O’Shea, S. and Delahunty, J., (2018). Getting through the day and still having a smile on my face! How do students define success in the university learning environment? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(5), 1062–1075. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1463973

- Pitts, J. D. and Johnson, J. D., (2017). Predicting student success in an undergraduate sport management program from performance in general education courses. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 21, 55–60. doi: 10.1016/j.jhlste.2017.07.002
- Richardson, J. T. E., (2015). The under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education: What we know and what we don't know. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(2), 278–291. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2013.858680
- Seidman, A. (2012). *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success (ACE Series on Higher Education)*.
- Sriram, R. and McLivain, M., (2016). The future of residence life and student affairs in Christian higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, 15(1–2), 72–83. doi: 10.1080/15363759.2015.1106354
- Thomas, L., (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: A summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
- Tinto, V. (2012). Enhancing student success: Taking the classroom success seriously. *Student Success*, 3(1), 1.
- Tinto, V., (2003). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success. *Higher Education Monograph Series*, 1(8), 1–8.
- Unite (2017). *Student resilience: Unite students insight report*. Available online at: <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-03/student-insight-report-2016.pdf> (Accessed July 14, 2020).
- Universities Press United Kingdom [UUK] (2017). *Education, consumer rights and maintaining trust: what students want from their university*. [UUK]. Available online at: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/what-students-want-from-their-university.aspx> (Accessed July 14, 2020).
- Wagner, E. and Longanecker, D., (2016). Scaling student success with predictive analytics: Reflections after four years in the data trenches. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 48(1), 52–59. doi: 10.1080/00091383.2016.1121087
- Weatherston, M. and Schussler, E. E., (2021). Success for all? A call to re-examine how student success is defined in higher education. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 20(1), 3. doi: 10.1187/cbe.20-09-0223
- Wintrup, J. (2017). Higher education's panopticon? Learning analytics, ethics and student engagement. *Higher Education Policy*, 30(1), 87–103.
- Yorke, M. and Longden, B., (2004). *Retention and student success in higher education*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

