

Mobilising Success Differently

Penny Jane Burke, Anna Bennett, Kristen Allen
University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper draws on a national commissioned study about success from the point of view of university students from under-represented backgrounds in Australia. Applying Fraser's (1997; 2003) framework for understanding injustices in HE, we discuss how students mobilise success differently to HE policy and institutions. Students provide broader accounts of the mobilities offered by HE, including in their future trajectories. In general, the students regard success at university as being empowered personally, socially and economically, as well as being able to "give back" to the wider community. From the students' perspectives we can see that the success enabled by university is much more than the temporally limited focus on good grades, course completion and getting a job. Therefore, including recognition of the wider and longer mobilisation of value provided by HE, as defined by the students themselves, is required for HE policy at national and institutional levels.

Full paper

This paper draws from a national study (Rubin et al, 2022) exploring the accounts of success of students from under-represented backgrounds in Australia. A total of 72 in-depth interviews were conducted with students from La Trobe University, the University of Newcastle, the University of Queensland, the University of the Sunshine Coast, the University of Wollongong, and Western Sydney University. The qualitative study was framed by an understanding that success in higher education necessitates attention to the

multidimensional injustices that students navigate as part of the process of participating in university study and that recognition of intersecting inequalities enable attention to how differences (e.g. of socioeconomic status, age, gender) are inter-related, complex and come to matter in ways that are often hard to straightforwardly observe, predict or measure. Drawing on Fraser (1997; 2013), the study explored how multidimensional injustices operate in how students experience success and challenges. Aligned with Fraser's insights, we found that students' experiences highlight to 1) maldistribution (not having access to material, technological and/or financial resources that enable a sense of success to be realised), 2) misrecognition (the student's sense of success is not valued or recognised at the institutional or policy level), and 3) misrepresentation (not having a voice in how success is defined).

The paper focuses on the socio-economic dimension of maldistribution and the cultural aspect of misrecognition to consider how students mobilise success differently. Their experiences of success counter the sole future hegemonic focus on being "job-ready" and "employable". The students point to maldistribution as significant to university experience. They discuss the problems of long work hours in order to support themselves, and the difficulty of juggling work and study. We consider the importance of redistribution through aspects the students discussed, including scholarships and opportunities afforded via Australian enabling programs that assist students to enter university through non-traditional pathways.

We also discuss the students' responses to questions about teaching and assessment practices in the interviews, with their accounts indicating the important emotional dimensions that profoundly shape their sense of being successful. The focus on emotion is crucial for understanding student equity and success, as inequalities operate not only as structural barriers, which can be objectively measured, but also as cultural and symbolic injustices experienced in powerful emotive ways, that are insidious and difficult to both identify and measure. Cultural and symbolic injustices shape the processes in

which a person is recognised (and recognises themselves) as worthy, belonging, valued, legitimate and successful (Skeggs, 1997; Burke, 2012). Although such feelings are often described through deficit perspectives as a problem with individual self-esteem or confidence, sociological analyses illuminate the relationship between such feelings and sensibilities of self as entwined with, related to and shaped by structural, cultural and symbolic inequalities (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Ahmed, 2013). The absence of analytical attention to significant institutional practices in higher education, such as grading and assessment, which define capability (Bennett & Burke, 2018), is a form of cultural misrecognition, in which the hidden nature of systemic inequality can deeply affect a person's self-esteem and feelings of worthiness, and ultimately their success at university.

Motivations for going to university and remaining engaged in programs were described as being much more than what current policy and career discourse often reduce to a concern for being 'job ready'. Students were holistic in their longer-term aspirations, which were overwhelmingly about gaining the power to make a difference to others' lives through gaining a university degree, developing their careers and being able to represent the concerns and interests of their communities. This aspiration to make a difference was significant in sustaining their motivation to continue with their studies, despite the challenges they faced. Student identities were formed through the intersections between their interests, sense of curiosity as learners, their identification with place and their connection to community. This was driven by a sense of value in being able to help others that they cared about and related to.

Students' perspectives of success offered broader conceptions than the more limited policy and institutional definitions. In general, students regarded success at university as about being empowered personally, socially and economically, as well as "giving back" and contributing in meaningful ways to the wider communities to which they had a sense of belonging. Hence, from students' perspectives, success at university is much more than getting good grades and

completing courses. An appropriate definition of success needs therefore to be broadened to capture students' important insights and to recognise their experiences and values.

References

Ahmed, S. (2013). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.

Bennett A. & Burke P. (2018). 'Re/conceptualising time and temporality: an exploration of time in higher education', *Discourse*, 39. 913-925.

Burke, P. J. (2012). *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond widening participation*. Routledge.

Fraser, N. (2013). *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso.

Rubin, M., Burke, P. J., Bennett, A., Evans, O., O'Shea, S., Allen, K., Parker, J., Denson, N., Douglas, H., Gendi, M., Hardacre, S., Howley, P., Macqueen, S., Mills, C., Naylor, R., & Raciti, M. (2022). *Success from the perspective of the successful: Low SES students, success and completion in higher education*. The Australian Government's Department of Education Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme National Priorities Pool.

Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class & gender: Becoming respectable*. *Formations of Class & Gender*, 1-200.