# Success from the Perspective of the Successful:
Equity, Success and Completion in Higher Education

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"Success now for me is based on the impact that you leave on the people around you and making people happy"

"'student success' is being able to complete what you've set out to achieve and being happy in yourself with what you've achieved. It's not so much about if you've got a better job than someone else – it's about whether you're happy internally with what you've done"

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# Executive Summary

## Executive Summary

### Project Overview

Success is often assumed to have a common definition and to be a transparent term. However, the data shows that success is, in reality, personal, sociocultural and structural. According to Government policy and institutional measures, it is considered in terms of pass/fail, grade averages or gaining employment (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). However, when students are asked about success, whilst there are references to vocational and quantifiable notions of success, equally, highly valuable personal, community and familial experiences are conveyed. This research clearly reveals the multidimensional and contextual nature of success.

Prior research has found differences in students' success at university in relation to their socioeconomic background. However, these studies have used relatively restricted and potentially biased definitions of success (e.g., grade performance, course completions) that do not take into account students' own perceptions of success. In contrast, this project aims to broaden engagement with notions of success through in-depth consideration of students' perspectives, highlighting the diversity of experiences and meanings in the context of students' lives. Through this process, we move away from imposed, top-down, mono-dimensional definitions of success towards a multidimensional understanding that success is related to the diverse contexts of lived experience.

The present project was commissioned by the Australian Government's Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme National Priorities Pool scheme. The project aimed to provide a more comprehensive and integrative understanding of success in higher education, including when and how it is predicted by students' socioeconomic status (SES). In particular, the project aimed to investigate SES differences in the definition and experience of success in higher education. The project focuses on students' perceptions, experiences and understandings of success, bringing together a quantitative and qualitative study to develop holistic and more equitable understandings of student success in higher education (HE).

### The Quantitative Study

The quantitative part of the research recruited 2,665 undergraduate students from six Australian universities: 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. Sampling students from this wide range of institutions enabled better generalisation of the research results to the national context. Students completed an online survey that assessed their self-reported social class; their social, economic, cultural resources and aspirations; and their perceived success in a variety of domains.

Mediation analyses showed that students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (LSESB) tended to experience less success at university, in part, as a result of their having fewer friendships with other university students (social connections), fewer finances (economic resources), and less clear expectations about university life (cultural expectations). Importantly, however, there were also some areas in which students from LSESB experienced greater success than students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds (HSESB). Specifically, students from LSESB tended to have better class attendance, and they were more likely to associate their university admission with success. The greater interdependent motivation[1] of students from LSESB to be a role model for their community and assist their families after university helped to explain these relative advantages. This greater interdependent motivation on the part of students from LSESB also helped to close the socioeconomic gap in peer engagement, sense of belonging, satisfaction with university, and expectation of completing university. Hence, interdependent motivations appeared to provide a valuable psychological resource at university that propels students from LSESB towards success in previously unacknowledged domains.

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1 Independent motivations refer to motives to be successful for one's own benefit, whereas interdependent motivation refers to motives to be successful for the benefit of one's family, friends and community.

Finally, our quantitative results highlighted the importance of considering age in conjunction with SES. Specifically, we found that the positive association between SES and economic resources was weaker among older students, potentially because there is less variability in economic resources among older students. In other words, the inequality between students in terms of economic resources is less acute in older students. This shows that considering the age of students is important in understanding the impact of SES. In contrast, the positive association between SES and expectations about university was stronger among older students, possibly because older students have less up-to-date academic knowledge in their (older) social networks about what to expect at university. Both of these moderation effects extended to moderated mediation effects: SES differences in economic resources were a more important explanation of SES differences in success among younger students, and SES differences in interdependent motivations were a more important explanation of SES differences in success among older students. These findings indicate that we need to pay attention to the age of students from LSESB when considering which forms of support might be most effective in closing the SES gap in success.

## The Qualitative Study

The aim of the qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of success among students from LSESB. The project investigated the teaching and learning strategies that these students identify as particularly helpful, as well as the different equity initiatives available during their study that supports their sense of capability, belonging and success as university students. 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. Of the 72 participants, 32 were male and 40 female, 14 participants identified as members of ethnic minorities, and a further five identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Forty-seven participants were first-in-family, three were international students, 62 were enrolled full-time, 69 were enrolled on-campus, and 42 had deferred their entry to university. Through an iterative analytical process, the qualitative analysis identified six overarching themes, including 1) understanding success; 2) social connections, relations and commitments; 3) economic and educational resources; 4) cultural expectations and practices; 5) aspirations and transformations; and 6) critical life events.

The qualitative study was framed by an understanding that success in higher education necessitates attention to the inequalities students navigate as part of the process of participating in university study. Inequalities are intersecting and relate to multidimensional injustices. Intersecting inequalities include 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; 2003), multidimensional injustices relate 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), or 3) misrepresentation (not having a voice in how success is defined).

Key Findings from the qualitative study included:

**1. Student Understanding of Success**

- Success is a highly variable experience for students.
- What success means for students involves a range of important emotional and structural considerations. Success is about being empowered personally, socially and economically. Not one of these elements outweighs the other, so cannot be reduced to being only about passing all courses or being job ready. Therefore, the definition and measurement of success needs to be broadened to capture student experiences and what they value.
- Success is often described as being able to 'give back' and contribute in meaningful ways to the community.
- Becoming a professional and having a career that provides students with the power and confidence to make a difference, especially to those treated unfairly, was described as the ultimate success.
- Students described their learning about how to think analytically and critically as amongst the most important and empowering parts of their success, apart from grades and other conventional measures.

**2. Social Connections, Relations and Commitments**

- Social and peer relations contributed significantly to many students' sense of success by providing emotional support and fostering feelings of confidence, belonging and capability. However, some students described social and peer relations as distracting and at times difficult.
- Family impact on students' success is complex and variable.
- Participation in learning, regardless of outcomes, was described by many of the students interviewed as highly valuable for them and their families.
- Time is a major equity issue. Time is erroneously presumed to be equal for everyone. Those who are more advantaged often do not understand time inequalities[2]. Insecure types of work, and long and irregular hours, cause time inequalities and stress. Money and resources can buy time, and networks and supports enable the time to achieve.

- Students from LSESB backgrounds experience compounding challenges, including self-doubt and performance anxiety. Multiple and intersecting factors were described as much more impactful, and for much longer periods of time, than are recognised by institutions and teachers.
- Measures of time treat all students as if they are the same and then measure all students' performance as if they experience the same conditions.
- While responsibility for time management continues to be treated solely as an individual student's issue, inequity will persist.
- Some lecturers and tutors recognise time inequality and address this through providing a range of choice and flexible timeframes for assessments, rather than a specific due date. Simple changes in assessment structures makes all the difference for students.

**3. Economic and educational resources**

- Inadequate financial resources impact students' capacity to engage with and succeed in their studies.
- Financial insecurities create burdens that redirect students' focus from their studies.
- Scholarships relieve financial stresses, giving students a sense of pride, and fostering a sense of belonging in the university.
- Many students are unaware of the provision of scholarships and bursaries, and others find information about scholarships inaccessible.
- Many students asserted that affording textbooks is a hurdle for success and that the cost is a source of inequity.

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2 Time inequalities is a concept that enables recognition of how multidimensional inequalities position students differently in relation to higher education time structures. Inequalities that relate to the structures of time in higher education (for example semesters, course timetabling, assessment deadlines) are connected to differences that have not been considered that might exacerbate existing forms of social disadvantage (examples include long and irregular work hours, caring commitments, long commutes to campus and time required to access and become familiar with highly coded academic practices and conventions).

**4. Cultural Expectations, Relations and Practices**

- Belonging and inclusion are significant for building student equity and supporting student success at multiple levels.
- An inclusive institutional environment is key to students' sense of belonging, where students are recognised as persons rather than a number or statistic.
- High quality and inclusive student support structures, teaching and learning strategies and formative assessment practices are central to student equity.
- Students are frustrated when there is a disconnect between theory and practice. Practical elements of programs were referred to positively, but the necessity for many students from LSES backgrounds to work to support their study can cause difficulties for students when on placement.
- The flexibility in degree structures enables students to alter their choices as they learn more about their subject and themselves. This was experienced as an important part of widening opportunities and horizons.
- The impact on pedagogy as a result of COVID-19 was described by many participants as both 'destructive' and disruptive.

**5. Aspirations and Transformations**

- All students talked about more than one factor that motivates and inspires them to study at university.
- Simply wanting a job was not expressed as a motivation, as students talked about having jobs through engaging in employment and further/vocational forms of education, but wanting more. Students were very ambitious when describing their longer-term aspirations, which were overwhelmingly about gaining the power to make a difference through their careers.
- Aspirations are multifactorial, fluid and intimately connected to community and family enrichment and personal identity formation.
- Aspiring to be a professional who had the knowledge and skills to make a difference for people, whether as a leader, teacher, nurse or a doctor, was a prime motivation.

**6. Critical Life Events**

- Critical life events can occur at any point in an individual's lifetime. It is therefore impractical and insensitive to expect students to complete their degree within the minimum timeframe. This is particularly true for students who have fewer resources to draw on in times of difficulty. Universities must have mechanisms in place that enable staff awareness, sensitivity and responsiveness to the challenges students have to navigate due to multidimensional inequalities. Beyond students facing extenuating circumstances at an individual level we need to promote institutional knowledge and sensitivity to the kinds of barriers, inequalities and challenges students navigating university study might face.
- The effects of critical life events often have a flow-on effect, therefore compounding issues of disadvantage. Illness, for example, can affect finances, which can affect housing. These can have significant impacts on a student's capacity to study.
- University services are appreciated by students but do not always make enough difference to a student's situation. In these cases, leaving university should be treated as an interim point, rather than a final destination which could be further supported by providing early exit certificates or diplomas in recognition of students' achievements.

## Recommendations for Higher Education Policy and Practice

The project generated a set of recommendations – directed towards future research, as well as policy and practice recommendations directed to government and higher educational institutions. The full list of recommendations and brief summary of conclusions from the report can be read on page 100 of the report below.

**The key recommendations to government are:**

1. The government should provide an adequate living allowance for students from LSESB. This financial support would remove the need for students to undertake excessive paid work, provide flexibility for navigating life crises, and provide the appropriate time to focus on their university studies.
2. Alternative pathways to university, particularly free enabling programs, remain crucial enablers for students from LSESB to access and succeed at university. These pathways need to be fully supported, sustained and expanded.

**The key recommendations to universities are:**

1. Universities should recognise and redress the time inequalities students from LSESB face. For example, simple changes in timetabling and assessment structures can make all the difference for students. Financial support can also alleviate time inequalities.
2. Universities should conduct institutional research that focuses on the views and experiences of students from diverse LSESB, and draw from these research insights to inform decisions around equity policy strategies and planning around areas such as pedagogy, curriculum and staff professional development.
3. Universities should develop forums to engage with the collective voices of LSESB and other underrepresented students, and listen to their views about ways to support and improve their experiences at university.
4. Scholarships should be more widely available and advertised to potential students in a universal, transparent and accessible manner.
5. Textbooks should be provided online or subsidised publicly so that students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage can access the mandatory materials in order to gain a broad understanding of subjects regardless of their financial means.
6. Emergency funding schemes should be promoted to assist students from LSESB when they encounter unexpected life events that impede their university studies.
7. Financial support should be provided to students whose courses require them to perform unpaid practicums and placements. Universities should review the instances of such course requirements across their institutions, consider their impacts on equity, and find ways to provide financial support to affected students.
8. Teaching staff should be provided with professional development opportunities to provide quality formative assessment, clear assessment criteria, instructive feedback and examples or guides to help students from LSESB understand assessment expectations and practices.
9. Inclusive curriculum, pedagogy and support across all higher education courses should be provided for all students under a strength-based framework that works to challenge multiple inequalities.
10. Universities should demonstrate a clear strategy to foster student belonging in the context of diversity and inclusion. This requires strategies to build inclusive teaching and learning environments across all programs of study that support and value the different forms of success that students are striving towards.
11. Students from LSESB thrive in an environment in which they feel recognised and cared for. Staff/student ratios should provide adequate resources for responsive and high quality support, teaching and learning.
12. Flexibility in degree programs is key to supporting processes of student choice-making, self-discovery and sense of purpose, helping students sustain engagement across the full duration of their studies.
13. University policies should enable students with a greater life load to study part-time while they continue to receive financial assistance.

# Background

## Background

Current DESE data on student attrition and success is limited regarding students' reasons for continuing or leaving higher education. In terms of success, it is not yet clear which factors lead to success for students, particularly non-traditional students such as LSESB, Indigenous, and regional/remote students. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly evident that conventional conceptualisations of success (i.e., passing courses, graduation, etc.) are not wholly representative of students' own conceptions of success (e.g., Bennett et al., 2015). Success is linked to numerous important outcomes at university, including retention, progress, career outcomes, student experience, mental health and well-being, graduation rates, and employment opportunities after graduation. The project aimed to develop a clearer and more nuanced and holistic framework within which to consider SESB differences in success and the factors that explain these differences. In order to understand the complex factors that students from LSESB must navigate in relation to 'success', we conducted a large-scale, multi-institution research survey.

# Project Aims

## Project Aims

This project aimed to (a) enhance existing understandings about what constitutes 'success' by using a broad range of indicators of success, (b) identify SES differences in success, (c) identify which dimensions of success show the largest SES differences, (d) identify mediator and moderator variables that explain SES differences in success, (e) identify LSESB students' own attributions and definitions of success, and (f) identify how socio-demographic factors may impact on how students achieve and also conceive of success. Developing this understanding allows higher education practitioners to better enable success for LSESB students and place greater focus on the outcomes of success that are most important to the students themselves. We hypothesised that students from LSES backgrounds will conceptualise success differently to their HSESB counterparts, and that this difference would affect the ways in which LSESB students approach and experience higher education. We also hypothesised that LSESB students will have different pathways through which they achieve success. The project sought to test this hypothesis through two interrelated parts. Part 1 aimed to identify and explain SESB differences in success. We conducted a quantitative survey with students of all SES backgrounds from six universities, using multidimensional measures of academic success. Part 2 aimed to understand how LSESB students define their success and the factors to which they subjectively attribute their success. Part 2 used one-on-one interviews with LSESB students. Together, Parts 1 and 2 provided a comprehensive report on (a) SES differences in multiple dimensions of success, (b) mediators and moderators of these differences, and (c) subjective attributions for these differences.

# Literature Review

## Literature Review

From the perspectives of governments and universities, success at university is often constructed in relation to statistics that indicate the percentage of students who pass courses or complete course requirements (Oh & Kim, 2016), reach certain benchmarks of knowledge and skills (Sullivan, 2008), or progress through a degree program independently in an efficient and linear fashion (Leathwood, 2006). Although grades achieved, courses completed, numbers of graduates and speed of graduation are useful in illuminating how inequalities relate to these aspects of success, including allowing institutional and longitudinal comparison (Hanover Research, 2014; Beneke, 2011), it is important to consider students' own *experiences* and *perspectives* of success at university and the potential gains that students receive through their participation in higher education (Burke, 2012, 2017; Bennett et al., 2015; Burke, Bennett et al., 2016; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Although governments and universities are concerned about understanding student perspectives on success, often the avenues for communicating the nature of success are limited, through evaluation instruments that are not designed to fully value, recognise or represent the diversity of student experiences of success (such as evaluation of teaching quality and campus facilities). Indeed the end-users (students) are conspicuously excluded from many evaluations, which creates an incomplete picture of the true impact of higher education.

Relatedly, it has been argued that more limited views of success may indeed undermine students' own feelings, values and experiences of success and fail to explain why students who are considered successful by conventional standards nonetheless drop-out or falter after graduation (Biesta, 2007; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). Furthermore, it is important to understand success in the context of students' lived experiences, including the meanings they give to "success" but also in terms of the wider discourses of success that shape their sense of belonging, inclusion and capability (Burke, Bennett et al., 2016). Success is therefore not objective, or simply reducible to sets of measures and statistics. Understanding success in higher education requires attention to the different values, contexts and experiences that diverse students bring to their learning.

Indeed one goal of the current project is to expand the concept of student success, and move away from the prevailing monodimensional conception. This is underpinned by a commitment to student equity and to challenging limited definitions of success that ignore the depth of students' values, hopes and aspirations. In describing the prevailing conception of success as monodimensional, we mean that success

is defined and measured simply by the number of students who pass courses within the appropriate timeframes. In place of this view of student success we propose a multidimensional concept of success, which recognises the importance of passing courses and graduation – both for students themselves and for the higher education system overall, but also encapsulates the ways in which studying impacts personal growth, and the capacity for social action and empowerment.

Further, success is contextual, relational and subjective, and the multiple meanings that students bring to their experiences of success are crucial in developing equitable higher education. Students experience success at the emotional level and it is felt in the body and as a sense of self – in this way we argue success is embodied, contextual and subjective. Furthermore, success is not experienced as a singular moment in time, but related to the ongoing processes of learning, discovery and purpose that is meaningful in the context of students' lives, commitments and values.

One forum where students' perceptions of university are now routinely collected is in student satisfaction surveys. However such surveys embed a methodology which aims to generate data that can be used to evaluate the efficacy of teaching, and for marketing higher educational institutions. In other words, student experience surveys are designed to create a "potential market signal" (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017), a metric which can be used to promote the university and justify the distribution of resources inside the institution. Indeed as Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) argue:

> "Such information is strategically vital and high stakes given that reporting of data can impact positively or negatively on an institution's market power" (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017, p.30)

Satisfaction surveys also arguably promote the neoliberal conception of students as consumers in a higher education market. As Stefan Collini argues, this conception does not reflect the reality of good educational experiences, which, contrary to the purchase of commodities, often require students to be challenged and even "disturbed" by their teachers (Connell 2019, p.41).

Student satisfaction surveys, therefore, are not designed in such a way as to capture the experience of students in the broadest sense, or as students change in response to their learning experiences at university. Rather, they reflect the need for higher educational institutions to quantify and compare learning. Therefore, although we recognise the value of student evaluations that

provide contextual data and statistical measures about student success, we point to the limitation of this when further understanding of the complexities of lived experiences of success is not brought to bear. This tends to reduce engagement with questions of student success to mono-dimensional metrics, which do not reflect student experience or the diversity of meanings about 'success' that are crucial to developing equitable policy and practice to enhance the student experience.

Research that has asked students to define success from their perspective has painted a very different picture to the conventional measures of success. From students' perspectives, success takes on an array of meanings ranging from tangible outcomes such as CVs and careers, to personal growth and achievement, to developing the ability to change the world for the better (May, Delahunty, O'Shea & Stone, 2016). Students experience a sense of success from the personal growth they undergo while studying (Allen, 2020; Starrfield, 1992; Terenzini & Wright, 1987), the connections they form with students and staff (Burke et al., 2016; Nevill & Rhodes, 2004), and the sense of identity and belonging that comes from being a student (Allen, 2020; Daniels & Brooker, 2014; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Success might include the feeling that their student status is recognised and legitimate and being able to improve the wellbeing of others and the world at large (Burke, 2012; Devlin, 2013; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). That is not to say that graduating is not the ultimate goal of most university students, but rather that finishing courses and degrees are long-term successes that are achieved through or enable a series of smaller, more subjective successes throughout the student life cycle, particularly for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (LSESB), many of whom enter via pathways programs (Bennett et al., 2012).

There is also a growing body of evidence that suggests that students from under-represented backgrounds (e.g. lower SES, Indigenous, regional/ remote) have different experiences and attributions of success at university (Burke, Bennett et al., 2016; Jury et al., 2018; O'Shea, 2009; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Raciti et al., 2017; Threadgold et al., 2018). In fact, some researchers have argued that conventional narrow conceptualisations of success impact on these students in particular, because such markers of success were designed with traditional (i.e., young, white, middle-class) students in mind (Taylor, 1992). These markers reflect institutional structures that are historically exclusive to the cultures, practices and experiences of those groups that are under-represented in higher education (e.g. low socioeconomic status and Indigenous groups)

(e.g., David, Burke and Moreau, 2019; Burke, 2012; Nakata, 2007). Much of the focus on students from LSESB in higher education tends to be on the deficits these students are presumed to have (i.e., lack of motivation or being at risk and failing courses) and the difficulties they experience (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2012; Devlin, 2013). This deficit lens places the onus of success or failure on the students, their families and communities (Smit, 2012) and ignores the wider contexts of social, economic and cultural inequality, exclusion and disadvantage. As explained by Swadener and Lubeck (1995), this creates a covert form of institutional exclusion whereby students are expected to struggle or fail, and thereby many students from LSESB come to also believe that this is because of their own limitations (Threadgold et al., 2018). In rebut to this deficit lens, Smit (2012) argues that we should see students from LSESB as being "at promise" rather than "at-risk", with the duty of higher education institutions being to assist students with realising their promise.

In terms of conventional indicators of success, several studies have shown that SES is positively related to academic performance. For example, Robbins et al.'s (2004) meta-analysis of 109 (all USA) studies found that higher SES predicts higher grade point average. In Australia, Southgate, Douglas, Scevak, MacQueen, Rubin, and Lindell (2014) found that first-generation university students had similar academic results to other students in first year. However, as Southgate et al., (2014) found, the SES academic performance gap opened up in subsequent years.

Some researchers have argued that narrow, conventional definitions of success, which promote an independent and linear trajectory through higher education, partially explain why students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle at university (Leathwood, 2006; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Threadgold, Burke and Bunn, 2018; Taylor, 1992). Furthermore, research has shown that students who are successful in relation to objective measurements often perceive themselves as incapable and less intelligent than their peers (Burke, Bennett et al., 2016). Consequently, the lack of nuance and expanse in the discourse around student success could be one of the reasons for the present limited knowledge about why students from under-represented backgrounds struggle at university or drop out at higher rates.

Researchers have argued that to focus exclusively on conventional measures of success exacerbates existing exclusion and inequalities (Burke, 2012; Devlin, 2013; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018), and reinforces deficit misframings and the misrecognition of students from LSESB (Burke, 2012, 2020). In order to avoid reinforcing institutionalised exclusion

and inequities, it is critical to consider students' own experiences of success at university and the potential gains that they receive through their participation in higher education (Allen, 2020; Burke et al., 2016). It is also important to understand student success *in relation to* multidimensional inequalities (Burke, 2012).

In considering questions of inequality, it is important to identify the mechanisms and multi-dimensions of inequality (Fraser, 1997, 2003) that explain the relations between SES and experiences of success at university in order for policy-makers to understand the reasons why students from lower SES backgrounds may struggle at university or drop out at higher rates (Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018). Research on equity has argued that mono-dimensional explanations of equity in higher education are unable to grasp the relational power dynamics that shape student experience and identity (Burke, 2012). This work reveals that a decontextualised and reductive focus on a single factor to explain complex lived experiences unwittingly reproduces deficit constructions of students from LSESB (and other under-represented backgrounds) through failing to fully address structural and interrelated forms of inequality (Burke, 2020). Moving towards a multi-dimensional understanding of success that considers intersecting inequalities and interrelated dimensions of social, economic and cultural inequality may then inform the development of more nuanced forms of equity policy and practice (e.g. Burke, 2012; Bozalek et al., 2020) to reduce SES disparities in higher education success.

If we are to understand how students achieve success, then it is necessary to explore how success is perceived and explained by students. The project accomplished this by interrogating data through highly developed and theoretically sound conceptual framings using qualitative sources of information. As Oh and Kim (2016) argued, success is more appropriately defined at a close-up micro-level in order to account for the fact that it is "multifaceted, fluid and at times, unpredictable" (p. 288). Similarly, students from lower SES backgrounds are not a homogenous group, and we require more nuanced analyses that shed light on how inequalities in relation to success are formed through intersections of difference (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017). O'Shea and Delahunty (2018) found that, within a group of Australian first-in-family students, each student had a different "yardstick" that they used to measure their success, and they also argued that students' experiences are deeply emotional and often connected to the values of their particular community, and are therefore not reducible to objective measures of success. Thus, while the quantitative part of this project may be able to capture the broader trends relating to success and its factors, the mixed method approach will enable significant qualitative insights to be captured.

# Project Overview

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Success is often assumed to have a common definition and to be a transparent term. However, the data shows that success is, in reality, personal and structural. According to Government policy and institutional measures, it is considered in terms of pass/fail, grade averages or gaining employment (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). However, when students are asked about success, whilst there are references to vocational and statistical notions of success, equally, highly valuable personal, community and familial experiences are conveyed. This research clearly reveals the multidimensional nature of success.

This mixed-methods project aimed to expand the concept of success at university to include students' diverse experiences and perceptions of success. Thus, as well as including the typical indicators of success such as grades and likelihood of graduating, we measured variables that students from LSESB have identified as part of their value of university success, including personal growth, belonging, identity, engagement, participation, and self-efficacy (Burke, 2012; Devlin, 2013; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). We also included measures of feelings of success and expectations for future success. To investigate student experiences of not succeeding, either in terms of a personal assessment or in relation to prevailing conceptions, we included a number of quantitative measures that we consider to be antithetical to success, including a sense of imposterism, mental health issues, and disengagement. Through the qualitative part of the project, we were then able to critically examine these themes through the lens of students' perceptions and accounts of their lived, embodied and complex experiences of success.

Consistent with prior research, we predicted that students from higher SES backgrounds (HSESB) would tend to experience greater success in most of these domains, particularly on the traditional indicators such as achieving good grades, and completion of courses. We also expected students from LSESB to report less success on non-traditional indicators. This includes not identifying strongly as a university student (Bassett et al., 2018; Groves & O'Shea, 2019; Iyer et al., 2009) and not having a sense of belonging at university (for a meta-analysis, see Rubin, 2012), greater university imposterism (Gardner & Holley, 2011; MacInnis et al., 2019; Raciti et al., 2020), poorer mental health (e.g., Rubin et al., 2016; Verhaeghe et al., 2011), less academic engagement (Martinez et al., 2009; Walpole, 2003), less academic self-efficacy (MacPhee et al., 2013), fewer feelings of success (Bui, 2002) and less satisfaction with university (Martin, 2012). Through the in-depth interviews with students, we were able to

shed light on these differences in the context of lived and emotional experiences of inequalities, which can become embodied sensibilities of not belonging, being an outsider or shame (Ahmed, 2004; Burke, 2017).

In view of this, other research challenges the deficit explanation and reframes individual disadvantage to wider social, economic and cultural inequalities, recognising that students from LSESB also have important knowledge, values and experiences that they bring to the university experience (e.g. Stephens et al., 2015; Yee, 2016). For example, students from LSESB tend to be motivated by external factors (e.g., supporting community) when attending university (Stephens et al., 2012), and they also report significant personal growth during their initial transition into university (Gibbons et al., 2019). Thus, we were also interested in identifying any success domains that have been excluded from conventional measures in order to recognise the forms of success students from LSESB experience and value. Indeed, success factors or value in higher education has previously been shown to be highly contextual and contingent on background factors (Naylor et al., 2016; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Consistent with the previous research discussed above, we also expected that students from LSESB would have different perceptions and notions of success.

## Understanding Predictors of Success

The second aim of the present research was to examine the mediators of the relations between SES and success. In considering questions of inequality, it is important to identify the mechanisms and multi-dimensions of injustice (Fraser, 1997, 2003) that explain the relationship between SES and experiences of success at university in order for policy-makers to understand the reasons why students from lower SES backgrounds may struggle at university or drop out at higher rates (Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018). Research on equity has argued that one-dimensional explanations of equity in higher education are unable to grasp the relational power dynamics that shape student experience and identity (Burke, 2012). This work reveals that a decontextualised and reductive focus on a single factor to explain complex lived experiences unwittingly reproduces deficit constructions of students from LSESB (and other under-represented backgrounds) through failing to fully address structural and interrelated forms of inequality (Burke, 2020). Moving towards a multi-dimensional understanding that considers the interrelated dimensions of social, economic and cultural inequality may then inform the development of more nuanced forms of equity policy and practice (e.g. Burke, 2012; Bozalek et al., 2020) to reduce SES disparities in higher education success.

We drew from such insights in the mixed methods project design to enable a broad overview of student perspectives through a quantitative survey to be brought into dialogue with an in-depth exploration of diverse student experiences through qualitative interviews. This paper focuses on the quantitative aspects of the project but is contextualised through our dialogic methodological framework. This paper draws on data from an online survey that students completed. The survey invited students to self-report their SES and assessed four dimensions of inequality: their social connections, economic resources, cultural expectations and practices, and aspirations; and their success in a variety of domains.

In this report, and in order to maintain focus and brevity, we focused on the following three key hypotheses, which are paraphrased from our preregistration document: (a) SES will be positively related to perceived success. (b) SES will be positively related to the four dimensions of inequality (social connection, economic resources, cultural expectations, and aspirations. (c) the dimensions of inequality will mediate the relationship between SES and perceived success. We tested these hypotheses using an online survey that was completed by a sample of undergraduate students from six Australian universities.

## Investigating age as a potential moderator of the relations between SES and university-related personal resources.

SES is a highly intersectional construct, in that other equity and diversity groups within society also tend to be from LSESB (Bowleg, 2017; Harley et al., 2002; Jackson & Williams, 2006). In the higher education context in particular, there are distinct intersections between SES and other demographic identities (e.g. Harris & Patton, 2019; Mahoney et al., 2019). Most notably in the Australian context, students from LSESB backgrounds are more likely to have come to university later in life and therefore be older than the average student (Rubin & Wright, 2015).

Research has shown that being an older university student is a unique university experience that comes with many benefits and setbacks (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Douglas et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2018). Of particular relevance to the present study is the relationship between age and the various resources that may predict success. We expect that age has both benefits and disadvantages in terms of access to and accumulation of resources that aid in success. In terms of social resources, LSESB students who are older tend to be less embedded within social networks at university than younger students (Rubin & Wright, 2015). On the other hand, LSESB students who are older will have had more time to accrue economic resources and may have developed more stability in their economic circumstances compared to younger LSESB students, meaning that economic pathways to success may be more available to them. Finally, LSESB students who are older will have different expectations and aspirations about the university experience because they are coming to university at a distinctly different time in their lives than students who are younger and/or who came to university straight from high school.

It is important to understand how LSESB intersects with age in determining access to resources and success in order to ensure that approaches to improving success are appropriate and do not paint all LSESB students with the same brush. For example, economic assistance may be more relevant for improving the university experience of younger LSESB students compared to that of older LSESB students. This intersection may also demonstrate that characteristics that may be expected to predict poorer university outcomes in isolation, such as LSESB or older age, instead combine to create strengths and resources that students can draw on to improve their university experience. This approach provides a clearer picture of both the positives and negatives of intersectionality.

Thus, in the present study we tested the moderating properties of age on the relationship between SES and various resources. We expected to find that older age amplifies the relationship between SES and social resources, such that SES differences in social resources are more pronounced among older students. Conversely, we expected to find that older age buffers the relationship between SES and economic resources, such that SES differences in economic resources are less pronounced among students who are older. Finally, we expected there would be an interaction between SES and age for cultural and aspirational resources. However, due to a dearth of research on age differences in cultural and aspirational resources, these analyses were exploratory and we did not have a priori hypotheses.

# Methods: Quantitative Study

## Methods: Quantitative Study

The project consisted of two interrelated parts that use quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Part 1 of the project uses a cross-institutional quantitative survey to investigate the extent to which different demographic, economic, social and cultural resources variables mediated and moderated SES differences in success. This data was used to develop a set of questions for a series of qualitative interviews that were conducted with a subset of students who took part in the Part 1 survey. We discuss the methodological aspects of each part in turn.

## Participants

The survey received 4,968 responses from participants who were undergraduate students who had been enrolled at one of six universities in the previous semester. Of these, 1,499 participants either (a) did not answer the eligibility questions at the start of the survey or (b) provided responses that ruled them ineligible to participate. Hence, there were 3,469 eligible participants. A further 727 participants did not respond to an item near the end of the survey that requested their informed consent, and 68 actively declined their consent on this item. The responses for these 795 participants were deleted, leaving a total of 2,674 responses. Of these, 16 responses were identified as duplicates based on the provision of identical email addresses. In these cases, each participant's first attempt was retained and their subsequent attempt ($n$ = 8) was deleted, leaving a total of 2,666 useable responses. Finally, one participant was excluded because they completed the survey in less time than our preregistered threshold of 5 minutes. Hence, the final sample consisted of 2,665 participants.

Participants had a mean age of 25.45 years ($SD$ = 9.10), and their median year of commencement at university was 2018. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the categorical demographic and other variables.

**Table 1.** Demographic and Other Variables

| Variable | | N | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | | |
| | Women | 1,938 | 72.72% |
| | Men | 699 | 26.23% |
| | Nonbinary | 25 | 0.94% |
| | Other | 3 | 0.11% |
| Ethnic minority | | | |
| | Yes | 311 | 11.67% |
| | No | 2,354 | 88.33% |
| Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people | | | |
| | Yes | 62 | 2.33% |
| | No | 2,603 | 97.67% |
| University | | | |
| | A | 1,005 | 37.71% |
| | B | 544 | 20.41% |
| | C | 369 | 13.85% |
| | D | 341 | 12.80% |
| | E | 223 | 8.37% |
| | F | 183 | 6.87% |
| Year of study | | | |
| | First year | 199 | 7.47% |
| | Second year | 959 | 35.98% |
| | Third year | 903 | 33.88% |
| | Fourth year | 435 | 16.32% |
| | Fifth year or greater | 169 | 6.34% |
| Degree | | | |
| | Health/Medicine | 841 | 31.56% |
| | Science | 462 | 17.34% |
| | Business/Law | 425 | 15.95% |
| | Humanities/Arts | 393 | 14.75% |
| | Education | 267 | 10.02% |
| | Engineering | 159 | 5.97% |
| | Other | 118 | 4.43% |

| Variable | | N | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| International students | | | |
| | Yes | 263 | 9.87% |
| | No | 2,402 | 90.13% |
| Enrolment status | | | |
| | Full-time | 2,325 | 87.24% |
| | Part-time | 340 | 12.76% |
| Study mode | | | |
| | On campus | 2,590 | 97.19% |
| | Online/distance | 75 | 2.81% |
| First in family to attend university | | | |
| | Yes | 836 | 31.37% |
| | No | 1,829 | 68.63% |
| Straight from finishing high school | | | |
| | Yes | 1,380 | 51.78% |
| | No | 1,285 | 48.22% |
| If not straight from high school: | | | |
| | Deferred university studies due to life circumstances | 782 | 60.86% |
| | Deliberately deferred | 503 | 39.14% |
| | Enabling pathway? Yes | 452 | 16.96% |
| | Enabling pathway? No | 833 | 31.26% |

## Power and Sensitivity Analysis

We had originally proposed to investigate effects within each of the six university samples. However, our recruitment rates were substantially different at each university, leading to large discrepancies in sample sizes (see Table 1). Hence, instead, we opted to limit our analyses to the broader sample rather than to investigate effects within subsamples.

Given our relatively large sample size ($N$ = 2,665), we reduced our alpha level (significance threshold) from .05 to .005. This alpha level has been recommended by experts in the area (e.g., Benjamin et al., 2018), and it provided a stringent Type I error rate. A sensitivity analysis found that a two-tailed correlation test with a power of .85 and an alpha level of .005 would be able to detect an effect size of $r$ = .074 using a sample size of 2,665. Hence, we had sufficient power to proceed.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited from six publicly funded Australian universities that ranged in size from ~18,000 enrolments to ~54,000 enrolments ($M$ = 39,000). They were located in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria. They ranged in national rankings from 4th to 33rd, out of the 35 Australian universities list by the Times Higher Education's (2020) World University Rankings ($M$ = 16.5).

Data collection occurred between 28 January 2020 and 1 August 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic began during this period, and this resulted in many students studying from home. However, most of the questions in our survey asked students to reflect on their experiences during the preceding semester, before the emergence of COVID-19. Hence, the survey responses reflect students' pre-COVID-19 experiences in this respect.

Students were recruited via research assistant visits to undergraduate classes in lecture theatres and tutorials (where this was possible), notices on online course websites, and mass emails. Participants had the opportunity to enter a prize lottery to win 1 of 150 $100 e-gift vouchers.

Participants completed the survey online and in their own time. The survey was titled "university experiences," and it was introduced as "investigating the experience of undergraduate students at university." It included self-report measures of SES, the four dimensions of inequality, success, and demographic and other variables, most of which were adapted from existing scales. The measures of success and dimensions of inequality were presented in a randomised order for each participant. The measures of SES were presented at the end of the survey, together with the demographic items, in order to prevent participants from considering SES as a key variable in the research, which may have provoked unnatural responses. The survey required a total of 131 responses, and it took a median time of 17.85 minutes to complete.

## Open Science Resources

We have included the following information at *http://bit.ly/socialclasssuccess*: (a) the research survey, (b) the raw and refined research data, (c) data aggregation code, and (d) a preregistered research protocol that includes a list of the research hypotheses and our standard analytical approaches. (We acknowledge that preregistration does not necessarily increase the credibility of research; Rubin, 2020.) For brevity and clarity, we have not reported or analysed all of the items in our survey (e.g., open-ended items about success).

We confirm that we have disclosed all data exclusions, and that we did not conduct any interim data analyses during data collection. To avoid any potential costs of hypothesising after the results are known (Harking; Rubin, 2022), we have indicated those cases in which our findings were unexpected. Finally, we have reported the results of robustness analyses (e.g., analyses with and without outliers and covariates), including all significant results that contradict our claims.

## Measures

### Predictor Variable: SES

SES was measured using 11 items. Two items assessed the highest level of education of each participant's mother and father (1 = *less than primary school*, 8 = *university or college of advanced education – postgraduate degree*). Two items assessed the prestige and status of the mother's and father's occupations (Rubin & Kelly, 2015; 1 = *extremely low status and prestige*, 11 = *extremely high status and prestige*). Three items assessed subjective perceptions of wealth during childhood (Griskevicius et al., 2011; e.g., "I felt relatively wealthy compared to other kids in my high school"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Three items assessed the perceived social class of mother, father, and self (Ostrove & Long, 2007; 1 = *working class*, 5 = *upper class*). Finally, participants completed an adapted version of the single item MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler & Stewart, 2007; 0 = *lowest income, education, and occupation*; 100 = *highest income, education, and occupation*).

A principal axis exploratory factor analysis was used to test the factor structure of the 11 SES items after they had been converted to standardised scores. A scree plot suggested either one or two factors. The first factor had an eigenvalue of 4.82 and accounted for 43.81% of the variance, and the second factor had an eigenvalue of 1.32 and accounted for 12.01% of the variance. Factors were extracted using a promax rotation ($\kappa = 3$). A two-factor solution resulted in the two items assessing parental education loading positively on both factors ($\geq$ .45). A one-factor solution resulted in all 11 items loading $\geq$ .41. Our preregistered cut-point for item loadings was .50. However, given that .40 is often used as a conventional threshold, we opted to include the two parental education items in global, one-factor, measure of SES. We should also note that this one-factor approach has been used successfully in prior research (Rubin & Kelly, 2015). The resulting measure had a good Cronbach's alpha (.87) and a good mean interitem correlation ($r =$ .37). In addition, scores on this global measure were normally distributed (skewness = -.38, kurtosis = -.28). Please note that we did not impose arbitrary cut-offs on our measure of SES in order to distinguish students from LSESB and HSESB. Instead, we used the SES index as a continuous scale, and we interpreted higher scores on this index as indicating higher SES (Rubin et al., 2019). This approach is appropriate when considering associations between variables rather than mean values.

**Table 2.** Example Items, Response Scales, and
Internal Reliability Values for the Mediator and
Outcome Variables

| Type of Measure | Measure | No. of Items | Example Item/Actual Item | Response Scale | Internal Reliability |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social connections | Friendship | 4 | "I have friends at university that I could rely on in a time of need." | SD-SA | α = .93 |
| Economic resources | Financial difficulty | 3 | "During the past 6 months, how frequently have you...cut the size of your meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food?" (R) | Never (1), Always (7) | α = .89 |
| | Finances for studying | 1 | "I have enough money to do my university studies." | SD-SA | – |
| | Finances for socialising | 1 | "I have enough money to participate in all the social activities I want to at university." | SD-SA | |
| | Homelessness | 1 | "How often have you considered yourself to be homeless during your time as a university student?" | Always (1), Never (7) | – |
| | Financial assistance | 1 | "During your studies, have you received financial assistance from the government?" | *Yes* (1), *No* (2) | – |
| | Financial stress | 1 | "What is your current level of financial stress in regard to paying for all your living and study costs combined?" (R) | No financial stress (0), Extreme financial stress (100) | – |
| | Time spent in paid work | 1 | "On average, how many hours a week do you do paid work?" | [Hours estimate] | – |
| Cultural expectations | Expectations about university | 2 | "I knew what to expect coming into university." | SD-SA | ρ = .63 |
| | Perceived discrimination at university | 2 | "I have seen instances of discrimination at this university against people who do not have a lot of money." | SD-SA | ρ = .77 |
| | Family expectations about attending university | 1 | "My family always expected me to go to university." | SD-SA | – |
| | Family support for the decision to attend university | 1 | "My family was supportive of my decision to go to university." | SD-SA | – |
| | Family support for university studies | 1 | "I can ask my family for support with my university studies." | SD-SA | – |
| | Time available for studying | 1 | "I have enough time to do my university studies." | SD-SA | – |
| | Time available for socialising | 1 | "I have enough time to participate in all the social activities I want to at university." | SD-SA | – |
| Aspirations | Independent motivations | 2 | "I am at university to expand my understanding of the world." | SD-SA | ρ = .78 |
| | Interdependent motivations | 2 | "I am at university to be a role model for people in my community." | SD-SA | ρ = .55 |
| Grades | Number of each type of grade students received last semester | 1 | Please write a number inside each box to indicate how many of the following course grades you received last semester: Fail, Pass, Credit, Distinction, High-Distinction | [Number provided] | – |
| | Average grade at university | 1 | If you converted your grades across all courses you have taken at university into a score out of 100, what do you think it would be? | 0, 100 | – |
| | Self-ranking relative to peers | 1 | Where would you place yourself relative to your peers? | 0, 100 | – |
| | Characterisation of grades during university | 1 | Please indicate how you would characterise your grades over the course of your time at university. (R) | Excellent (1), Poor (7) | – |
| | Most frequent grade | 1 | On average, during your time as a university student, which is the grade you get most frequently? | e.g., Fail, Higher distinction | – |
| Special provisions | Frequency of special provision applications | 1 | Across your time as a university student, how often have you applied for special provisions (e.g., adverse circumstances, academic considerations, special considerations) that was not part of an approved support plan for assessment tasks, exams or other coursework? (R) | Always (1), Never (7) | – |

| Type of Measure | Measure | No. of Items | Example Item/Actual Item | Response Scale | Internal Reliability |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Acceptability of special provisions | 1 | "In general, I think it is OK to ask for special provisions (such as extensions based on adverse circumstances) when needed." (R) | Strongly agree (1), Strongly disagree (7) | – |
| Belonging and identity | Sense of belonging | 2 | "I feel a sense of belonging to the university community." | SD-SA | $\rho$ = .77 |
| | Student identity | 2 | "Being a student is an important reflection of who I am." | SD-SA | $\rho$ = .71 |
| Engagement and participation | Cognitive engagement | 4 | "I enjoy the intellectual challenge of the courses I am studying." | SD-SA | $\alpha$ = .84 |
| | Peer engagement | 4 | "I regularly study with other students." | SD-SA | $\alpha$ = .90 |
| | Schoolwork engagement | 3 | "I am enthusiastic about my studies." | SD-SA | $\alpha$ = .89 |
| | Percentage of time attending classes | 1 | "Between 0% to 100% of the time, how often do you attend lectures, tutorials, and labs or listen to their online recordings?" | 0, 100 | – |
| | Leaves of absence | 1 | "How many leaves of absence (breaks from your studies) have you taken since starting university?" | | |
| | Late assessments | 1 | "Over the course of your time as a university student, how often would you say that you handed in assessments late?" (R) | Always (1), Never (7) | – |
| Feelings of success | Academic self-efficacy | 2 | "I can do almost all my university course work if I don't give up." | SD-SA | $\rho$ = .71 |
| | University imposterism | 2 | "In some situations at university, I feel like an imposter." | SD-SA | $\rho$ = .71 |
| | Mental health | 5 | "How much of the time, during the last month, have you…felt calm and peaceful?" | Never (1), Always (7) | $\alpha$ = .85 |
| | Feelings of success | 1 | "I feel highly successful at university." | SD-SA | – |
| | Personal growth | 1 | "I believe I have grown as a person since starting my studies at university." | SD-SA | – |
| | Seeing the self as a role model | 1 | "As a university student, I see myself as a role model to other students, family members or friends." | SD-SA | – |
| | Satisfaction with university | 1 | "I am satisfied with my university experience so far." | SD-SA | – |
| Interpretations of success | University admission as success | 1 | "Getting into university has been one of my biggest successes to date." | SD-SA | – |
| | Grades as success | 1 | "My university grades are closely tied to how successful I feel." | SD-SA | – |
| | The association between feedback and failure | 1 | "The feedback that I got last semester made me feel like a failure." | SD-SA | – |
| Expectations of success | Expectations of completing university | 4 | "I am confident that I will be able to complete my university degree." | SD-SA | $\alpha$ = .82 |
| | Expected time to complete university | 1 | "It is going to take me longer to finish my degree than I initially expected." | SD-SA | – |
| Attributions of success | Deservedness of success | 1 | "I deserve the success I have had at university." | SD-SA | – |
| | Internal attributions for success | 1 | "When you've had grades that you were proud of at university, would you say that it is due to the work that you put in (e.g., studying, engaging in class, organising your time well) or to circumstances beyond your control (e.g., the coursework being easy, extensions on assessments, lenient marking, luck)." | All circumstances beyond my control (0), All my own work (100) | – |

*Note.* R = Reverse scored item. SD-SA = Response scale was anchored *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). $\alpha$ =Cronbach's alpha. $\rho$ = Spearman-Brown rho. Regarding the number of each type of grade students received in the last semester, five participants indicated that they received 20 or more of a particular grade, but it is extremely unlikely that they took 20 courses. To address this issue, we classed values greater than 6 as missing data.

## Mediator Variables: Social Connections, Economic Resources, Cultural Expectations, and Aspirations

Table 2 provides example items, response scales, and internal reliability values for the mediator and outcome variables. Social connections were measured using four items from the Friendship scale of the Student-Institution Fit survey (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Economic resources were assessed using nine items that measured financial difficulty, finances for studying and socialising, homelessness, financial assistance, financial stress, and time spent in paid work (based on Bickel et al., 2000). After being standardised, the financial difficulty, homelessness, money for study, money for socialising, financial assistance, and financial stress variables had a good Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha$ = .75) and a good mean interitem correlation ($r$ = .34), and so they were combined to form a more reliable index of economic resources. The paid work variable did not fit well into this index (reducing the alpha to .70), and so it was left separate.

Cultural expectations were assessed using nine items that measured students' expectations about university, family expectations about attending university, perceived discrimination at university, family support for the decision to attend university and for university studies, and time available for studying and socialising.

Aspirations were assessed using four items that were adapted from the Independent/Interdependent Motivations for Going to University scale (Stephens et al., 2012). Two items measured independent motivations, and two items measured interdependent motivations. Although the association between the two interdependent items was lower than expected ($\rho$ = .55), we decided to combine them as part of a single, more valid measure, rather than to treat them as separate items (Clifton, 2020), especially given that they were derived from a previously validated measure (Stephens et al., 2012).

## Outcome Variables: Success

We assessed perceived success in terms of grades, special provisions, belonging and identity, engagement and participation, feelings of success, interpretations of success, expectations of success, and attributions for success.

We measured grades as the number of each type of grade that students had received in the last semester (e.g., higher distinction or A, distinction or B, credit or C, etc.), students' average grade at university, their self-ranking relative to peers in terms of their grades, their characterisation of their grades during university, and their most frequent grade. Only the number of top grades (e.g., higher distinctions) showed strong associations with the other measures of grades ($r$s ≥ .51). The other grade types (e.g., distinction, credit, etc.) had much lower correlations with the other measures of grades (mean $r$ = -.24). Hence, we only included the number of higher distinctions in our composite measure of grades. After being standardised, the number of higher distinction grades, average grade, self-ranking relative to peers in terms of grade, characterisation of grades during university, and most frequent grade at university combined to form a reliable measure of grades ($\alpha$ = .91).

Perceived success was also measured in terms of the frequency of students' applications for special provisions (e.g., adverse circumstances, academic considerations, special considerations) independent from any disability plan and whether students felt that it was appropriate to ask for special provisions. We reasoned that students might equate multiple applications for special provisions as indicating less success (i.e., less ability or opportunity to manage their life difficulties). However, it is important to understand that students may view success as incrementally developed over longer periods of time that these critical mechanisms enable. We also measured belonging and identity using two items from the Sense of Belonging Scale (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and two items from the Student Identity scale (Bowman & Felix, 2017). We reasoned that more successful students would feel a greater sense of belonging to their university and assign greater importance to their student identity.

Perceived success was also assessed in terms of students' engagement and participation. Students completed two subscales from the Higher Education Student Engagement Scale (Zhoc et al., 2019): the Cognitive Engagement subscale and the Peer Engagement subscale. Participants also completed three items adapted from the Schoolwork Engagement Inventory (Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2012). Finally, participants completed single items that measured students' self-reported percentage of the time attending classes or listening to their online recordings, the number of leaves of absence taken since starting university, and the frequency with which students handed in late assessments.

We also assessed students' feelings of success. Academic self-efficacy was measured using two items that were adapted from the academic-related perceptions, beliefs, and strategies subscale of the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (Midgley et al., 2000). University imposterism (i.e., the feeling of being an imposter at university) was measured using two items adapted from the Imposterism Scale (Leary et al., 2000). Mental health was measured using the 5-item Mental Health Inventory-5 (Berwick et al., 1991). Finally, single items were used to measure feelings of success, personal growth, seeing the self as a role model, and satisfaction with university.

We also assessed specific interpretations of success. Single items were used to measure university admission as success, grades as success, and the association between feedback and failure. In addition, we assessed expectations of success. Four items measured expectations of completing university, and one item measured the expected time to complete university. Finally, we assessed attributions for success. Single items measured deservedness of success and internal attributions for success.

# Methodology: Qualitative Study

## Methodology: Qualitative Study

The qualitative study was designed in relation to the quantitative part of this project, with a focus on providing deep contextual understanding of students' perceptions of success. The qualitative study set out to explore, analyse and make sense of students' perceptions, the different social contexts in which students' accounts are situated and the ways that "success" is constructed through lived and embodied experiences. In other words, the qualitative study constructs success as dynamically related to inequality, diversity and difference, contesting a universal definition of student success. Indeed, the analyses generated from this project suggests that a singular or rigid definition of student success exacerbates inequity in higher education. It is thus important to recognise the complex challenges and inequalities that students from LSESB face whilst also drawing from the insights they bring to understanding "success" in higher education. Drawing from social justice theories and methodologies, experiences of success are understood to be significantly shaped by wider social, economic and cultural forces and students' aspirations are seen to be contextually formed. The study thus explored the different educational histories, contexts, aspirations and values that students bring to their experiences of success in higher education, and analysed their accounts of success as relational. This means that rather than understanding success as individually defined, success is understood as formed in relation to social connection, cultural expectations and practices and the different and unequal economic and educational resources available to students from LSESB. However, we also understood that success, as a powerful, emotional and embodied experience, requires analysis at the personal level. Underpinning the methodological framework for the qualitative study then is the position that success is constructed, relational and contextual, rather than as concrete or fixed. It is therefore of importance to consider student success as always personal and subjective.

## Aims and questions

The project aim was to explore the experiences and perceptions of success among students from low SES backgrounds (LSESB). The project investigated the teaching and learning strategies that these students identify as particularly helpful, as well as the different equity initiatives available during their study that supports their sense of capability, belonging and success as university students.

## Selection of participants

In order to explore LSESB students' experiences and attributions of success at university, a total of 72 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. Twelve students participated from each university, except for the University of Wollongong (13 students) and the Western Sydney University (11 students).

Eligibility for interview participation was based on participants' survey results. Specifically, students were eligible to be interviewed if (a) their score on the measure of SES was in the lowest quartile at their institution and (b) they indicated willingness to be contacted for an interview at the end of the survey. As outlined in the quantitative methods section, students' SES was measured using 11 items, including the highest level of education of the participant's mother and father, the prestige and status of their parents' occupations, the participant's subjective perceptions of wealth during childhood, the perceived social class of mother, father, and self, the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. Literature exploring the social class of university students tends to focus on single demographic variables or objective SES-based measures like the socio-economic index for geographical areas. Although these approaches may be useful at a national level, they oversimplify the concept of social class, particularly its social and cultural aspects (Saegert et al., 2006). Research that seeks to comprehensively conceptualise and measure social class should therefore supplement objective measures with subjective measures and include a range of dimensions (Rubin et al., 2014). To this end, in the present research we used a variety of objective and subjective indicators of social class and aggregated them to place individuals on a continuous spectrum of social class, which incorporates their objective circumstances and subjective experiences (Evans et al., 2021).

To obtain students' SES score, their responses to each of these 11 items were converted to standardised scores. A principal axis exploratory factor analysis provided a global, one-factor measure of SES, so we elected to sum the 11 items together to obtain each participants' SES score. We treated this aggregated SES index as a continuous scale rather than imposing arbitrary cut-offs to distinguish between LSESB and HSESB, with lower scores indicating lower SES (Rubin et al., 2019).

For each university, we determined those participants whose SES scores were in the lowest quintile at their institution and who had additionally indicated they were willing to be interviewed. We then sampled purposively from the pool of eligible interviewees to ensure the participants reflected a range of ages, genders, backgrounds, and circumstances. Specifically, we endeavoured to recruit equal numbers of male and female participants as well as students who differed from one another on other demographic variables, including their ethnic minority, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, international student status, straight from high school, enabling pathway, and first in family. Given that these variables are often associated with SES, we aimed to recruit sufficient numbers in order to investigate the influence of each variable on success. For example, we wanted to see if ethnicity impacted success independent from SES. To ensure our interviewees were spread across these relevant demographic variables, we first split the eligible participants into groups of men and women, then within those groups recorded which demographic groups each participant belonged to. A research assistant based at each university then contacted 3-5 participants at a time from each gender group via email, ensuring that they selected participants from across a broad range of demographics.

Because the overall eligible sample of ethnic minorities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and international students was quite small, the research assistants first contacted each of the participants belonging to these groups to ensure these groups were represented in our sample. For example, if there were only 6 eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants (compared to 28 eligible first in family participants) all 6 would be contacted. There was also a high degree of overlap between membership of each demographic group. For instance, many of the participants who were from ethnic minority or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds were also first-in-family or had entered via enabling pathways. Once the few eligible ethnic minority or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants had all been contacted, the research assistants would then randomly select participants from the larger demographic groups such as straight from high school and first in family. This meant that we were able to recruit interviewees from across the full range of demographic variables.

## Participants

Of the 72 participants who were interviewed, 32 were male and 40 female, between the ages of 19-88 years (M = 29.76, SD = 13.45). Fourteen participants identified as members of ethnic minorities, five identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and three were international students. Forty-seven participants were first-in-family, 62 were enrolled full-time, 69 were enrolled on-campus, and 42 had deferred their entry to university. Of those who deferred, 10 indicated that they deferred deliberately and 32 deferred due to life circumstances, and 20 indicated that they came to university through an enabling pathway, while the remaining 22 did not. After excluding two outliers who indicated that they had been at university for 33.5 and 65.5 years respectively, participants had spent a mean of 3.45 years at university (SD = 2.64). Participants were enrolled in a variety of degrees, including arts, commerce, computer science, education, engineering, human services, law, nursing, psychology, science, social science.

**Figure 1.** Social demographics of our student interviewees.
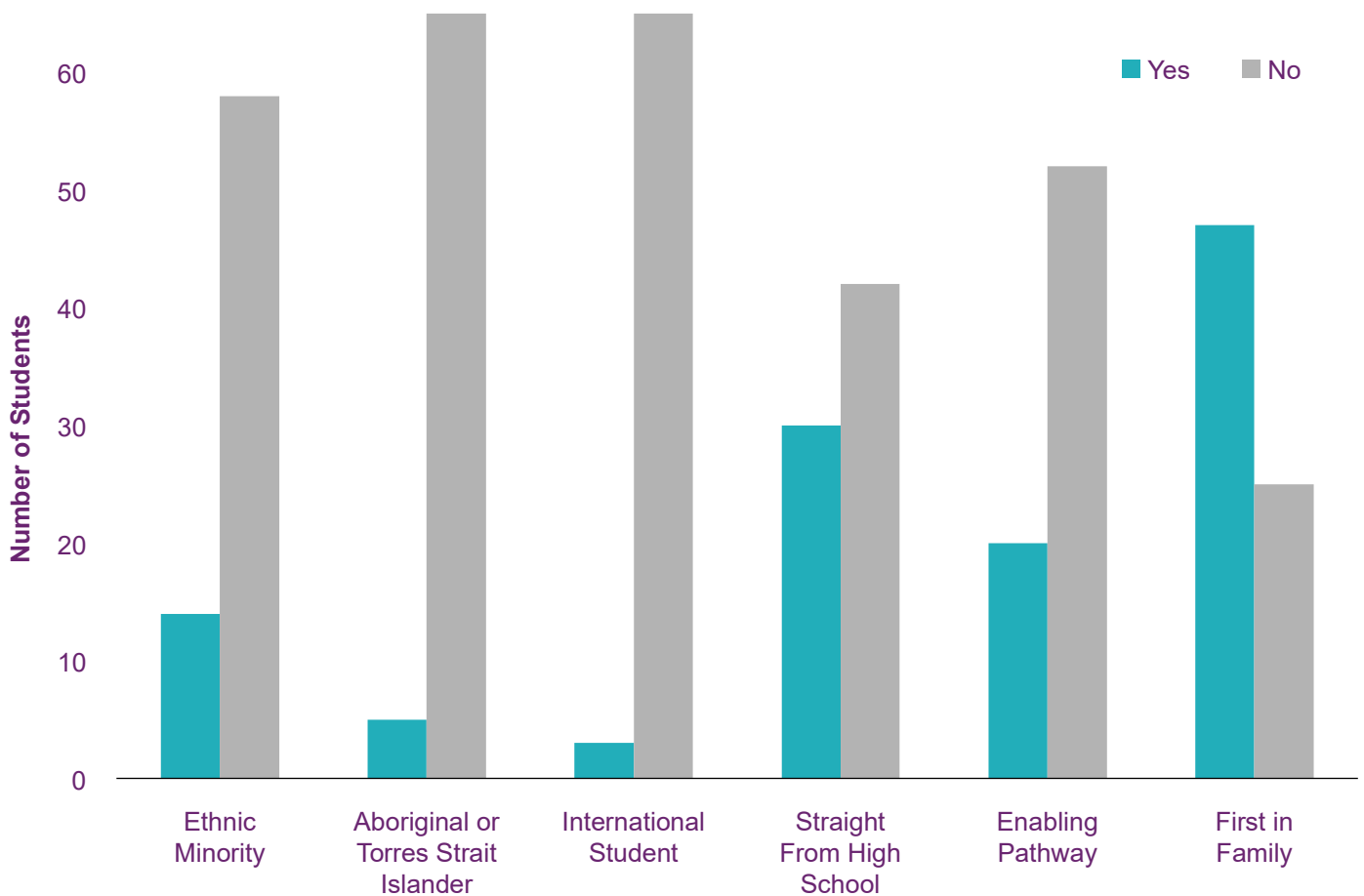
## Interviews

The interviews were conducted via Zoom or telephone due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interviews students were asked both about pre-COVID study experiences (their reflections on 2019), and also about their immediate experiences of study during early 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 disruptions. Experiences such as the rapid move to online learning, the loss of paid work, caring for children doing schooling at home while parents attempted to study – these disruptions and challenges highlighted important ongoing and systemic inequities which we discuss later in the report.

The open-ended interview questions were developed in relation to the project aims and in dialogue with the wider research literature. The qualitative team worked closely with the quantitative team in developing the interview questions to ensure connection across the two parts of the project.

The resulting interview questions explored a range of topics, including student history and journey to higher education, aspirations and goals of enrolling in higher education, perceptions of how the government and their university views student success, students' own perceptions of what constitutes success and the factors that contribute to success, sense of belonging and inclusion at university, confidence and self-esteem, the effects of time and timing on success, the importance of grades and assessments in views of success, ideas surrounding not feeling successful, and positive outcomes of university other than grades and completion. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in Appendix 1.

## Analysis

The research team participated in a collaborative approach to thematic analysis, drawing on the study's aims and research questions, qualitative literature in the field, and conceptual tools drawn from a range of sociological insights of equity in higher education. In keeping with the quantitative part of the study, the analysis focused on the multidimensions of inequality including social, cultural and economic. In relation to this, the analysis focused on six overarching themes, including 1) social connections, relations and commitments; 2) economic and educational resources; 3) cultural expectations and practices; 4) aspirations and transformations; 5) critical life events and COVID-19; and 6) understanding success. This analysis was further nuanced by drawing on intersectional theory to analyse how socio-economic inequalities interact with other structural and cultural differences to impact on students' perceptions and experiences of success and their sense of being capable and successful students.

The analysis process was iterative. The themes which emerged from thematic analyses of the first interviews that were analysed were integrated into an overall analytic framework that was used for coding the whole dataset. NVivo was used to manage and support this process. The team met regularly over Zoom and kept in contact over email to discuss additional themes and concepts that were identified as the data analysis and coding progressed, and to draw on each team member's expertise and research strengths. Emergent themes were added, removed, or merged as the analysis progressed. Policy and practical implications of the data were also drawn out and developed.

# Results: Quantitative Study

## Results: Quantitative Study

### Analytical Approach

As per our preregistered protocol and significant evidence from qualitative research about the role of socioeconomic and cultural structures in enabling and preventing equity of participation and outcomes, we predicted that four dimensions of inequality (social connections, economic resources, cultural expectations, and aspirations) will mediate the relationship between SES and views of success, given that success is a social psychological dynamic defined and experienced by context. Similar to Yzerbyt et al., (2018), we took the conservative approach of restricting our mediation tests to those cases in which (a) the predictor variable (SES) was significantly related to the outcome variable (success; see H1 in our preregistration) and (b) the predictor was significantly related to the mediator variable (social connections, economic resources, cultural expectations, or aspirations; see H2 in our preregistration). During our mediation analyses, we also confirmed that (c) the mediator variable was significantly related to the outcome variable (see H3 in our preregistration). Hence, we proceeded by identifying significant associations between (a) SES and success and (b) SES and the four dimensions of inequality.

### Predictor and Outcome Variables: SES and Success

SES had a significant but weak positive association with grades ($r = .07$, $p < .001$). Hence, students from LSESB tended to obtain lower grades than higher SES students.

Students from LSESB also tended to report applying for special provisions more often ($r = -.06$, $p = .002$). However, SES was not significantly associated with viewing special provisions as being acceptable ($r = -.01$, $p = .523$). Furthermore, participants' mean score for the acceptability of special provisions was 6.01 ($SD = 1.23$) on a 7-point scale, which was significantly higher than the neutral scale midpoint of 4.00, $t(2,664) = 84.09$, $p < .001$. Hence, on average students agreed that it was okay to ask for special provisions. Given this result, we decided to exclude applications for special provisions as an indicator of perceived success.

Regarding student engagement and participation, there was a weak negative association between SES and frequency of class attendance/listening to online recordings ($r = -.08$, $p < .001$). However, there was no significant association between SES and leaves of absence ($r = .02$, $p = .294$; one participant indicated that they had taken 600 leaves of absences, but the null association remained nonsignificant when this response was excluded). There was a positive association between SES and peer engagement ($r = .14$, $p < .001$) and a negative association between SES and frequency of handing in late assessments ($r = -.10$, $p < .001$). Hence, students from LSESB tended to report less academic engagement with other students and a greater frequency of handing in late assessments. However, there was no significant association between SES and either schoolwork engagement ($r = -.04$, $p = .073$) or cognitive engagement ($r = -.04$, $p = .026$).

With regards to belonging and identity, there was a weak positive association between SES and sense of belonging to the university community ($r = .10$, $p < .001$). However, the association with student identity was not significant ($r = .05$, $p = .016$).

In terms of feelings of success, SES had a weak positive association with mental health ($r$ = .12, $p$ < .001) and satisfaction with university ($r$ = .06, $p$ = .002) and a weak negative association with university imposterism ($r$ = -.08, $p$ < .001). Hence, students from LSESB tended to report poorer mental health, lower satisfaction with university, and greater feelings of being an imposter at university. SES had no significant associations with feelings of success ($r$ = .03, $p$ = .075), personal growth ($r$ = .03, $p$ = .089), academic self-efficacy ($r$ = .05, $p$ = .015), or perception of oneself as a role model for other students, family members, or friends ($r$ = -.05, $p$ = .006).

With regards to interpretations of success, SES had negative associations with university admission being associated with success ($r$ = -.18, $p$ < .001) and feedback being associated with failure ($r$ = -.07, $p$ = .001). Hence, students from LSESB tended to associate their admission to university with success and their feedback with failure. However, SES was unrelated to success being tied to grades ($r$ = .00, $p$ = .990).

With regards to expectations, SES was positively associated with expectations of completing university ($r$ = .08, $p$ < .001) and negatively associated with the expected length of time to finish the degree ($r$ = -.15, $p$ < .001). Hence, students from LSESB tended to be less confident that they would complete university and to think that it would take them longer to complete university than they initially expected.

Finally, in relation to attributions for success, SES was not significantly associated with students' feelings that they deserved the success that they had achieved at university ($r$ = -.01, $p$ = .763) or with an internal attribution for that success ($r$ = -.03, $p$ = .106).

In summary, students from LSESB tended to report (a) poorer grades, (b) more special provisions applications, (c) less peer engagement, (d) more late assessments, (e) a poorer sense of belonging at university, (f) poorer mental health, (g) less satisfaction with university, (h) a greater association of failure with their feedback, (i) less expectation that they would complete university, and (j) a greater belief that it would take them longer to complete university than expected. However, it is also important to note that students from LSESB reported (a) greater class attendance and (b) a greater association of university admission with success.

### Predictor and Mediator Variables: SES and the Four Dimensions of Inequality

SES showed significant associations with all aspects of social connections, economic resources, cultural expectations, and aspirations apart from paid work ($r$ = .05, $p$ = .016), witnessing discrimination at university ($r$ = -.02, $p$ = .293), and independent motivations ($r$ = .03, $p$ = .159). The significant associations between SES and the dimensions of inequality were all positive ($r$s ranged from .09 to .40, $p$s < .001) apart from that between SES and interdependent motivations, which was negative ($r$ = -.15, $p$ < .001).

## Mediation Analyses

**Table 3.** Indirect Effects of the Four Dimensions of Inequality in the Association between SES and Success Variables.

| Outcome Variable | Mediator Variable | β (SE) | 99.5% CIs |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grades | Social connections | .03 (.004) | .014 .039 |
| | Economic resources | .08 (.009) | .058, .109 |
| | CE Time for socialising | -.01 (.005) | -.030, -.002 |
| | CE Expectations about university | .01 (.003) | .005, .024 |
| Frequency of class attendance | Social connections | .02 (.004) | .009, .032 |
| | Economic resources | .04 (.010) | .017, .073 |
| | CE Family expectations | -.05 (.008) | -.071, -.025 |
| | Interdependent motivations | -.01 (.004) | -.024, -.004 |
| Peer engagement | Social connections | .11 (.014) | .073, .156 |
| | Interdependent motivations | -.02 (.003) | -.026, -.009 |
| Frequency of late assessments | Social connections | -.02 (.004) | -.029, -.008 |
| | Economic resources | -.06 (.010) | -.086, -.032 |
| Sense of belonging | Social connections | .07 (.009) | .046, .097 |
| | Economic resources | .02 (.007) | .002, .047 |
| | CE Time for socialising | .02 (.004) | .004, .029 |
| | CE Time for study | .01 (.004) | .002, .023 |
| | CE Expectations about university | .01 (.003) | .004, .020 |
| | Interdependent motivations | -.02 (.004) | -.036, -.012 |
| Mental health | Social connections | .02 (.004) | .010, .032 |
| | Economic resources | .09 (.009) | .061, .113 |
| | CE Family expectations | -.08 (.008) | -.103, -.054 |
| | CE Family support for study | .03 (.009) | .007, .055 |
| | CE Time for study | .01 (.004) | .004, .028 |
| | CE Expectations about university | .01 (.003) | .003, .017 |
| Satisfaction with university | Social connections | .04 (.006) | .025, .058 |
| | Economic resources | .05 (.009) | .028, .080 |
| | CE Time for study | .02 (.005) | .010, .036 |
| | CE Expectations about university | .02 (.004) | .006, .026 |
| | Interdependent motivations | -.02 (.004) | -.033, -.011 |
| University imposterism | Social connections | -.01 (.004) | -.022, -.003 |
| | Economic resources | -.03 (.009) | -.053, -.001 |
| | CE Family expectations | .05 (.008) | .025, .072 |
| | CE Time for socialising | -.02 (.005) | -.031, -.002 |
| | CE Expectations about university | -.02 (.004) | -.032, -.007 |

| Outcome Variable | Mediator Variable | β (SE) | 99.5% CIs |
|---|---|---|---|
| University admission as success | Social connections | .02 (.004) | .006, .026 |
| | CE Family expectations | -.04 (.008) | -.062, -.016 |
| | CE Expectations about university | -.01 (.002) | -.015, -.002 |
| | Interdependent motivations | -.04 (.006) | -.056, -.023 |
| Feedback associated with failure | Social connections | -.01 (.004) | -.022, -.003 |
| | Economic resources | -.07 (.010) | -.100, -.046 |
| | CE Time for study | -.01 (.004) | -.029, -.003 |
| | CE Expectations about university | -.01 (.003) | -.024, -.005 |
| Expecting to complete university | Social connections | .02 (.004) | .010, .033 |
| | Economic resources | .06 (.009) | .032, .085 |
| | CE Family support for university decision | .02 (.006) | .006, .043 |
| | CE Time for study | .03 (.005) | .017 .046 |
| | CE Expectations about university | .01 (.003) | .004, .021 |
| | Interdependent motivations | -.02 (.004) | -.033, -.012 |
| Expected time to complete university | Social connections | -.03 (.004) | -.040, -.014 |
| | Economic resources | -.04 (.009) | -.065, -.012 |
| | CE Time for study | -.02 (.004) | -.030, -.006 |
| | CE Expectations about university | -.01 (.003) | -.017, -.002 |

*Note.* CE = cultural expectations. Models have *df*1 = 1, *df*2 =2,663. Indirect effects are computed in parallel using 5,000 bootstrapping iterations. β = the completely standardised indirect effect. *SE* = the completely standardised bootstrapped standard error for the indirect effect. 99.5% CIs = lower and upper 99.5% bias-corrected, bootstrapped, completely standardised confidence intervals indicating significant indirect effects at *p* ≤ .005. Only significant indirect effects are reported. Consistent with Yzerbyt et al., (2018), all total effects are significant, and the mediator variable was significantly associated with the predictor and outcome variables in all cases. Italicised text indicates suppression effects, in which the association became significantly *stronger*, rather than weaker, after controlling for the mediator variable.

## Moderation Analyses

The next aim of the study was to identify whether age moderates the relations between the predictor and mediator variables in the mediations reported above. Our approach was to first test for SES and age moderation effects on the various dimensions of inequality mediators and then to check whether these SES multiplied by age moderations produced significant moderated mediation results when including the direct effect of SES on the various measures of success. In the interest of completeness, we also tested for the moderating properties of all the other demographic variables recorded in the present study.

### Moderators of SES and Personal Resources

We used PROCESS Model 1 to test gender, ethnic minority status, ATSI status, international student status, area of study, study mode (i.e., distance or on-campus) enrolment status (i.e., part time or full time), first in family status, deferment, reason for deferment, pathway to university, and age as potential moderators of the relations between SES and the dimensions of inequality mediator variables. We report the analyses involving age and deferment in the main text (the latter as robustness analyses). The analyses involving the other moderators are reported in an endnote because these analyses showed a less consistent pattern of results and hence are not explored further.[1]

Age significantly moderated the negative relation between SES and economic resources ($\beta$ = -.01, $SE$ = .002, $t$ = -3.99, $p$ = .0001, 95% CI [-.013, -.002]). The relation between SES and economic resources was positive at the 16th percentile of age, $\beta$ = .46, $SE$ = .022, $t$ = 20.84, $p$ < .0001, 95% CI [0.40, 0.52], positive but smaller at the 50th percentile of age, $\beta$ = .44, $SE$ = .020, $t$ = 21.84, $p$ < .0001, 95% CI [0.39, 0.50], and positive but smaller still at the 84th percentile of age, $\beta$ = .37, $SE$ = .022, $t$ = 16.71, $p$ < .0001, 95% CI [0.31, 0.43]. Pair-wise analyses revealed that the effect at each level was significantly different from the effect at others. Hence, the negative association between SES and economic resources became weaker among older students.

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1 SES interacted with ethnic minority status to predict family expectations ($\beta$ = 0.54, $SE$ = 0.16, $t$ = 3.31, $p$ = .0009). The positive relation between SES and family expectations was significant for members of ethnic minorities, $\beta$ = 0.69, $SE$ = .15, $t$ = 4.56, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [0.27, 1.12] and became larger for those who were not members of ethnic minorities, $\beta$ = 1.24, $SE$ = 0.06, $t$ = 20.53, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [1.07, 1.41].
SES interacted with first in family status to predict economic resources, $\beta$ = 0.13, $SE$ = 0.04, $t$ = 3.22, $p$ = .001, 99.5% CI [0.02, 0.25]. The relation between SES and economic resources was significant and positive for those who were the first in their family to attend university, $\beta$ = 0.32, $SE$ = 0.03, $t$ = 9.80, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [0.23, 0.42], and became larger for students who were not the first in their family to attend university, $\beta$ = 0.46, $SE$ = 0.02, $t$ = 18.72, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [0.39, 0.53].
SES interacted with the use of enabling pathways to university to predict interdependent motivations, $\beta$ = -0.40, $SE$ = .13, $t$ = -2.98, $p$ = .003, 99.5% CI [ -0.78, -0.02]. The relation between SES and interdependent motivations was not significant for students who took an enabling pathway to attend university ($p$ = .423). However, for students who deferred but did not take an enabling pathway to university, there was a significant negative relation between SES and interdependent motivations, $\beta$ = -0.32, $SE$ = 0.08, $t$ = -3.87, $p$ = .0001, 99.5% CI [-0.54, -0.09].
There was a significant interaction between SES and international student status to predict family expectations about university attendance, $\beta$ = 0.74, $SE$ = 0.22, $t$ = 3.29, $p$ = .001, 99.5% CI [0.11, 1.37]. The relation between SES and family expectations was not significant for international students ($p$ = .048), but this relation was positive and significant for domestic students, $\beta$ = 1.17, $SE$ = 0.07, $t$ = 19.89, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [1.00, 1.31].
SES and year of study also interacted to predict family expectations about university attendance, $\beta$ = 0.15, $SE$ = 0.05, $t$ = 2.83, $p$ = .0047, 99.5% CI [0.001, 0.290]. The relation between SES and family expectations was positive and significant at the 16th percentile of year of study, $\beta$ = 1.07, $SE$ = 0.07, $t$ = 16.34, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [0.89, 1.26], became larger at the median year of study, $\beta$ = 1.22, $SE$ = 0.05, $t$ = -22.52, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [1.07, 1.37], and then became larger still at the 84th percentile of year of study, $\beta$ = 1.36, $SE$ = 0.08, $t$ = 16.50, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [1.13, 1.596].
SES interacted with area of study to predict family support for attending university, $\beta$ = 0.37, $SE$ = 0.12, $t$ = 2.95, $p$ = .003, 99.5% CI [0.02, 0.72]. Specifically, there was a difference in the relation between SES and family support for attending university between those who were studying humanities/arts and those who were studying engineering. The relation between SES and family support was positive for those studying humanities/arts, $\beta$ = 0.54, $SE$ = 0.08, $t$ = 6.53, $p$ < .0001, 99.5% CI [0.31, 0.78], and became larger for those who were studying engineering, $\beta$ = 0.87, $SE$ = 0.14, $t$ = 3.64, $p$ = .0003, 99.5% CI [0.12, 1.91].
There were no significant interactions between SES and gender, enrolment status, ATSI status, or study mode (all $p$s ≥ .008).

Age also significantly moderated the positive relation between SES and expectations about university (β = .02, *SE* = .004, *t* = 3.97, *p* = .0001, 95% CI [.005, .029]). The relation between SES and expectations about university was positive at the 16th percentile of age, β = .15, *SE* = .049, *t* = 2.97, *p* = .0031, 95% CI [.01, .28]. The relation became larger at the 50th percentile of age, β = .18, *SE* = .045, *t* = 3.95, *p* = .0001, 95% CI [.05, .31] and larger still at the 84th percentile of age, β = .35, *SE* = .049, *t* = 7.07, *p* < .0001, 95% CI [.21, .48]. Pair-wise analyses revealed that the effect at each level was significantly different from the effect at others. Hence, the positive association between SES and expectations about university became stronger among older students.

Finally, age significantly moderated the negative relation between SES and interdependent motivations (β = .01, *SE* = .005, *t* = 3.01, *p* = .0027, 95% CI [.001, .027]). There was a significant negative relation between SES at the 16th percentile of age, β = -.38, *SE* = .053, *t* = -7.24, *p* < .0001, 95% CI [-.53, -.23] which became smaller at the 50th percentile of age, β = -.36, *SE* = .049, *t* = -7.28, *p* < .0001, 95% CI [-.49, -.22] and smaller still at the 84th percentile of age, β = -.22, *SE* = .053, *t* = -4.13, *p* < .0001, 95% CI [-.37, -.07]. Pair-wise analyses revealed that the effect at each level was significantly different from the effect at others. Hence, the negative association between SES and interdependent motivations became weaker among older students.

Age was not a significant moderator of the relations between SES and any of the other mediator variables (social connections, family expectations about attending university, family support for the decision to attend university, family support for university studies, time available for studying, time available for socialising, or independent motivations; all *p*s ≥ .010).

## Moderated Mediators of Success

Hence, to investigate the role of age in moderating the mediating role of economic resources, cultural expectations, and aspirations in the relation between SES and success, we conducted Model 7 analyses for models where economic resources, expectations about university, and interdependent motivations acted as mediator variables. A visual representation of this model is demonstrated in Figure 2. For brevity, only the significant results from these analyses have been reported (see Table 4).

When economic resources were the mediating variable, the index of moderated mediation was significant for the following outcome variables: grades, class attendance, frequency of handing in assessments late, sense of belonging, mental health, satisfaction with university, university imposterism,

seeing feedback as failure, expecting to finish university, and expected time to complete university. Thus, the results indicated that the indirect effect of economic resources was moderated: Any two conditional indirect effects estimated at different levels of age were significantly different from each other. Consistent with our prior moderation analysis, the effect of socioeconomic status on economic resources was significant at all levels of age. However, the effect became weaker as age increased. Notably, the direct effect was not significant when age was included as a moderator of the mediator of grades, frequency of handing in late assessments, sense of belonging, mental health, satisfaction with university, university imposterism, feedback as failure and expectations of completing university. In sum, the results suggest that age can be a moderator of the pathway from socioeconomic status through economic resources to various indicators of success: although the impact of socioeconomic status on economic resources remains significant across all ages, being older lessened the effect of socioeconomic status on economic resources, which then indirectly predicted various kinds of university success.

Similarly, the index of moderated mediation was significant for expectations about university and grades, sense of belonging, mental health, satisfaction with university, university imposterism, seeing admission as success, seeing feedback as failure, expecting to finish university and expected time to complete university. Thus, the results indicated that the indirect effect of expectations about university was moderated. In general, the effect of socioeconomic status on expectations about university became stronger as age increased. The interaction between socioeconomic status and age was always significant at the highest age percentile, but was not significant at the lowest for tests where grades, satisfaction with university, university imposterism, and seeing admission as success were the outcome variables. Additionally, when age was included as a moderator of the mediation of expectations about university success of satisfaction with university, the direct effect was not significant. In sum, the results suggest that age can be a moderator of the mediation pathway from socioeconomic status through expectations about university to success: being older increases the effect of socioeconomic status on expectations about university success, which then predicts various kinds of success.

There was no significant moderated mediation for models including age and interdependent motivations.

**Table 4.** Model 7 Analyses Involving Age

| Outcome | Mediator | Index of Moderated Mediation | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | β (SE) | 99.5% CIs |
| Grades | Economic resources | -0.002 (0.0001) | -0.004, -0.001 |
| | Expectations | 0.002 (0.001) | 0.0004, 0.0035 |
| Percentage Attend Class | Economic resources | -.02 (.01) | -.05, -.01 |
| | Expectations | 0.01 (0.01) | 0.001, 0.034 |
| Peer Engagement | Expectations | 0.001 (0.001) | 0.000, 0.003 |
| Late Assessment | Economic resources | 0.002 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.005 |
| Cognitive Engagement | Economic resources | -0.002 (0.001) | -0.0033, -0.0004 |
| | Expectations | 0.002 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.004 |
| Schoolwork Engagement | Economic resources | -0.001 (0.001) | -0.0031, -0.0003 |
| | Expectations | 0.002 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.004 |
| Sense of Belonging | Economic resources | -0.002 (0.001) | -0.005, -0.001 |
| | Expectations | 0.003 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.006 |
| Mental Health | Economic resources | -0.004 (0.001) | -0.007, -0.001 |
| | Expectations | 0.002 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.004 |
| Satisfaction with Uni | Economic resources | -0.003 (0.001) | -0.007, -0.001 |
| | Expectations | 0.004 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.007 |
| University Imposterism | Economic resources | 0.003 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.005 |
| | Expectations | -0.004 (0.001) | -0.008, -0.001 |
| Feeling Successful | Economic resources | -0.003 (0.001) | -0.006, -0.001 |
| | Expectations | 0.004 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.007 |
| Personal Growth | Economic resources | -0.002 (0.001) | -0.0032, -0.0004 |
| Academic Self Efficacy | Economic resources | -0.002 (0.001) | -0.004, -0.001 |
| | Expectations | 0.002 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.004 |
| Admission as Success | Economic resources | 0.001 (0.001) | 0.0002, 0.0033 |
| | Expectations | -0.001 (0.001) | -0.0036, -0.0002 |
| Feedback as Failure | Economic resources | 0.004 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.009 |
| | Expectations | -0.003 (0.001) | -0.007, -0.001 |
| Expect to Complete Uni | Economic resources | -0.003 (0.001) | -0.005, -0.001 |
| | Expectations | 0.002 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.004 |
| Degree taking longer than expected | Economic resources | 0.004 (0.001) | 0.001, 0.008 |
| | Expectations | -0.003 (0.001) | -0.007, -0.001 |
| Deserve Success | Economic resources | -0.001 (0.0004) | -0.0023, -0.0002 |
| | Expectations | 0.001 (0.0004) | 0.0003, 0.0027 |
| Internal | Expectations | .04 (.02) | .01, .09 |

*Note.* Expectations = expectations about university. Models have df1 = 1, df2 =2,662. Indirect effects are computed in parallel using 5,000 bootstrapping iterations. 99.5% CIs = lower and upper 99.5% bias-corrected, bootstrapped, completely standardised confidence intervals indicating significant indirect effects at $p ≤ .005$. Only significant moderated mediation effects are reported. All indirect effects reported are significantly different from one another at $p ≤ .005$

| | Indirect Effect | | | | | Direct Effect | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 16th Percentile | | 50th Percentile | | 84th Percentile | | | |
| β (SE) | 99.5% CIs | β (SE) | 99.5% CIs | β (SE) | 99.5% CIs | β (SE) | p | 99.5% CIs |
| .13 (0.01) | .09, .17 | .13 (.01) | .09, .16 | .11 (.01) | .07, .14 | -.02 (.03) | 0.393 | -.10, .05 |
| .02 (.01) | -.00, .03 | .02 (.01) | .01, .04 | .04 (.01) | .02, .06 | .07 (.03) | .004 | .00, .14 |
| 1.34 (.29) | .58, 2.21 | 1.30 (.28) | .57, 2.12 | 1.08 (.23) | .47, 1.76 | -3.37 (.57) | .000 | -4.98, -1.77 |
| .11 (.06) | -0.01, 0.31 | 0.14 (0.06) | 0.003, 0.343 | 0.27 (0.10) | 0.01, .060 | -2.33 (0.53) | .000 | -3.81, -0.85 |
| .01 (.01) | -.00, .03 | .01 (.01) | .00, .03 | .02 (.01) | .00, .05 | .33 (.05) | .000 | .19, .46 |
| -.14 (.02) | -.20, -.09 | -.14 (.02) | -.19, -.09 | -.11 (.02) | -.17, -.07 | -.07 (.04) | .071 | -.18, .04 |
| .10 (.02) | .05, .15 | .09 (.02) | .04, .14 | .08 (.15) | .04, .12 | -.16 (.04) | .000 | -.26, -.06 |
| .02 (.01) | -.00, .04 | .03 (.01) | .01, .05 | .05 (.01) | .03, .08 | -.10 (.03) | .002 | -.20, -.01 |
| .09 (.02) | .03, .14 | .08 (.02) | .03, .14 | .07 (.02) | .03, .12 | -.14 (.04) | .000 | -.25, -.03 |
| .02 (.01) | .00, .04 | .02 (.01) | .00, .04 | .04 (.01) | .02, .07 | -.09 (.04) | .017 | -.18, .02 |
| .15 (.02) | .09, .22 | .14 (.02) | .09, .21 | .12 (.02) | .07, .18 | .08 (.05) | .082 | -.05, .21 |
| .03 (.01) | .00, .06 | .03 (.01) | .01, .06 | .06 (.01) | .03, .10 | .18 (.04) | .000 | .06, .30 |
| .23 (.02) | .17, .28 | .22 (.02) | .17, .27 | .18 (.02) | .13, .23 | .004 (.04) | .903 | -.09, .10 |
| .02 (.01) | .00, .04 | .02 (.01) | .00, .04 | .04 (.01) | .02, .07 | .18 (.03) | .000 | .09, .28 |
| .21 (.02) | .15, .27 | .20 (.02) | .14, .26 | .17 (.02) | .11, .22 | -.06 (.04) | .138 | -.18, .06 |
| .03 (.01) | -.00, .06 | .04 (.01) | .01, .07 | .07 (.01) | .04, .11 | .08 (.04) | .036 | -.03, .19 |
| -.15 (.03) | -.23, -.09 | -.15 (.02) | -.22, -.08 | -.12 (.02) | -.19, -.07 | -.06 (.05) | .280 | -.20, .09 |
| -.04 (.01) | -.08, .00 | -.05 (.01) | -.08, -.01 | -.09 (.02) | -.14, -.05 | -.14 (.05) | .002 | -.27, -.01 |
| .18 (.02) | .12, .24 | .17 (.02) | .11, .23 | .14 (.02) | .09, .20 | -.08 (.05) | .074 | -.21, .05 |
| .03 (.01) | -.00, .07 | .04 (.01) | .01, .07 | .07 (.01) | .04, .12 | .03 (.04) | .427 | -.08, .15 |
| .09 (.02) | .04, .14 | .09 (.02) | .04, .14 | .07 (.02) | .03, .12 | -.02 (.04) | .621 | -.13, .09 |
| .12 (.02) | .08, .16 | .11 (.02) | .08, .16 | .10 (.01) | .06, .13 | -.04 (.03) | .225 | -.12, .05 |
| .02 (.01) | .00, .04 | .02 (.01) | .01, .04 | .04 (.01) | .02, .07 | .05 (.03) | .104 | -.03, .12 |
| -.08 (.03) | -.15, -.01 | -.08 (.03) | -.15, -.01 | -.07 (.02) | -.13, -.01 | -.39 (.05) | .000 | -.54, -.24 |
| -.01 (.01) | -.03, .00 | -.02 (.01) | -.04, -.00 | -.03 (.01) | -.07, -.00 | -.45 (.05) | .000 | -.59, -.31 |
| -.27 (.03) | -.35, -.19 | -.26 (.03) | -.34, -.19 | -.22 (.03) | -.29, -.15 | .08 (.05) | .118 | -.06, .22 |
| -.03 (.01) | -..06, -.00 | -.04 (.01) | -.07, -.01 | -.07 (.01) | -.11, -.04 | -.12 (.05) | .010 | -.07, -.01 |
| .15 (.02) | .10, .20 | .14 (.02) | .10, .19 | .12 (.02) | .08, .16 | -.02 (.03) | .590 | -.11, .07 |
| .02 (.01) | .00, .04 | .02 (.01) | .01, .04 | .04 (.01) | .02, .06 | .09 (.03) | .002 | .01, .17 |
| -.24 (.03) | -.33, -.15 | -.23 (.03) | -.32, -.14 | -.19 (.03) | -.27, -.11 | -.29 (.07) | .000 | -.48, -.10 |
| -.03 (.01) | -.06, -.01 | -.04 (.01) | -.07, -.01 | -.07, .02 | -.11, -.03 | -.46 (.06) | .000 | -.64, -.29 |
| .06 (.02) | .01, .11 | .06 (.02) | .01, .10 | .05 (.01) | .01, .09 | -.06 (.03) | .065 | -.16, .03 |
| .01 (.01) | .00, .03 | .01 (.01) | .00, .03 | .03 (.01) | .01, .05 | -.02 (.03) | .441 | -.11, .06 |
| .35 (15) | .01, .90 | .43 (.16) | .09, .97 | .84 (.24) | .25, 1.59 | -2.36 (1.17) | .043 | -5.64, .92 |

**Figure 2.** Visual representation of the moderated mediation effect being tested using Model 7.

## Sensitivity Analyses

The survey also asked participants to indicate whether they went to university straight from high school or whether they deferred their entry to university. Because this variable is related to age ($r = .52$, $p < .0001$), we checked whether the moderated mediations reported in Table 5 would be significant if age was replaced with the deferment variable.

As shown in Table 5, when economic resources was the mediator, the moderated mediation results where deferment was the moderator were largely consistent with the results where age was the moderator, with two exceptions. The sensitivity analyses using deferment as the moderator were nonsignificant (in contrast to the significant main analyses) when the outcome variable was (a) peer engagement (index of moderated mediation 95% CI [-0.05, 0.002]) or (b) internal attributions of success was the outcome variable (index of moderated mediation 95% CI [-0.91, 0.44]).

In contrast to the main analyses, for models where expectations about university was the mediator, none of the moderated mediations that involved deferment as the moderator were significant. Hence, these results are not reported in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Moderated Mediation Effects of Deferment on Economic Resources in the Association between Socioeconomic status and Success Variables

| Outcome | Index of Moderated Mediation | | Indirect effect | | | | Direct Effect | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | Deferred | | Did not defer | | | | |
| | b (SE) | 99.5% CIs | b (SE) | 99.5% CIs | b (SE) | 99.5% CIs | b (SE) | p | 99.5% CIs |
| Grades | -0.04 (.01) | -0.08, -0.01 | 0.09 (0.09) | 0.06, 0.13 | 0.13 (0.01) | 0.09, 0.17 | -0.02 (0.03) | .393 | -0.10, 0.05 |
| Percentage Attend Class | -0.42 (0.15) | -0.94, -0.11 | 0.91 (0.20) | 0.41, 1.57 | 1.34 (0.29) | 0.59, 2.21 | -3.37 (0.57) | <.001 | -4.98, -1.77 |
| Frequency Late Assessment | 0.05 (0.01) | 0.01, 0.09 | -0.10 (0.02) | -0.14. -0.06 | -0.14 (0.02) | -0.20, -0.09 | -0.07 (0.04) | .071 | -0.18, 0.04 |
| Cognitive Engagement | -0.03 (0.01) | -0.07, -0.01 | 0.07 (0.01) | 0.03, 0.10 | 0.10 (0.02) | 0.04, 0.15 | -0.16 (0.04) | <.001 | -0.26, -0.06 |
| Schoolwork Engagement | -0.03 (0.01) | -0.06, -0.01 | 0.06 (0.01) | 0.02, 0.10 | 0.09 (0.02) | 0.03, 0.14 | -0.14 (0.04) | <.001 | -0.25, -0.03 |
| Sense of Belonging | -0.05 (0.01) | -0.09, -0.01 | 0.10 (0.02) | 0.06, 0.15 | 0.15 (0.02) | 0.08, 0.21 | 0.08 (0.05) | .082 | -0.05, 0.21 |
| Mental Health | -0.07 (0.02) | -0.13, -0.02 | 0.15 (0.02) | 0.11, 0.20 | 0.22 (0.02) | 0.16, 0.29 | 0.00 (0.03) | .903 | -0.09, 0.10 |
| Satisfaction with Uni | -0.07 (0.02) | -0.13, -0.02 | 0.12 (0.02) | 0.10, 0.20 | 0.21 (0.02) | 0.14, 0.28 | -0.06 (0.04) | .138 | -0.018, 0.06 |
| University Imposterism | 0.05 (0.02) | 0.01, 0.10 | -0.10 (0.02) | -0.16, -0.06 | -0.15 (0.03) | -0.23, -0.08 | -0.06 | .280 | -0.20, 0.09 |
| Feeling Successful | -0.06 (0.0) | -0.11, -0.01 | 0.12 (0.02) | 0.08, 0.17 | 0.17 (0.02) | 0.11, 0.25 | -0.08 (0.04) | .074 | -0.21, 0.05 |
| Personal Growth | -0.03 (0.01) | -0.06, -0.01 | 0.06 (0.01) | 0.02, 0.10 | 0.09 (0.02) | 0.04, 0.14 | -0.02 (0.04) | .621 | -0.13, 0.09 |
| Academic Self-Efficacy | -0.04 (0.01) | -0.07, -0.01 | 0.08 (0.01) | 0.05, 0.12 | 0.12 (0.02) | 0.08, 0.17 | -0.04 (0.03) | .225 | -0.12, 0.05 |
| Admission as Success | 0.03 (0.01) | 0.003, 0.061 | -0.05 (0.02) | -0.11, -0.01 | -0.08, 0.02 | -0.13, -0.01 | -0.39 (0.05) | <.001 | -0.54, -0.24 |
| Feedback as Failure | 0.08 (0.02) | 0.02, 0.15 | -0.18 (0.02) | -0.25, -0.12 | -0.27 (0.03) | -0.35. -0.19 | 0.08 (0.05) | .118 | -0.06, 0.22 |
| Expect to Complete Uni | -0.05 (0.01) | -0.09, -0.01 | 0.10 (0.01) | 0.06, 0.14 | 0.15 (0.02) | 0.10, 0.20 | -0.02 (0.03) | .590 | -0.11, 0.07 |
| Degree taking longer than expected | 0.07 (0.02) | 0.02, 0.15 | -0.16 (0.02) | -0.24, -0.10 | -0.24 (0.03) | -0.33, -0.15 | -0.29 (0.07) | <.001 | -0.48, -0.10 |
| Deserve Success | -0.02 (0.01) | -0.04, -0.003 | 0.04 (0.01) | 0.01, 0.08 | 0.06 (0.02) | 0.02, 0.11 | -0.06 (0.03) | .065 | -0.16, 0.03 |

*Note.* Models have $df1 = 1$, $df2 = 2,662$. Coefficients are unstandardised. Indirect effects are computed in parallel using 5,000 bootstrapping iterations. 99.5% CIs = lower and upper 99.5% bias-corrected, bootstrapped, confidence intervals indicating significant indirect effects at $p \leq .005$. Only significant moderated mediation effects are reported.

# Results: Qualitative Study

## Results: Qualitative Study

The qualitative investigation allowed us to explore in more depth the motivations, aspirations and understandings of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds of success. The in-depth interviews uncovered a rich picture of the lived experience of university for these students, and the values and goals that allowed them to navigate the many challenges they faced. In their own words[1] students clearly articulate the resources that help them achieve success, and the stresses and adverse events that they felt undermined their potential to engage at university. Many voices and varied experiences were illuminated through this research, however there were clear unifying themes that came to the fore. These have been organised into the five chapters that follow:

### Chapter 1: Understanding success

> I think generally governments use a lot of data to monitor population, so I think it's reasonable to a point, from a government perspective. From a people perspective, it's not really an effective way I think; I think there needs to be a balance between what is a monetary success and what is a statistical success and what is actually a personal success. (Stephanie)

This opening chapter reports on students' views of success at university, as well as their understanding of how government and higher educational institutions construct student success. As indicated in our quantitative results, for many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, student success is conceived around the very fact of their presence at university; engaging meaningfully with their courses and interacting with tutors. Success is also understood as connected to learning and personal growth, and with accessing knowledge that allows them to effect change in their community.

### Chapter 2: Social connections, relation and commitments

> it's been lovely to build relationships and rapport with a new community of people. (Anna)

This chapter explores how students' family and friendship networks impact on their experience at university. From support, to discouragement, an asset or a distraction, students speak about their relationships both on and off campus and how these have impacted their student lives.

### Chapter 3: Economic and educational resources

> still now will have to prioritise work sometimes and not go to class… when I was probably 18, 19, if I hadn't brought food from home I wouldn't be eating all day because I couldn't really afford to buy food so that probably didn't have a positive impact… (Chloe)

In this chapter students speak about how inadequate financial support impacts on their experience at university. They discuss the problems of long work hours in order to support themselves, and the difficulty of juggling between work and study. The chapter also explores the impact of scholarships, and the positive impact of these for those students who were able to access adequate and timely information that allowed them to apply. Finally, the chapter looks at the experience of enabling programs that assist students to enter university through non-traditional pathways.

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1 Participants have been anonymised and assigned a pseudonym by researchers. Select demographic information about each participant can be accessed in Appendix 2.

## Chapter 4: Cultural expectations, relations and practices

> having the proper etiquette that you should have, talking to someone who's done a PhD or is a professor … When I'm communicating with them, they seem to respond better if you communicate with them with the respect that they're entitled to. (Callan)

This section explores the ways in which students, many of whom are the first in their family to undertake higher education, envisage university life, and how this compares with their experiences. More broadly the section gives voice to students' experience of the cultural dimensions of university in relation to their own values and sense of identity. Students speak about how the prevailing culture on campus impacts their sense of self and either fosters or impedes the creation of a sense of belonging.

## Chapter 5: Aspirations and transformations

> I want to make those connections so that that changes their life because I've experienced that in my own life, and the empowerment of being able to access those difficult to access connections. I guess that's what I'd like to do... It was a motivator from the beginning… (Marcus)

In this chapter students speak about what drove them to higher levels of education, and what motivates them to continue in the face of stresses and obstacles. Many students articulate a broad vision of the worth of higher education, often connected to their desire to empower those around them and, consistent with the quantitative results, to contribute to their families and their communities.

## Chapter 6: Critical life events + COVID-19

> It's in terms of the amount of time and the amount of mental capacity that you have – if you have an essay, it's like okay, the essay is important, but also having a place to sleep next week is probably more important, so trying to have to deal with that, yeah, in terms of stress levels and in terms of time and in terms of exhaustion basically. (Caitlin)

The final chapter explores the impacts of critical events outside of students' control, and how these affect the capacity to succeed at university. Events like eviction, chronic illness, and family crisis are seen to exacerbate existing inequalities and cause major disturbance to study, with potentially long-term impact on students' capacity for success. Students discuss these episodes, and the kind of support that help them to retain a positive relationship with the university and their studies.

## Introducing our participants

In the chapters that follow we are use pseudonyms to refer to the 72 students we interviewed for this element of the project. Demographic information about participants is summarised in the Qualitative Methodology section and Appendix 2. Here are some brief examples of students we spoke to:

- "Stephanie" is a 37-year-old second year health sciences student, and the first in her family to attend university. She studies part-time at an outer-metropolitan university.
- "Anna" is a 40-year-old Arts student, from a regional university. She came to university through an enabling program and is in her third year, studying full-time.
- "Chloe" is a 26-year-old criminology and law student. She deferred university and is now studying full-time.
- "Callan" is a 28-year-old fourth-year psychology honours student.
- "Marcus" is a 52-year-old social science student. He is the first in his family to attend university, and he came through an enabling program.
- "Caitlin" is a 22-year-old psychology student who studies full-time at a regional university.
- "Brooke" is a 36-year-old nursing student. She came to university through an enabling program, and is the first in her family to attend university.
- "Tyler" is a 22-year-old economics/arts student. He is the first in his family to attend university.
- "Dean" is a 21-year-old psychology student, the first in his family to attend university. Dean is Aboriginal, and also belongs to an ethnic minority community. Dean came to university through an enabling course.
- "Ji-hoon" is a physiotherapy student. His family is from a minority ethnic community, and he is the first in his family to attend university.

## Chapter 1: Understanding Success

This chapter explores success in relation to two overarching high-level themes. The first theme focuses on how students articulated success, including conceiving of success as being about learning, development and growth; success being about life satisfaction; and finally, how 'lack' of success translates on an individual lived level. The second overarching theme unpacks the multiple dimensions of success, paying particular attention to how university, government and individual learner's conceptions of success can be different. In our recommendations, we offer ways for more connection and a more holistic understanding, in order to better represent what being a successful student is for students. Importantly, understandings of success, and what is considered valuable, were considered to be evolving, given that the world and individuals undergo change. Success is not static and fixed.

It is important to note that the students in this study reflected upon success in terms of both the personal and the political. In part, this may have been related to the period this study occurred in, during 2020, when the Australian government proposed and passed the 'Job Ready Graduates Package,' a complex set of reforms to Commonwealth funding of higher education to 'help drive the nation's economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic' (DESE 2020). Hoping to steer enrolments towards courses which support national priorities (for example, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)), student contributions for those courses were reduced, while costs for courses which were not named as a national priority (e.g. Arts) increased. As we shall see below, some students commented about the impact of the legislation, particularly what they saw as the government's ascription of value to some fields of study, and not others.

## Students' Understandings of Success

> Academic success isn't the only kind of success. (Stephanie)

The notion that there are multiple conceptions of success came through strongly in the data. This section examines students' understandings of success under three overarching themes:

• Success as learning, development and growth
• Success as about life satisfaction
• Considering perceptions of 'lack' of success

### Success as Development and Growth

For some students, success at university was conceived as being about growing and developing as a person, for example, 'I always want to try and become a better person' (Emily) and 'it's what students learn in their degrees, the professional and personal development what is really "student success"' (Dominique). The emphasis seemed related to a need for this development to occur in a positive way:

> [University has] taken that person from not a fantastic place to somewhere else, so that was "success" to me… that blossoming of that person out of that whole. (Polly)

However, it is important not to reduce individual development and growth as the focus, without recognising the importance of the structures around them. Such individualisation ignores the material and social circumstances of the individual and perpetuates the myth of everyone having 'equal' access to opportunity.

Individualising success came across in some of the ways that students talked about being unsuccessful. Lack of success was sometimes ascribed to individual traits such as lack of motivation or poor engagement, as explained by Matthew: 'I guess a way to describe that would be a student that would be lazy but not motivated to get better and not doing well.' Individualisation was also identified when success was defined as achieving and accomplishing one's own goals, which in some cases might diverge from vocational or academic objectives:

> For me, "student success" is being able to complete what you've set out to achieve and being happy in yourself with what you've achieved. It's not so much about if you've got a better job than someone else – it's about whether you're happy internally with what you've done. (Emily)

Accomplishing such personal goals was also not necessarily bounded by course content; instead success also resides 'outside' of actual course content, reflecting broader experiences:

> gaining friends and peers, learning about different people, learning a huge variety of things that aren't included in the course. (Brooke)

> how well you… make connections and enjoying the [university] community. (David)

These more expansive notions of success reflect how it was weaved throughout the university experience rather than conceived of narrowly in relation to grades or assessments.

### Success is About Life Satisfaction

In addition to success being conceived as learning, development and growth, participants also reflected on success as being highly emotive. Participants in this study described how success was embodied in a sense of self, most commonly related to happiness, enjoyment and contentment in life. Relating success to emotions is perhaps unsurprising but the positive emotional attributes that students described are often elided in institutional discourses concerning academic success. Instead, too often, success is automatically measured in terms of good grades, gaining employment or achieving goals. This is not to say that the participants in this study did not mention these things but rather, it was often much more fundamental changes in 'feelings' that were considered when asked to define success:

> it's not just good grades but like something that you enjoy doing. (Stephen)

> I just feel content with what I'm doing. (Tyler)

> at the end of the day, if I can sit down on the couch at night time and feel content and happy, that's "success" for me. (Emily)

Related to this definition was the ways in which 'success' was conceived in terms of 'personal fulfilment' (Dominique). This was sometimes referenced in terms of gaining work or qualifications but equally, could be more expansive, including what was termed as finding 'your calling':

> I had a friend who withdrew from social work in the first year and I don't think that she was unsuccessful… she was successful because she found that this was not her calling. She went into environmental science so that was her calling. (Dominique)

> She's just blossoming and really, she's found her calling and to me, that's her success at uni. (Jaelynn)

Success in finding this 'calling' was often linked to the notion of 'giving back' or contributing in meaningful ways to the community.

I'd love to help young people and as soon as I'm able to do that I will see myself as "successful". (Ashley)

success now for me is based on the impact that you leave on the people around you and making people happy – the soft things about life, the things you can't… the non-tangibles that really matter. (Tyler)

Finally, and importantly, students identified that understandings about success were both fluid and evolving, not something that remained fixed. Instead as Dominique explained, *'it's an ever-changing term'.* This fluidity suggests that as students' progress through their degrees, conceptions of success may also ebb and flow. From an institutional perspective, adopting more expansive and evolving notions of success is perhaps key to ensuring that this term reflects the actual viewpoints of students rather than assumed perspectives.

I'm not really specific with "success"; it's not like I want to have X amount of dollars and a certain type of car and a house by a certain age. It's more like they're personal goals along the way. (Camilla)

### Considering 'Lack' of Success

Despite variations in understandings around what success is, the achievement of it was wholly regarded as something to be celebrated. Whereas 'lack' of success (failure) was exclusively described in negative terms and individualised. Failing was defined in relation to personal actions or attributes such as 'giving up, not trying, not engaging' (Kiara) or 'not getting involved in a uni society or something like that' (Kathy). The responsibility for enacting success then was attributed to the individual learner, it was only those who 'wasted this opportunity to learn' (Jaelynn) or were 'not trying your best' (Dominique) that ultimately experienced failure. For Tyler, failing was the direct result of an individual not being 'involved' and /or 'doesn't really try very hard with their grades.'

Lack of success was also described in terms of recognising that your occupational goal or ambition was not suitable. For example, Matthew explained how being unsuccessful was ultimately about 'end[ing] up stuck in a job that you don't like to do, you hate doing, I mean how can anyone really call that "successful"?'. Such a realisation was conceived by Rikki as being somewhat 'wasteful' because: 'you're not contributing better to your society…you're not expressing any kind of passion in what you're doing'. This perception was echoed by Maddison: 'I don't think you should go through like a minimum of three years uni to do a job that you don't think you'll like'.

### Contested views of Success

The student data indicate differences in how students conceive of success and the ways in which institutions and government policy present it. For the participants in this study, university and government definitions generally rested upon dehumanised ideas of success, whereas for the students themselves, success was overwhelmingly multidimensional, personal and embodied in a sense of personhood.

The juxtaposition between students' personal conceptions and the ways in which university or government perspectives of success is outlined under three overarching themes:

- Government perceptions of success
- University perceptions of success
- Failure as success.

### Government Perceptions of Success

According to the participants in this study, the government's perceptions of success rested upon three key factors namely 1) the completion of a degree, 2) the acquisition of employment, and 3) financial gain.

Completion of university and attainment of a degree was identified as core to what represented a 'successful' student from the government's perspective. As both Jaelynn and Dominique explained:

I think in the government eyes, "student success" is mainly focused on completion of university. (Dominique)

I think they probably define it in terms of passing rates or graduation rates and in terms of job attainment at the end. (Jaelynn)

These participants and others in the study articulated how success was often simply equated to movement into the workforce, with obtaining employment key to government perspectives on academic success:

Definitely hiring out of uni – that's definitely important to the government. They probably don't look at GPA; they probably look at how many jobs were created this year or how many jobs were filled this year in different fields. (Saben)

In these cases, a successful student progressed swiftly from university to employment, becoming 'industrious as soon as possible' (Dean) and also 'employable so that you can pay them back'. A 'successful' student was then conceived as providing 'benefits [to] the economy, and ultimately repays their university loan' (Emily).

Participants also felt that the government valued some graduates over others, deeming them more successful because they could contribute to national priorities. Repeatedly, including Gila, Tyler, Scott, Hayley, Konrad, students referred to values within the Australian Government's 'Job Ready Graduates Package' which reduced the cost of studying STEM courses but increased student contribution fees for degrees in the Arts and Humanities fields. These funding changes had a profound impact on how students saw the government's notion of success with many students highlighting the political nature of it.

> the government sees "student success" exclusively through the lens of being a productive member of society through careers... I feel like the government doesn't really view university as anything more than a capitalism machine. (David)

The participants acutely perceived the government's valuing of some occupations over others. 'I think with the government, it really depends on faculty even on what kind of student and what you've studied… like anthropologist and social students, they're very undervalued as opposed to students who have done law and all the social stereotypically big courses' (Hayley). For Konrad, there was also a sense that if students studied an un-valued degree, even once completed and working, that they would not be deemed a 'successful' university student in the eyes of the government.

> I think the government's determination of "success" at uni is being in one of the upper-class subjects rather than being in something that's arts-related or anything. So, I think if their definition excluded those degrees and focused on engineering, science, health – if you finish that, you're successful, versus that can't be applied to an arts student. (Konrad)

The explicit promotion of some degrees over others in official discourse was seen by Konrad as undermining the notion that he could be seen as contributing successfully to society even if he excelled in his studies and graduated into employment.

Indeed, many students saw the government as overlooking the individual and personal, in favour of statistics and averages. Students described government perceptions of success as residing in 'raw data' (Peter), 'statistics' (Stephen), and 'graphs and charts and numbers and stuff without taking into account people and their feelings' (Amanda).

> Realistically, I'd probably think it's something to do with average grades and average scores and whatnot – nothing to do with individual students

kind of thing, more like an average total of the whole kind of thing. (Stephen)

The absence of lived experience, and students' voices, in metric-based approaches to measuring success tends to create a "dehumanising" affect – it is a largely disembodied account of the nature of success on real lives, as Stephen articulates here. The dehumanising nature of these perceived notions of success was clear in many survey and interview responses. While the collection of "big data" about student outcomes holds some value for policymakers, government and university management, according to the participants in this study, such understandings only presented a partial understanding of the nature of academic success.

> I think generally governments use a lot of data to monitor population, so I think it's reasonable to a point, from a government perspective. From a people perspective, it's not really an effective way I think; I think there needs to be a balance between what is a monetary success and what is a statistical success and what is actually a personal success. (Stephanie)

## University Perceptions of Success

According to the participants in this study, students regard universities' ideas of success as being related to similar things as government: the completion of a degree and graduates securing employment. This perspective was recognised in terms of the ways that universities chose to market themselves and attract new enrolments in a competitive global education market:

> I think they would also use the 'being employed' as success – you often see ads for uni saying, you know, "90 percent of students found a job after graduating", all that, so that's what I think they see it as. (Callan)

The emphasis was on success as benefitting the reputation and positioning of the university rather than the student population. References to league tables, financial recompense and also, good completion rates, abounded in the interviews and surveys:

> It's more about "We're the top two percent in this", you know. (Christopher)

> the university is a business and I don't think they particularly care if one person gets an 80 or a 70; they care that "Did you complete the course to its end, because I get the most money that way". (Ryan)

> I feel the university isn't necessarily about the students, to be honest. I know this is hard to say really; I think "success" for them means funding. (Ashley)

In addition to the macro attributes of completion, employment and money, participants saw universities as conflating good grades or 'performing well on paper' (Emily) with student success. The focus on these tangible markers was articulated across participant accounts with success from the perspective of the institution being conflated with 'getting good grades, completing work; that's succeeding' (Madison) and also, 'distinction average, everything on time'.

For some of these participants, this reliance on marks or grades suggested that their own self-fulfilment or personal achievement was less valuable than the reputation of the institution, as one student described: 'I really think it's just good grades – from my opinion, from what I get the feel of the university, it's just what makes the university looks good' (Dylan). However, importantly it was those universities that managed to conceive as success in both global and individual terms that stood out for participants; that is, equally valuing rankings and statistics alongside student wellbeing.

> one thing that stuck out for me was [University C's] success picture isn't just about numbers; it's actually more the wellbeing of students'. (Dominique)

> it does feel like the university itself values education and enrichment more than just what it can do in terms of career-wise, if that makes sense. (David)

> I think they would definitely take into like having a good mental health of students, making sure that they're not overloaded, or overwhelmed with work, having a good work/social/study balance if you did work as well – that kind of stuff. (Antonia)

The awareness and appreciation of how success could be conveyed by institutions was clearly summed up by one participant who had attended two different institutions, experiencing contrasting attitudes towards student success:

> the vibe I get from [University F] is that they are about transforming and breaking cycles, particularly in the [outer metropolitan suburban] context; they see "success" as helping someone achieve something they never thought they could like transforming the refugee's life into a happy successful member of society or transforming someone who comes from a low income family or a low educational attainment family into someone who has a degree. Whereas that's not the feeling I got somewhere like [an elite university]. [That elite university] felt

more like you're a success if you graduate with honours and then become an academic. Yep, totally different mindset; I feel like [University F] sees you as a whole person more so and they're trying to equip you for life more so than just getting a job at the end. (Jaelynn)

The participants in this study had sophisticated understandings of success, including interpreting both university and government actions in this regard. Many of these participants deliberately located themselves in opposition to these perceptions, refusing to be positioned solely as a statistic or as a worker. Undoubtedly, a tension exists between these varying perspectives, which questions the taken for granted or assumed nature of this term.

### Failure as Success

> I kind of also don't feel like failing is necessarily a failure. (Stephanie)

The term 'failure' was also contested by participants in this study. Most students agreed that success could come from failure and so was not failure at all. For example, withdrawing from a course was not considered a failure but a chance to redefine self or focus on another area of life. A number of the participants considered how the act of failing was key to learning and also, developing as a person. For example, Stephanie described how repeating a subject could translate into **'deeper understanding'**, a sentiment echoed by Matthew), who conceived failing as offering 'the chance to find out what went wrong and you can grow from that, I feel like you can get some success from a negative experience'.

Failing was intricately bound up with success, one seemingly could not exist independent to the other, with participants reflecting how the act of failing had brokered rich learnings about themselves and their goals:

> I was having that negative experience for the first two years of university. I thought, "I need to learn from my past experiences and just work on those" and that's what I did and here I am, just doing pretty well in all my subjects so far, enjoying it. (Simon)

> Yeah, I had those failures but that doesn't make me a failure of a student; it just means that I need to do more, I need to put more effort in it, I need to learn from those experiences. (James)

Repeatedly in interviews and surveys, a delineation between how failure was constructed by institutional or political discourses and how this act was determined by individual learners was highlighted. For the participants in this study, the act of failing or being unsuccessful needed to be contextualised or informed by wider social and economic factors, rather than simply attributed to the perceived limitations of the learner:

> I reckon it's different because there could be any number of reasons…if you just don't have the time or if you need to go… like if you have to work for a year or two full-time to save up more money to be able to continue your course. (Matthew)

> you failed because the circumstances haven't been there to allow you to pass, whatever they happen to be – if they're mental health issues or work or whatever. So I kind of think they go hand in hand but they're viewed differently. (Callan)

> Some people might be more realistic too when it comes to "my intentions initially were to do uni, turns out university isn't for me. I'm dropping out and going into the workforce". I don't think that's a failure either; I think that's reasonable and rational. (Ryan)

The concept of success is often unquestioned and assumed to have a common or global definition. For instance, the Federal Department of Education, Skills and Employment provides "Student success, completions and retention data… on the department's website" (DESE 2018). The student success data being referred to here is the publication of a "success rate" which is defined as measuring "…academic performance by comparing the equivalent fulltime student load (EFTSL) of units passed to the EFTSL of units attempted" (DESE 2021). In other words student success is commensurate with the number of course units students pass. This is one indicative example of the way in which student success is often understood and quantified by policymakers, as is reflected in the public common sense understanding.

In contrast, the students we interviewed held views about student success that cover far broader arenas of accomplishments and that evoke a range of emotional and structural considerations specific to their lives and backgrounds. The multidimensional and contested nature of success is clearly evident in the ways that students understood this concept as well as how they saw it was perceived by both political and educational bodies.

## Chapter 2: Social connections, relations and commitments

This section of the report outlines how participants conceived the impact of their relationships and commitments on their experiences of success. The effect of family on students' success was revealed as both complex and variable, while social and peer relations were described primarily as aiding students' motivation and confidence levels and fostering sense of belonging. Many participants also spoke about the opportunities that higher education participation provides and the empowering impact of developing critical knowledge, critical awareness and strong social connections.

Many participants spoke about the benefits of engaging with extra-curricular activities and their desire for social networking. These pursuits, however, were acknowledged as requiring time, which was described as a 'luxury'. Students talked about the recurrent requirement to engage in paid work in order to 'make ends meet' and the compounding impact of an inadequate focus on their education accordingly. These narratives expose the lived impact of systemic, structural inequalities experienced by many students from LSESB who have a desire to fully engage with higher education but lack the privilege do so.

## Family Impact on Success

Many participants in this study affirmed that their family has a strong and sustained impact on their success at university. This began by influencing their decision to enrol at university and in most instances, support has been maintained throughout their degree. Charles remarked that "there was never a doubt" he would attend university which, "I think stems from my parents' influence". He explained, "my grandad's an engineer, my uncle's an engineer. My parents wanted me to, so I tried it." Gila described her family as her "biggest support. My dad went to university. Sometimes if I'm feeling frustrated…he just has anecdotal funny stories to cheer me up and reassure me... I think encouragement is probably their biggest help." Other students positioned their family members as "the best resources...I find myself asking my sister a lot and…she sort of leads me into different directions of how to approach a problem." These narratives support research that "hot knowledge" (access to informal networks of information, advice and knowledge) and support which derives from families, are key influences of academic success (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Mishra, 2020).

Some participants, however, spoke about 'differences' within their families which presented as a challenge for study. Rhys explained how his family perceived higher education as "a waste of time". Others experienced considerable pressure to "go straight into the workforce and get straight to work". Brooke said:

> My family's more trade-oriented so we were really discouraged from going to university. I was pretty much told I wasn't smart enough to go to uni. I wasn't forced, but I was really heavily encouraged to go do an apprenticeship instead. (Brooke)

Even when family was explained as supportive of the student's decision, some participants perceived that their family's unfamiliarity with the requirements of university created challenges for their success. Dylan commented:

> I'd like to say I have a lot of support at home in terms of university but I don't really. It's a weird space to navigate at home because they haven't gone to university, my parents… It was quite difficult… my parents do support me but I guess they just don't understand how I can be really tired and I guess, like when I say to them, 'I can't do anything for the next couple of days'. (Dylan)

It is crucial to understand students' and their family's perceptions of higher education participation in relation to structural, historical and cultural inequalities that play out inter-generationally. Aspirations are not just hopes but comprise complex histories and structures that shape understandings of what is possible within a given context (Burke, 2012). Families are unequally positioned economically, socially and symbolically, placing different pressures and concerns on the future directions they consider possible and sensible for their children. Inter-generational underrepresentation and/or exclusion from higher education creates the conditions by which families are unfamiliar with the requirements of higher education, limiting access to "hot knowledge". Indeed, most families want 'the best' for their children, but negative, exclusionary and inequitable experiences of education will inevitably shape their relationship to their child's educational journey. What was perceived by some of the participants as a lack of support must then be contextualised in relation to the historical inequities experienced by students' parents and families.

Despite the ongoing impact of social, economic and cultural inequalities, other students reasoned that the absence of their parents' qualifications drove their support, with the idea that university education will 'open up doors' that were closed to them. Gila remarked:

> Well, my mum, the highest qualification that she was able to attain was a TAFE certificate; but something she always really encouraged was to make sure that my sister and I both went into university… she found that she was denied a lot of opportunities just because she didn't have a degree in a certain field so she was always quite adamant that my sister and I would go to uni. (Gila)

This reveals that understanding the relationship of family to student equity and success is complex and not easily categorised. For example, while students who are the first-in-family to attend university did speak more frequently about the challenges that family can present when studying, equally, there were many students whose parents were not university educated but were described as essential to their success. This reveals the unequal positions of families in higher education, yet that social position will not guarantee the way that families understand their children's educational futures. Adding to this complexity, Hayley spoke about the "pressure" from her university-educated parents to succeed. This was explained as impactful, but not supportive. As she explained, "they both expected us to always go to university. They had the other options there but it was never really on the table. It was like 'University is your only pathway so you'd better get this grade!" (Hayley).

Research suggests that socio-economic status and parents' education is a strong predictor of students' educational expectations and achievement (Trusty, 1998; Wilson & Wilson, 1992). At the same time, the aspirations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are purported as being shaped by parents' aspirations for them (Marjoribanks, 1986). These findings however, are simplistic and reinforce deficit views that students' backgrounds and socio-economic status can shape their 'performance' in higher education and therefore their 'right' to be there (Burke, 2012). These findings do not take into account that family influence on students' success is complex and variable, even amongst students from one singular equity group, as our data reveals. Family background and parents' aspiration is one dimension that can impact students' success but educational outcomes for any individual are varied. As such, the likelihood of accurately predicting student success based on one dimension is unworkable.

## Friendships and Success

When reflecting on success in higher education, many students explained that the friendship groups made at university contributed significantly to their success. In particular, friends were described by most participants as providing valuable study support and an approachable, fun way of investigating learning topics. James, for example, explained how he would, "collaborate regularly with friends made at university and talk to them about points and flesh out general ideas." Domonique stated that, "talking with another person about the subject material…really helps to not only facilitate learning but wellbeing. Without those supports I wouldn't have been as successful". Friends were also identified as key motivators; "we study together and we can push each other, you know, "Have you done all your work this week?" and push each other to do better".

Friendships also provided important emotional support which led to feelings of capability and belonging at university. For example, when reflecting on his study groups, Ryan said they "definitely helped with the confidence". Dean remarked that because of friendships made, "I feel a sense of community and I'm not alone". In some instances, friendships were described as impactful in both the institutional setting and beyond. Page commented that, "I made friends that are family to me, so that's definitely a great thing. I also got more comfortable with myself and then, on top of that, I got comfortable going on public transport for the first time".

While most students spoke about the impact of friendships on their success, others went further to explain that friendships were a key marker of their success. James said, "all my friends that I have now are thanks to university and the indicators for my success." Brooke explained, "when I have fellow students come in ask me for advice, I feel like that's a determination of success. When I have people messaging me all the time, asking me for help, I feel like I'm more in a higher level of success when I do that". When Caitlin was asked for her own definition of success, she said, "being able to communicate and feeling confident and … having friends – all those things I think are pretty good markers of success".

While the majority of students spoke positively regarding friendships in higher education, it is important to note that a small number positioned peer interaction as a barrier. Robert spoke of the "distracting" nature of friends to his studies and having to "learn how to say "no" to hanging out". This was more common among younger students who were experiencing some angst in wanting to "go out and party more". Others, though, described themselves as introverted yet framed this in deficit terms or as a character flaw. In particular, isolation whether by

choice or not, seemed to exacerbate feelings of not belonging at university. When students talked about friendships, there was a common view that university and socialising are inextricably linked. A discourse of university culture as "a big, fun kind of like party, [where you] make so many friends", where "social life becomes university", appeared to normalise social behaviour and situate those who were less social as 'different'. Sierra alluded to her feelings of not belonging when she said, "Everyone seems to form friendship groups – there's a lot more people more outgoing than I am, and I'm too awkward, [but], "Hi, I'm here too". Matthew spoke of how "hard" it is to learn in a tutorial setting as "I don't really talk to people all that often and so working in large groups can be a bit of a challenge for me." Another student said, I could have included myself more but …it's just a challenge…I don't feel like I was ever purposefully excluded; I think it just is what it is."

Current university measures do not take full account of the nature and importance of the procurement of friendships, when determining successful student outcomes in higher education. Connell (2019) argues that the development of friendships that lead to academic collaboration, are very underrated by university policymakers. She feels "dismay" at reading course guides which open with stern warnings against plagiarism, suggesting that "what course guides would be doing, if a university is working well, is encouraging mutual aid and collective learning" (Connell, 2019). Researchers have argued that friendship is a "crucially important" dimension of student experience and equity that requires critical attention (Read, Burke & Crozier, 2018). Although institutional approaches might be constrained to some extent, it remains significant that universities to create environments that enable students to forge and experience supportive peer relations and friendships during their studies.

Indeed many students we interviewed attributed, and even partly defined their success in higher education, by their peer interactions. Friendships were also explained as impacting participants' confidence and feelings of belonging and capability. Friendships also provide an important emotional support within the potentially demanding university environment (Read, Burke & Crozier, 2018). Support that fosters these qualities are vital for providing greater equity for students from under-represented backgrounds, including low socio-economic backgrounds (Burke et al., 2016; Hollinsworth; et al., 2020; Rubin, 2012a).

It is vital that governments and institutions recognise that friendships can provide many students essential support, and adopt policies and practices that foster the development of student relationships accordingly. This could begin with policy that enables students with

a greater lifeload (in other words a way of recognising the multiple commitments, including paid and unpaid labour and caring commitments, that students from LSESB might be navigating) to study part time yet still receive financial assistance. At an institutional level, campuses could be organising more events around a particular discipline, creating creative study spaces, or promoting pedagogies that highlight and enable the development of friendships in higher education (Kahu & Nelson, 2018) at the same time, it is also important to recognise that some individuals find social and peer relations distracting and difficult. As one student reflected, "I'm quite a self-reliant person and quite driven so I haven't needed to use a social network as much, unless it was part of a course or a group work thing – I don't need a social network to succeed." Alternatives that respect student diversity in learning and teaching should always be at the forefront of activities and structures. It is important to recognise that the dynamics of friendships are also shaped by intersectional inequalities and that there are greater difficulties faced by students who have constrained access to campus-based activities, including for example students who are mature, carers, are juggling paid work with study or are travelling to campus from a distance (Read, Burke & Crozier, 2018).

## Extracurricular Activities and Success

When reflecting on the successful outcomes of their higher education so far, many students referred to experiences beyond their formal learning environments. Being part of a club or society, or participation in other extra-curricular activities, was frequently described by students as increasing friendship networks, skills and ultimately, their sense of belonging and success at the university.

Aadhya spoke about the impact of "all these programs that are run" by the university which make her feel "so much more part of the community". She said, "it's such a great thing and you make new friends". Similarly, Anna remarked on the "personal growth" that has come from the extra curriculum. She said, "it's been lovely to build relationships and rapport with a new community of people."

'Personal growth' was described by other participants too, but defined as an increase in their skills, motivation and mental health. Kathy spoke about the impact of her extracurricular activity on her developing networking skills and "getting myself out there and not being afraid to ask for help." As a result, "I was able to find people that were similar to me – people that liked the law but also liked other things". She described this connection as keeping her motivated and interested in her studies. Anna spoke about the calming impact of health and well-being clubs such as yoga, mindfulness

or exercise clubs "where you're kind of adding and bettering and finding different ways" to improve. "Those little activities bring you back to reality and remind you that the study is not everything. It's just a part of your life."

Some extracurricular activities were aligned with students' career aspirations and were described as strengthening and empowering their career choice. Kathy referred to her extracurricular activities as "CV bling" that increases her opportunities and experiences which are "good to talk about in job interviews". She stated:

> I joined a club called "The Women's Career Network" – we run events with the purpose of bringing together female students from business and law who have aspirations of succeeding in the industry." She explained, "I'm quite young and the main issue that's always brought up is, you know, bringing up a family when you're working a full-time job so it's great to just think about those issues early on. (Kathy)

Extracurricular activities were established by many students as increasing employable skills and what was referred to as "soft skills" such as confidence and networking. They were described as positive on physical and mental health and subsequently on study as it helps with "clearing your mind and just focusing". They were also described as impactful on developing a sense of connection with the institution and the people within it. Students recognised that these self-improvements were contributing to their feelings of success in higher education.

As previously established, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are typically underrepresented in higher education. Students from lower socio economic backgrounds also experience greater feelings of ambivalence, uncertainty and lower levels of self-efficacy in higher education due to physically and mentally engrained impacts of socio-economic disadvantage (Reay et al., 2009). Implementation of programs that make extracurricular activities visible, accessible and attractive to all interested students should therefore form part of wider higher education policy that addresses equal access and opportunity. As the students in this study have established, involvement in extracurricular activities can help to address students' individual feelings of self-worth in the university setting.

Implementation of extracurricular programs, however, will require careful consideration as an equity initiative. Participation in extracurricular activities is often challenging for many students who have family/carer responsibilities, cultural obligations and unavoidable work commitments. Indeed students

from more affluent backgrounds who are less likely to have such pressing commitments should be able to dedicate more time to extracurricular activity (Lee, Buchanan & Berg, 2019) and therefore reap their benefits more easily.

Simply making extracurricular programs available will not be enough to address unequal opportunities for students in higher education. Instead, such simplistic solutions may add to the list of exclusionary practices that reinforce entrenched class ideas in higher education. Accessibility of extracurricular activities is vital to consider, but policymakers will require a toolkit of perspectives to draw upon when developing programs that will suitably address equal access for diverse students in higher education (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

## Empowerment Through Powerful Knowledge

Participating in university was experienced by students as profoundly empowering, in terms of enabling their self-discovery and engendering pride, and opening up more opportunities. Participation was also described as powerful for illuminating how they are, and have been, structurally disempowered due to deeply engrained judgements and practices that perpetuate inequalities. Students described learning about how to think deeply and critically as amongst the most important and empowering parts of their success, apart from grades and other conventional measures. For example, Aidan commented: 'I love learning. I love it. I can't not learn things.'

Many of the students interviewed talked about using this knowledge and capability as a form of power that they can use 'to make some cultural changes' in their work after graduating because they had learnt so much about how people are disempowered in institutions through taken-for-granted assumptions, processes and activities. Tyler explained that:

> I'd love to be a principal … Principals can make impacts on a lot of different students, maybe to a lesser extent that teachers can, and also because you can set culture. A lot of teachers who enjoy coming to work and feel their impact and know that they're contributing to a student's life are more willing to be better teachers and to try more in the classroom. That's probably the big thing is that I want to create a culture and I want to really make the school and the staff available at the school the best that they can be through cultural changes… (Tyler)

Another impassioned example of being able to challenge disempowering structures was again described by Aidan later on in the interview:

My parents didn't make it past Year 9 and Year 10 but actively discouraged me from completing high school, let alone anything else. In WA you've got two streams; you've got the TAFE stream and the uni stream; I wasn't allowed in any of the uni subjects – none of my Year 12 stuff counted towards uni and I was too old by the time I actually enrolled so I had to do the STAT thing STAT test to get an ATAR. So yeah, actively discouraged by my parents. I got kicked out of home six months after high school ended anyway, couple of stints of homelessness, been a sole carer for the last nearly 18 years, poverty, et cetera, and then what got me to enrol in uni was 2016, I went to an ER with what looked like seizures and the doctor guy was a XXXX [swears]. Look, I'm low class, okay, there's going to be swears. Sorry. The ER doctor was an absolutely bigot and outright refused to do anything for me and so I'm like, "Well this is very messed up" and to do anything to fix this problem; getting him fired doesn't fix the problem, doing advocacy with the hospital doesn't fix the society-wide problem, political advocacy doesn't fix the problem past a change of government, but putting policies and procedures in place through the Department of Health then means that hospitals have to follow them and that kind of bureaucratic inertia is where the real power is, like long-lasting change, so like well, how do I get in there because I can't do that from the outside. (Aiden)

Students talked about an important part of their success at university as being empowered to understand systemic forms of disadvantage which limit what they and others are capable of, and the ways that this has impacted on their sense of what was possible for them in the past. As Marcus, who had suffered a stroke at 19 years of age, explained:

> … the divide between me and people that are educated in society – the barriers are being torn down, you know, where I can compete on an equal space and I don't have to feel as though I have to beg or whatever and I can stand my own ground a bit. Do you know what I mean? ... Yeah, there's been a huge empowering and a change in power where … That's probably about the best way I can describe it, where now if I was to deal with an NDIS worker or a Centrelink worker ... That to me is more successful than remarks or anything; it's just breaking down those barriers to life … When you have disabilities and you're blind, those barriers are easily used by people to limit you. When you're smart it breaks it down. You know what I mean? (Marcus)

Pride at being able to participate in higher education was palpable. Students felt empowered, not only through gaining a higher education, but also through the power of coming to understand the operation of 'power-knowledge' (Foucault, 1980), which serves to empower those who are already advantaged in society and disempower others. Concern about this, as well as feeling empowered to contribute to the construction of powerful knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Young, 2013) were clear and recurring in many interviews.

Students discussed the development of their understanding of how powerful knowledges both enable and repress (Young, 2013; Burke, Bennett et al., 2017). As Konrad described:

It's made me a bit more resilient, but it also made me want to fight for things that I know I have a right to have. To bring up an anecdote like you said – this semester, Semester 2 of this year, was brought forward for me [for placement and the] time that they brought the semester forward was supposed to be a uni break where obviously those who can, do work, and now that restrictions had been lifted slightly back then, I was already working 40 hours a week - as much as possible. In terms of I knew I had a right not to say "no", but to say "Look, that's not fair. I have to work. Putting that distinction between me and those who can rely on parental income is kind of discriminatory". So yeah, just as an example – I fought my way out of that one. (Konrad)

Students talked about the importance of learning critical analysis and problem-based approaches in higher education which help us to connect the personal with the political, and the individual with 'the bigger picture'. As Noelle explains: 'I'm proud of that because I have a bigger picture now, which is not to say I don't still worry about that bigger picture and "Will I find a job" and my goodness, "What if this doesn't happen?" But I'm definitely proud that I've given it [higher education] a crack after all of this time.'

Aidan also explains:

…there are systemic barriers to accessing it [university]; it is not an accident that most people at uni are white, middle-class or upper-class, the way that the "good" jobs – and I'm putting that in air quotes for the transcript – that you have to have a uni qualification. It reinforces the class divide, it is a deeply flawed thing. (Aiden)

Some students also described success as being about learning how to recognise gender discrimination and, as Jaelynn described, discovering ways to succeed that are empowering:

I was suddenly immersed in this community of people who knew how to study. Two of them were lawyers working at two law firms and they were driving me to be part of their study group and I was like "Oh my gosh, I didn't even know this was a thing. This is amazing" and so, just that one year of observing how you can set yourself up for success, transformed the way I've then studied psychology post them. (Jaelynn)

Participating at university, regardless of outcomes, was described by some of the students interviewed as being very empowering personally and socially, as Anna explained: 'I'm the first in uni… I've got a split family but on dad's side it was like, you know, "Even if you go to university for one week, you've achieved more than any other family member"'. In addition, a sense of intellectual development and academic achievement were described as very powerful, both in terms of further developing self-esteem and in addressing previously limited and limiting notions of what many students understand to be possible for them. As one student put it, '… it has definitely given me a sense of pride because now I feel like I am heading towards something. Whereas before, I wasn't super proud, I just was kind of muddling along' (Noelle).

## The Significance of Time Inequality

Time was an important theme arising from the interviews. Saben explained:

So, time is, I guess, the most important thing to success because if you don't have that time to do the work or to allocate yourself to the assignments or the course work or whatever it is, then … you would struggle a lot. (Saben)

Time as a luxury for more advantaged students and a major form of disadvantage for many others was recognised as a major problem in higher education. Students talked about time inequality, mostly attributed to work – many students needing to work a lot to make a living. Distinct from this, students also talked about 'time stress' as a major issue. Some students explained that even when they find the time, they face a lot difficulty with getting enough 'quality time' to concentrate on study due to work demands and other significant life factors.

Institutional responses to these concerns generally amount to the promotion and provision of time-management and other study skills. Although developing time management in relation to often illusive or hidden academic expectations, practices and conventions is important, a broader conception of time equity is required to understand the multiple

time structures, commitments and inequalities students are navigating. Time-management tends to focus only at the individual level without paying attention to the relation of the individual to social, institutional and contesting time structures, cultures and pressures (Burke, Bennett et al., 2017). Students are navigating a range of temporal demands and institutionalised structures, including university semesters, course timetabling, assessment deadlines and the often multiple demands on time outside of study of paid employment and caring commitments. Providing access to the skills that might support time management in the context of higher education study is certainly valuable and might help build capacity in managing workloads at university and beyond. However, the research highlights that a focus only on the management of time as a skill, without attention to the wider social contexts in which students are navigating multiple time pressures, is unhelpful to students from under-represented backgrounds.

For our participants, the difficulty of never having the 'luxury of time' to adequately focus on study was also described as stemming from past experiences in education, particularly schooling, which reproduced limiting forms of self-doubt and performance anxiety, mental health issues, illness, whether periodic or prolonged, disabilities, inflexible and 'unfair' lecturers and disengaging courses and approaches to teaching. All of these factors were described as much more impactful and compounding, and impacting for much longer periods of time than are recognised by institutions and teachers.

As Adam (2004) points out, the normalisation of time as purely objective measurement, which exists as part of the 'natural' world outside social structures, ensures that time is a powerful factor in perpetuating inequalities. Further, time for thinking differently about timeframes in higher education (Bunn & Bennett, 2020) – particularly in relation to equity – has not yet arrived. As Burke and Manathunga (2020) argue, 'discourses of "time" and "change" have received little interrogation in the field of teaching in higher education and yet both discourses arguably carry profound power in relation to our pedagogical imaginations, practices, experiences and identities" (p. 663).

However, recognising what students tell us about time and how it can be changed for the better is a critical piece for now being able to design and implement impactful change.

Time pressure as a major barrier was described by Stephanie:

> The factors for me are generally the time constraint and what is going on at home.

That's usually the only thing that holds me back … sometimes I just have so much going on in my head that I just cannot focus, even in class – there's just no way through it … I mean sometimes just that stress can put… I mean I experience it myself all the time, just having to mentally juggle all of those things means that I can't focus on the work that I need to do, so, even if I have the time available, I mentally can't focus on what I need to do. So yeah, absolutely it can become a barrier. (Stephanie)

Beth described the way that even though most students recognise that financial inequalities overwhelmingly limit success, many of them ultimately blame themselves for having poor time management: 'I'm kicking myself ... and I'm like "Why did I do that to myself?" Yeah, I get very frustrated with myself'. Thus, while responsibility for time management continues to be treated solely as an individual student's issue and invisibilised through institutional exit surveys which place problems on factors 'external' to higher education, nothing will change.

Students provided the key insights that course and structural changes can make a significant impact on improving their experience of learning and performance. For example, when staff enable more time flexibility for assessments, incorporating supportive guidance around recommended time-frames for submissions, this makes an enormous difference (see also Rubin, 2020b).

Marcus provided an effective example of this flexible approach to assessment:

> One of the biggest flaws I see in the grading system is the rigidity of assessment timelines. I did a course last year… and the teacher used a more explanatory way of teaching where it was more like a question and answer time, but what he did, he allowed for flexible handing in of like a presentation. So, within the tutorials he said, "Instead of trying to get everything in Week 7, work out a time between Week 6 and Week 10 when you've got good time to put effort into this and do it". So he said "We don't have to stay in the same frame of the typical arts culture that we've always had. Let's do this differently". And you know, in that course, I thrived in that and he was spot-on with the way he taught it. It was weird because it was different but you know, I learned really well in that – the things I learned in that I remember and I enjoyed that course more because of that. I think that inability to produce a lot of work in a limited way in Week 7, I think that's a terrible method. (Marcus)

Peter also explained time as constraining success: 'that's my biggest battle, and especially at the moment. I'm just constantly trying to squeeze in time here and there.'

With households that include multiple family or friends working long hours and irregular hours in precarious jobs in order to make ends meet, students described the profundity of how this limits and stresses them, impeding more timely successes beyond participating (which it is important to again emphasise that they do greatly vale as an enabler and critical dimension of success). Instead they battle many obstacles others do not face in order to keep going, most often over longer time-frames because of interruptions based on disadvantage. They talk about sacrificing grades just to fit study in, and how passing courses takes longer, but they still progress and find participation life-changing. Their patterns of success just look different in terms of grades, retention and success rates. Robert explains:

> I was very time-poor and I didn't enjoy that the studies that much given that I was always very behind or I could see that I would go to uni and I would schedule my lectures from the morning, early on from 8:00 till maybe 2:00 and then I worked in the afternoon till the evening and I was kind of not able to… if I liked something and they suggested readings or review a lecture, I was not able to do it … (Robert)

Those who are more advantaged often do not understand time poverty, as time is just presumed to be equal for everyone. But time is a serious equity issue. Money can 'buy' time, and networks and supports can help us to have time to do and achieve more things. Insecure types of work, and long and irregular hours also cause time poverty and stress, as they are often inflexible, with workers having little to no choice of hours allocated. Advantage creates more time to gain more advantages and climb educational, development and career ladders. Everyday demands, invisible to many, further reinforce time poverty. As Baylee explains about the time-consuming and exhausting impacts that exist for many students in not having enough money for timely transport that makes the day fit along with demanding work and study responsibilities:

> When I first moved to Brisbane, I didn't have a car and I was taking the train and it was about a two-hour train ride but to get to the train station, it was about a 25 minute walk and then I'd get off the train and then my parents would have to pick me up and then it was a half hour drive to their house as well, so it was just a big long trip to get there and then I ended up buying my grandmother's car for $500 but it took me so long to save up for it because I didn't have a job so it was a bit painful. And then, once I got my car, it was much easier from there. I think it was because I'd go to work and I'd be there and I wouldn't be able to think about uni at all because it's not really related to my degree in any way and then I'd get home and I was tired … (Baylee)

Measures of time that treat all students as if they are the same, and then measuring all students' performance as if they are experiencing the same conditions of living – as if inequality does not exist or impact students – are a major problem for higher education being able to continue to serve the needs of its students. As students tell us through this and other research about the impact of time on them (e.g. Burke et al., 2017; Bennett & Burke, 2018; Bunn et al., 2019), until time structures are made flexible in higher education, and there are changes to the current 'time management' approach of individualising responsibility which demands conformity to privileged time-structures, student grades, success and retention will not improve. However, it is very heartening to hear from what students tell us about the ways that some lecturers are able to recognise and address time inequalities, it is indeed possible, and certainly time, for change.

## Chapter 3: Economic and Educational Resources

This section of the report examines how very concrete daily questions of food adequacy and the capacity to pay for rent and internet access interact with student success. Participants paint a picture in which many are forced to continually balance between the time needed for study, the work hours needed in order to support themselves, and pay for essential course requirements such as textbooks. Many students described not having sufficient time to both work and study, and therefore needing to always calculate which of these could be deprioritised at a given moment. The emotional stress and mental load of these challenging equations provides a vivid insight into the conditions under which student success is produced.

### Financial Security and Paid Work

As you would expect, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often reported that lack of financial security constrained their capacity to study and therefore succeed at university. The extent of daily poverty experienced during their degrees varied across the participants. For some of our respondents, food insecurity was experienced while they were at university, in line with research indicating that Australia's current system of income support for students leaves low income students without sufficient income to cover the costs of necessities (Baglow & Gair 2018; Seivwright et al., 2020). Chloe reported being unable to afford to eat during the day unless she brought food from home:

> Yeah. I didn't really have any money particularly when I started uni so I definitely, I would say… actually probably still now will have to prioritise work sometimes and not go to class. This doesn't happen anymore because I have a better job but what I do, like first undergrad, when I was probably 18, 19, if I hadn't brought food from home I wouldn't be eating all day because I couldn't really afford to buy food so that probably didn't have a positive impact [on learning]. (Chloe)

Rather than go hungry, many students in our study took on long work hours in order to support themselves financially. This had a range of profound impacts on their experience at university. Students reported being continually forced to choose work shifts over necessary study time or class participation. They seemed to be constantly working out how much study could be sacrificed in order to support themselves, and how much work could be foregone in order that they write essays or study for exams. Many students describe non-stop juggling to attempt to fit the necessary work hours required to pay the bills, while struggling to balance this with the need to pass courses:

Finances have been one of the biggest parts of my university experience that has stopped me from being able to achieve better grades. I've had to work multiple jobs throughout my time at uni just to study and I had to cut back to three subjects quite early because I wasn't able to maintain my study and my workload. I wasn't in a situation where I could get parental support for living out of home and if I was to access Centrelink, especially because Centrelink's cut-off age is like 22, so I was younger than 22 when I first moved out and so that meant I would have got peanuts when I was eligible. I think I was eligible for like $30 a fortnight based on my parents' income. So, having to work 30 hour, 40 hour weeks on top of studying full-time is really ridiculous and I think universities could potentially help provide a little bit… (Tyler)

I can say that at least from my point of view, I'm expected to not only either full-time study and also have a job to be able to pay… you know, before COVID-19, I had two jobs and that was barely making ends meet but yet I'm also expected to be able to make my own money and not just survive purely off Centrelink and then on top of that, get good grades to pass. (Page)

Students consistently discussed the difficult equations they had to undertake to make the best use of inadequate financial resources. They reported being forced to choose between paying for textbooks, food, or access to the internet. Indeed, the cost of textbooks, and the implications of not having these, was a consistent concern raised by the students in our study. The choices facing students of working more to save up for textbooks and therefore studying less, or foregoing the textbooks and then suffering in terms of access to the essential course materials, exposes the impossible decisions facing students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

When Kathy was able to afford one of the more expensive textbooks, she explained the way in which it provided her with a wealth and breadth of knowledge, and allowed her to engage meaningfully with the subject matter rather than simply regurgitate the lectures:

> I find it ridiculous how the uni in certain courses, makes it compulsory for us to purchase $100 textbooks when a lot of us are literally… we have to use that $100 to feed ourselves. It's ridiculous how that isn't online and I actually think that is a barrier to success because I remember in some of those subjects where I had that luxury of spending that money, I was able to have that wealth of knowledge and have that breadth of knowledge whereas my other peers, who didn't have the textbook, just had the content that the lecture was giving. So, you weren't able to, in an exam, give a comprehensive answer; it was just like a word-to-word, verbatim copy of the lecture material. Definitely access to materials is [a requirement for success]. (Kathy)

Saben reported unwillingly moving back home with his parents because of the tension between work and affording course necessities including access to a laptop and textbooks. This made it impossible for him to live independently:

> My first semester, I did not [do] that well and my second semester I also did not do well because I had to work because I was out of home for a bit and work did not accommodate my university, so I had to work to pay rent, bills and all that sort of stuff. Yeah, I didn't do well at all… Uni was like we've got to have a laptop but I had to share it with my mum and I didn't get textbooks in my first year because I just couldn't afford it. I couldn't afford it working and mum couldn't afford it… then this semester, mid last semester, I had to borrow all of my textbooks from other people to afford them … It just felt like saving up for textbooks wasn't a priority, like it's not a number one priority. I managed to purchase old textbooks. I've managed to get one really cheap, and then I bought another one in the financial year sale. Yeah, textbooks five years old… [I said to myself] don't move out of home because you save money, you can use that money that you save to pay for textbooks and when you pay for textbooks you can do better at your grades and then you don't have to worry so much about grades and everything. Don't move out of home yet. (Saben)

One solution to the lack of time needed to work and to study was working night-shifts and then attending class during the day. Understandably this "solution" undermined the capacity of students to participate fully in their classes and depleted their energies for learning:

> My first year I didn't work at all; I was just getting Centrelink for it but it was only about $200 a week and it was just not really very productive for living on, and then, I got a job at Coles doing night-fill and that was good but I was working 10:30pm till 3:00 o'clock in the morning every night and it was just really painful, and then I got a job at McDonald's being a barista there, so I'd go 10:30 till 3:00 am and then I would get to Macca's at 4:00 o'clock in the morning and then go until midday, and then go to uni… so I dropped down to three courses when I took on the second job and I extended my degree by six months just so I could have a little bit of extra time… (Baylee)

As well as the incursion of paid work into the time needed to study and attend class, students also consistently spoke of the mental load of financial stress as an impediment to success. They articulated the mental drain of having to continually juggle their immense financial responsibility with full-time study:

> I think I'm only able to feel like I'm successful now because I've got my health under control and financially stable enough to have a job that even though it's annoying in terms of time, I have a job that I know, not having to stress about money. If you're having to spend time… like have your mind occupied with thinking about whether you're going to eat next or if you're going to be able to have somewhere safe to sleep or even less severe versions of that – it's for obvious reasons difficult but then I think it's also occupying mental space that you can't then spend focusing on study. (Chloe)

Although many students undertake some paid work to supplement their finances whilst at university, and to develop employment experiences, the significant financial inequalities that shape the requirements to take up paid work for students from LSESB must be recognised if student equity is to be achievable. The economic imperative is different for students from LSESB and has a significant impact on their capacity to study and thus on student success.

## Scholarships

We asked students about their experience with scholarships. Although we were interviewing students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, many didn't know anything about the availability of scholarships, or thought that scholarships would not apply to "people like them". This suggests that information about scholarships is not adequately communicated to all students at the time when they are considering applying for university. Baylee articulated this problem clearly:

> … they definitely need to put a bit more into the available scholarships and definitely promote the scholarships much more. You know, it seems to be a website that's tucked away and unless you Google it, you're not going to really know what you can and can't apply for. There was a lot of scholarships that I felt like I was applicable for but the application closing date was three months prior to when I'd even started looking at it and there wasn't a lot of advertising on that. (Baylee)

Research in the UK context found that information about scholarships was not presented in an accessible manner at the time students were actually deciding whether or not to enrol in university, and which institutions they would apply to (Burke, 2012; Callender & Wilkinson, 2013; Hordosy & Clark, 2019; Harrison, Davies, Harris & Waller, 2018). The lack of a universal understanding of the scholarships available among our participants suggests the same problems exist in the Australian context.

Gila, however, was very aware of the requirements she needed to meet in order to receive a scholarship. For her there was no possibility of attending university without one, so she focussed her efforts in the final year of school towards getting the marks that would guarantee her a scholarship:

> My family wasn't able to support me to go to university so I knew I had to get a scholarship to be able to go, and the scholarships at [University E], the larger ones, you had to have an ATAR of 95 to be considered for so I worked really hard just to be considered for a scholarship, even though the degree I was applying for I think it had an admission of 92 or something like that but I knew I had to get higher than that in order to be considered for a scholarship which I was eventually, so the hard work paid off, but yeah, I certainly tried to work very hard because I knew if I didn't I wouldn't be able to go to university straight out of school basically… I was fortunate enough to get two scholarships; I got one for the faculty I'm under and then a community one called the "George Alexander Foundation Scholarship" which have been hugely helpful and just it meant that I've been able to go to uni and focus on my studies rather than having to work at the same time. (Gila)

We mentioned above that the unaffordability of textbooks exemplified the level of financial strain some of our participants experienced, and the difficult financial tightrope they often walked between the time needed to study sufficiently, and the money needed to provide adequate study resources and conditions. Scholarships were cited as providing relief for these tensions and problems. Psychology student Madison explained how scholarship money, and the loan of textbooks from a friend, allowed her to purchase other essential study infrastructure such as an internet connection:

> And then of course financial is the other big thing for me; coming from my background, it's not a great time but I have received scholarships and things like that that have really helped me be able to afford the textbooks and things that I need like this semester. One of my friends, she's in honours now, she lent me all the textbooks for this year so that was a huge help. I'm like "Okay. Now I can use this money for other things that I need like the internet", because my Nan does not have the internet. So I'm like, "Well, you know, I can use these things now instead of having to pay $800 for a semester of textbooks". (Madison)

Other students reported that a scholarship made it possible for them to participate in a mandatory course work placement:

> I've got a couple of scholarships as well which has been fantastic. There's no way I could have done nine straight weeks without any pay on placement because you have to work full-time for nine weeks without a scholarship to help me do that. (Brooke)

As well as playing an essential role in the financial support needed for student success, some scholarship recipients we spoke to described the experience of receiving a scholarship as a source of personal recognition and value. This finding echoes research by UK authors, who found that being awarded a scholarship (or bursary in the UK context) became a source of legitimacy and recognition by students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Hordosy and Clark (2019) interviewed students at 'red brick'(middle-tier) universities in England who were in receipt of scholarships. According to this study, being recipients of financial support helped these students create an identity for themselves that validated their place in the institution as well as building a positive relationship with the university.

Similarly, Harrison, Davies and Harris et al., (2018) found that because bursaries are provided by the university, they "…have a role in recognising the students' legitimacy" (Harrison, Davies, Harris et al., 2018, p. 692).

Marcus, a mature age student, reported strong feelings of worth, value and empowerment as a result of being awarded his scholarship. This experience was a "total reversal" of his long-running experiences of discrimination and marginalisation in society. He also spoke of how being a scholarship recipient further motivated him to excel at university in order to "match" the image of a student he associated with his scholarship:

> The Shaping Future Scholarship that I've got – that's a very enabling scholarship… it was a confidence-boosting thing where I wouldn't tell anybody else that I had it but you know, deep down, I just thought I felt valued. I felt valued by the university and I felt empowered I guess in a way. You know, it was just quite… you know, for someone that had experienced so much prejudice in society and also barriers to participation due to ill health – that was a total reversal of my experience over the last 20 years. It just brought the doors open to a change of lifestyle so that was really meaningful to me and it was great…

> I think there was one less worry and there was definitely a sense of "You're worthy", and in a way my grades… I've tried to make those reflect that worthiness. You know what I mean? In my mind, someone who gets a scholarship gets Ds and HDs and I've tried to make that match my scholarship. Rather than it being a charity thing, I want to make myself not a student that gets passes… I had made my mind up to do well at uni anyway but it was like a reaffirming thing; it felt in a way almost a reward for the high marks I had got. You know, it made me feel as though that was a part of the consideration rather than just being a charity or a sad case that they were just trying to pay for. You know what I mean? So yeah, definitely. It also tied together that it was a very pleasant experience. (Marcus)

The other point made by Marcus was that the scholarship he received gave some relief to his anxieties about paying for the overall cost of his degree. In the context of enrolling in a degree later in life, with considerable financial and family responsibility, the scholarship provided a sense of security, and allowed Marcus to "relax" and prepare for his transition to university learning:

> It's sort of where financial short fallings is – [the scholarship] takes a lot of the scariness away from being able to repay the bill at the end…. So, I think some, particularly the scholarships that help in financial situations, they're good because I've got a wife and two kids, two teenage kids, that we've been paying for and at the time that scholarship came, that was definitely a… it wasn't from the point of view… a lot of people might not think that that scholarship was a huge amount of money compared to something that pays for a whole degree but for us, it was a real windfall and it was like "Yeah, okay, we can do this". My first year was worth $6,000 as a bill that the scholarship was for so that meant that I only had a shortfall of $2,000 for my first year of education and that took a lot of stress off that first year and it really relaxed me heading into the studies, thinking that, you know, "I've only got to pay that $2,000 for my first year". I wasn't thinking to myself, "I've got $18,000… I'm going to have a big debt", you know what I mean. So, it did take a lot of stress off … (Marcus)

In stark contrast with the very positive experience of Marcus having received a scholarship, other students were cynical about the way universities used their scholarship schemes. Indeed a strong criticism of the role of scholarships that has been made in the international literature, is that rather than assist those in greatest need, some universities use scholarships to "skim the cream", or attract the highest achieving students to their institutions. Callender and Wilkinson (2013) argue that scholarships and bursaries are used by UK higher education institutions as a 'competitive tool' to curate the composition of their student intake. In this sense bursaries in the UK context were seen to be '…generating new forms of inequality rather than eradicating them. Their discretionary and variable nature leads to the unequal treatment of students' (Callender & Wilkinson, 2013, p.304).

Tyler, who himself was in receipt of a scholarship, argued that there should be many more "equity-based" scholarships which address only financial need, not reward "achievement" in school:

> … a lot of [scholarships] are to attract students who have that potential to be the upper kind of echelon… because of my experience they also have a lot of equity-based scholarships but in my personal opinion, nowhere near enough of the money goes towards that; a lot of them are just academic-based which is totally not okay… there's a huge under-representation of low SES students and rural students at university and why I work for a program called "The Outreach Program" … the percentage of low SES students attending is nowhere near what we want it to be… equity-based scholarships and assistance for students from low SES backgrounds transitioning to university life in the city; there's nowhere near enough support or grants or scholarships around those areas. (Tyler)

The experience of financial insecurity, the need for paid work that threatens to incur into study time, and the constant precarious juggling of inadequate financial resources and limited time marks many of the accounts of the students we spoke to. Yet most often the burden of this experience is carried privately and invisibly by the students themselves. Those assessing students' essays and exams are unaware of the mental load and precarious conditions being carried by these students. Camilla clearly articulated the inequity of comparing the academic performance of students who are incumbered with such responsibilities, with their wealthier peers who are protected from such daily financial concerns and paid workloads:

> I think anyone who's got to work and do uni and if you really want to eat anything more than baked beans, you do have to work and I think maybe that's a reflection of how they want society to work, like unless you've already got financial support and good family support, you don't have to worry too much about work and you can just focus on study, you will be more successful at university, you will get better grades, you will do better. So if you're from a particular class structure, you know, your parents don't have a house you can live in or you do have to support yourself financially, you're just not going to do as well, and unfortunately, nobody cares about that when they look at your grades at the end. Nobody says, "And how was life during the year for you? Did you have to work?" So I think that the

government does want people getting educated but I think they also want people in certain class structures so that their little system works better maybe. (Camilla)

Camilla cautions that university grades are not achieved on an even playing field, but rather tend to replicate broader social inequalities. This is not to imply that the students we interviewed did not manage to excel against conventional academic metrics. However, when they did so, it was from a position of an often-invisible multiplicity of disadvantages. Aiden put it this way:

> When you compare me to the average uni student, I don't come home to a house that mummy and daddy pay the mortgage on, to a hot meal at the end of the day, with no other responsibilities. I come home, I then have to cook, clean, deal with meltdowns, wipe the 17 year-old [as a carer for a child with disabilities], you know, plus worry about paying bills and all of that other crap. I have less financial resources, I have less informal supports; I've got a lot more stresses, and a lot less resources than most of the people that I'm competing with which disadvantages me. (Aiden)

However, when the interviewer asked Aiden if successfully juggling all these responsibilities made him inherently successful, he disagreed:

> No. I am succeeding in spite of that but that does not make me successful; that hinders my potential. What would be helpful, what would make me more successful, is less financial stress, and less caring responsibility – more frigging consideration from people in my classes, staff and students both, better understanding about my disability specific needs, you know, that stuff. That would make me more successful. Very much me succeeding in spite – that is not "success"… (Aiden)

Many of the students we spoke to depicted an experience of university that was driven by trying to survive financially and academically with inadequate supports. A growing body of international literature argues that a necessary ingredient needed for students to flourish in higher education is freedom from the stress and time impositions dictated by financial insecurity. Students need an adequate financial base in order to go beyond financial survival and have an expansive university experience – be that the capacity to fund extra-curricular activities, afford course expenses, and reduce the need for part-time work and so allow more time to study and socialise (Harrison, Davies, Harris et al., 2018).

## Pathways to University

'Standard' entry methods into higher education are marked by competitive University Admissions Ranking systems which can present as a barrier for many students, in particular students from non-traditional backgrounds. It is important to note therefore that 452 participants in this study (16.96%), and approximately one third of all participants interviewed, entered higher education via an alternative, tuition-free Enabling pathway, and "probably would have never have gone to university" (Claudia) without the support of such alternative access programs. Others entered university via other alternative pathways, as discussed below.

Enabling programs are provided for students fee-free by the Federal Government as "a course of instruction provided to a person for the purpose of enabling the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award" (Department of the Attorney General, 2003, p. 384). Approximately half of the students who enrol in Enabling programs are classified as 'non-traditional', including students from regional areas, lower socio-economic backgrounds, first-in-family to attend higher education, and/or identify as Aboriginal or Torres-strait islander (Lomax-Smith, Watson & Webber, 2011). The majority have experienced educational disadvantage due to a wide range of issues in schooling, including periods of ill health as children and teenagers, differences in development, including unidentified disabilities, and complex challenges previously experienced in schools, families, and with peer groups. Due to this, Enabling programs play an important role in providing supportive, inclusive and empowering pedagogies that can strengthen confidence and academic competencies (Bennett et al., 2015), and help overcome damaging and elitist histories that have challenged the 'right' to higher education for many students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds (Burke, 2012).

A number of students reported complicated, 'stop-start' journeys towards university and many relied on Enabling and other non-traditional pathways in order to access university. Stephen for example stated, "I didn't have that many years in high school". Stephen explained that he attended many different high schools and missed three years of middle-secondary education which despite "usually [getting] B's and A's", seemed to preclude him from higher education. After many 'disruptions', the participant sought successful entry to university via an Enabling program. Reflecting back, Stephen explained his appreciation of the program and how important it is to "just keep going until you find something". Eric "grew up in the state care system – out-of-home care… [and my] case

worker actually withdrew me from school due to how mentally ill I ended up". He explained, "I went into Open Foundation [an Enabling program] and I did that for six months, and I ended up coming out with distinctions." Referring to the level of support that the program provided, he said, "Well, you know, there's not many kids [like me] that make it into university on their own; they usually either need help or they don't feel like they can actually get there".

Dean entered higher education through an Enabling pathway program designed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gain skills for entry into undergraduate degrees. He spoke of the empowering nature of his program, explaining that, "going to university and becoming exposed to that, broadening your actual awareness … I was like 'Oh okay, so I can go into this'". Marcus explained that, "I had a stroke when I was 19 and that left me unable to drive again which led to all sorts of problems being an electrician… I had convinced myself that I wasn't academically minded – that people that work in trade have a different brain than people that work in academia." After passing the Open Foundation Enabling pathway, he explained, "it was very empowering. Like I guess it's a highlight of my life."

As a result of engagement in an Enabling pathway program, not only did Dean and Marcus go on to undergraduate study, but they also felt empowered and 'legitimate' as university students – which they considered a mark of success. These types of successful outcomes are explored by Allen (2020) who investigated notions of success from the perspective of enabling students. All participants in her study spoke about the subjective, variable and emotional nature of success. Allen (2020) proposed a more holistic and equitable view of students' achievements than conventional performance measures, which tend to invisibilise these important and very personal outcomes. For example, after passing his Enabling program, Marcus stated, "Is this me? There was a couple of tears over it." While he was incredibly proud of his pass mark, his perceived transformation from a "tradey to academic" was a dynamic and emotional element to his success, one which standardised measurements such as grades would have completely overlooked.

As well as enabling programs, many participants entered higher education through other entryways. Claudia spoke warmly about being "sponsored" by Head Start, a high school transition program without which she would never have entered higher education. Sierra also gained access to university

through a non-traditional pathway. Her entrance to university included an unconventional personal presentation to illustrate her capacity for success at university:

> There's a program called "Big Picture" and it allows students to work at their own pace with their learning and not follow the curriculum as such. I did a thing called a "Portfolio pathway" where I came to the uni and did an interview with… the Dean of Education and someone from the enrolment, admin people – a presentation of all my knowledge to show that I was up to that level. (Sierra)

As a result of the Big Picture Program, Sierra has commented that in her undergraduate degree she is feeling well-prepared: "the actual course work and I find reasonably easy because a lot of it, I did look at in high school. That was part of the preparing me for uni."

All participants mentioned in this section positioned their alternative pathway to higher education as integral to their success. Success, however, was not described purely by the grades achieved or even their higher education admission, but explored multi-dimensionally as feelings of confidence, belonging and a change in their identity, even when the experience was not linear. Thus, the programs contribute a lifelong learning disposition for many students, many of whom also face ongoing disruptions along their educational journeys. Students experience what they describe as multiple forms of success incrementally, despite challenges, particularly given that many need to study online and part-time due to greater responsibilities outside of study. These 'other' successes are not exclusive to Enabling pathways, but should be recognised in all aspects of higher education as legitimate outcomes in order to ensure inclusivity, and so that all impacts are recognised and equally attainable.

## Chapter 4: Cultural Expectations, Relations and Practices

In this Chapter, we explore the students' accounts in relation to cultural expectations, relations and practices. In focusing on these themes, we aim to illuminate a key dimension of equity that is often hidden through taken-for-granted assumptions, and the ways that this cultural dimension impacts on students' perspectives of success. In this section, we are interested in the ways expectations about higher education shape students' choices as well as their sense of self-esteem and capability. Teaching and learning practices are a key part of the processes by which students might experience a sense of belonging, inclusion and worthiness. Students' qualitative accounts offered rich material to analyse the relationship between cultural expectations and practices to better understand questions of student equity and success.

Key insights emerging from the student data included the importance of opportunities for students to draw on their experiences, values and knowledges in their learning. Students often described their frustration with the lack of connection being made on their programs of study between theory and practice, which suggests a pedagogical challenge about how theory might be better related to practical elements of a course. Formative assessment significantly helped students understand assessment expectations and practices. Peer exchange and interactions were valued by students and when this was undermined, for example in some instances by COVID-19, this was experienced negatively as significantly disruptive to learning. Students articulated a strong sense of curiosity and openness to discovery, which in more flexible degree programs, widened their opportunities and horizons within their fields of study and their future outlooks.

## Teaching and Curriculum

### Teaching Staff and Tutors

While examples were provided of teaching staff who were responsive to student needs, students also spoke about staff being unresponsive to requests for assistance. Emily, for example, 'emailed the lecturer for some help and I never got an answer'. Similarly, Polly 'sent … about four emails asking for assistance and no response – no response at all'. While Courtney received a response from the staff member, 'the way that he responded to some of the questions – it was like we shouldn't be asking that question; we should know'. Alexander linked staff unresponsiveness to high teaching loads or staff study commitments (e.g., enrolment in a doctorate), which left him feeling as though 'the person who has the lowest priority [is] the poor undergraduate student'.

Students also had varying levels of comfort in reaching out to staff to seek support. Dominique reflected that 'a lot of the students in my class, they feel like they can't message a [staff member] because they are a teacher and we're only a student, whereas I feel like … if you be open and honest with them, they're more than willing to help you'. For Konrad, the formality of language required in communicating with staff deterred him from seeking help from staff members: 'with peer support the language is a lot more informal whereas … if you could keep in contact with lecturers … it would have to be with a level of formality that doesn't really help the situation'. Callan made reference to 'learning' the way to communicate with lecturers to increase his chances of a helpful response:

> having the proper etiquette that you should have, talking to someone who's done a PhD or is a professor … I feel that I definitely learned that pretty well … When I'm communicating with them, they seem to respond better if you communicate with them with the respect that they're entitled to.

Bonnie discussed her strategy of making contact with staff as part of a group of students: 'the friends I … have made, we do message one another when we get stuck and if we don't know then … eventually one of us would email a lecturer or a tutor for help if we don't understand as a group'. Nevertheless, there seemed to be consensus from students that the onus should be on the student to seek help from teaching staff. From Matthew's perspective, 'if a student is failing but they're asking for help, they will get that help. But if they're failing and they're not asking for help, then they won't'.

Some students who were further along in their degree wished that they could advise their younger self to 'go talk to your lecturers; use the consult hours' (Caitlin). However, Stephen reflected that feeling comfortable approaching staff was something that developed over time. As he explains, 'I suppose I've become more comfortable with talking to people in general, so I suppose social skills and all that, being able to go up to the lecturer and ask them all these questions and whatnot which I'm still working on' (Stephen). Similarly, Sophie spoke about developing 'a different approach' to help her to be successful: 'more engagement with more people, I became more active and tried to engage with the lecturers and more … proactive rather than passive.'

Small class sizes were viewed by students as more conducive to accessing support from teaching staff, and tutors were generally acknowledged as more accessible than lecturers, especially in large classes where 'you just don't really connect much with your lecturer' (Aadhya). Fiona, who had experienced different sized campuses, referred favourably to her small regional campus: 'at the [metropolitan] campus … I felt like I was … treated like a number, and not as a person … But at the [regional] campus … we were so well looked after'. Anna, too, said, 'I know that I can walk through my campus and staff members can see I'm a little bit stressed, they'll stop me and say, 'Is everything okay? How are you going?' which is really a nice and lovely thing to be in a small campus where they know you'.

### Curriculum

Students interviewed as part of this project spoke about learning content at university, but also needing to learn 'how to use the resources [teaching staff] provide you from the classes'. James explained it in the following way:

> the lecturers, they were very important in letting us know what we need to do in order to pass … They let us know that the resources were available, there was the LMS online that … they post resources on, their lectures were recorded [so] that you can go and watch back later. (James)

As students from LSESB, some participants referred to a lack of opportunity to draw on their experiences, values and knowledges to assist with learning at university. As Stephen reflected, 'I don't think I've ever had any instances where I've had prior knowledge and been able to draw upon it'. He commented on the assumptions made, even within first year courses, that students bring prior knowledge of the subject area to their study. Stephen recommended that 'any university course should [assume] no prior knowledge … Maybe the first year subjects cover basics … instead of assuming that you already know half the stuff that they're trying to teach you'. The exception seemed to be participants who had been part of university pathway or bridging programs, which helped familiarise them and made them feel more

comfortable when beginning their Bachelor program because 'I know what this is about' (Page).

Almost all students interviewed who referred to clinical placements and practical elements of their programs did so in positive ways. Grace said, 'I like going on clinical placement. It's always a really, really good learning experience'. Conversely, other, more theoretical content, distanced from practical application felt like 'just jumping through the university's hoops so that we can get the degree; it doesn't feel relevant … It was … really difficult to get motivated to learn it' (Amanda). Some students were frustrated by a disconnect they experienced early in their program between theory and practice. As Dylan explains, 'it's really hard to just link theory to practice. So we've learned all these things and you get disillusioned, like 'What's the point of this?''. Charles provided 'constructive criticism' to his university along the lines of his program needing to be 'more practical early on', or requesting 'more hands-on work with industry'. An important issue to consider in relation to placement elements of programs, however, is the necessity for many students from LSES backgrounds to work to support their study, which can cause difficulties for students when on placement if they are assumed to be available for placement 'up to 40 hours a week' (Konrad). As Konrad explained, 'That's not fair. I have to work. Putting that distinction between me and those who can rely on parental income is kind of discriminatory'.

### Pedagogy

Many students referred to opportunities to interact and study with peers as particularly valuable. Tyler commented that 'meeting up with some friends and studying together is incredibly useful'. He went on to say, 'it helps you feel like you're not the only one … that's struggling … So … accepting that you're in that learning zone and moving forward with friends is very good' (Tyler). Robert similarly reflected that 'even though a lot of people hate group work … for me, it was always beneficial'.

Tutorials were spoken about in very positive ways, in terms of providing both opportunities to learn and build student confidence. As Jaelynn reflected, 'when they're interactive and they allow for questions and discussion and opinions and skill building, they're so good for building my confidence'. Doha spoke about taking time to feel comfortable contributing to tutorial discussions:

> In this class, there were quite a few of us that didn't want to talk … But [the tutor] didn't 'make' us but she asked, 'What do you think?' And … initially it was like 'Oh God … I'm in the spotlight

here', but then afterwards it just became a natural thing. (Doha)

Some universities offered additional, optional sessions facilitated by previously successful students, which were also referred to favourably: 'there was this course which provided … past students who did very well, they got them to come and to teach us the concepts' (Chih-Cheng).

The impact on pedagogy as a result of COVID-19 was noted by many students from LSESB in negative ways due to the loss of face-to-face teaching and the move to online classes. Polly described the impact as 'destructive':

> I found that quite destructive because … those are the places in that lecture hall where you begin to become a community, where you begin to lose your fear, where you learn so much more by somebody else's questions and to lose that face-to-face lecturing is, to me, just wrong and as everybody has realised through COVID, missing that face-to-face is just missing a whole heap of communication and coming together and support. (Polly)

Others, like Emily, appreciated the time saved in travel: 'I like doing the lectures online; it saves a lot of time going in to uni'. While Chloe spoke of friends who 'like being at home and being able to allocate the time' (Chloe), she believed that the shift to online learning impacted on her ability to be successful: 'it's so the opposite of how I need to learn and do well … Particularly having in-person accountability, even just like going to class and seeing teachers and being on campus … it's kind of like a check' (Chloe). Christopher similarly reflected that as a result of online teaching, 'you don't feel included in anything, you don't feel valued in anything'.

### Assessment

Some students reflected on assessment practices at university and indicated a preference for assignments over exams, arguing that exams 'make no sense' (Claudia) in a professional situation. As Claudia argues, 'I have never agreed with an exam, like the purpose of doing an exam because there is no situation where you have to, in a professional circumstance, where you need to show all your knowledge in two-and-a-half hours'. Students seemed to suggest a preference for demonstrating their 'learning through more interactive platforms' such as 'an essay … or a presentation' but noted that 'it is really constrained by what the subject coordinator decides as an appropriate assessment for a subject' (Dominique).

Students spoke of the need for formative assessment to provide them with a 'frame of reference' (Kaleb). Kaleb reflected on his experience in a course with little formative assessment, and assessment weighted heavily at the end of the semester:

> It felt very intense … because I had no clue how well I was doing because grades weren't being released and all of them were towards the back end, I was panicked. I'm like, 'I don't know what success is. How do I know when I've done good? Is this bad? Is this good?' … Whereas with education courses where feedback is back and forth and you always have everything spaced out really well you're like, 'Oh, okay, I know exactly how to handle this kind of thing, I'm comfortable with academic writing now' … I've got that frame of reference. (Kaleb)

David spoke of the need for feedback on formative work; 'doing stuff where you weren't getting marked on it but you were still being given an opportunity to receive feedback'.

Antonia also referred to a lack of exemplar material in their coursework that would help them to succeed: 'they don't give you any essay formatting … they don't let you look at past exams, they don't let you look at past essays – there's none of that; you just have to come up with a random structure yourself and answer the question as best you can'. In a similar vein, Caitlin referred to lack of clarity in assessment criteria, and the need for examples or guides, particularly for first year students to help them better understand assessment expectations and practices:

> The marking criteria isn't clear … and specific … [For example,] clarity of writing – well what does that mean? How do you define that? Is my idea of 'clarity of writing' the same as your idea of 'clarity of writing'? And that's something that you don't know basically, and I also feel like often – especially in first year, they don't give you examples – so you're sort of flying blind, trying to be like, 'Okay, I tried this. Did I get a good mark? I tried this. Did I get a good mark?' And you sort of have to work things out where maybe, especially in first year, it would have been nice if they just went, 'This is it, this is how we want you to do it. This is an example of a good thing. Do that'. It would have just been a bit more clear. (Caitlin)

Jaelynn had a similar experience with 'marking criteria [that] was too vague' on an assessment task, with the end result that 'no one did anywhere near as well as they expected'. As Jaelynn summarised,

'The expectations weren't clearly set and so you can't expect someone to succeed unless you've got clear expectations of 'success''. She neatly articulated both the problem and one potential strategy to mitigate the issue in the following way:

> If you're not a good writer, you don't know what good writing looks like unless you've been given an exemplar … There was one subject I did where they gave us a HD paper and a P paper and we had to, in groups, mark each paper and go through the marking criteria and decide which one was better and that was so eye-opening and helpful. (Jaelynn)

Feedback on assessment tasks from teaching staff was seen as particularly important by students, but not always of a quality or quantity to promote student success. As Simon reflects, 'There were some markers that … just give you a mark and then not give you any feedback and I thought, 'Hang on, where's the feedback? What did I do wrong here?''. Courtney commented on the importance of feedback, and said, 'I definitely learn a lot off the feedback'. Fiona specifically suggested reducing the marking load for teaching staff to increase both the quality of feedback, and the fairness around the marking process: 'giv[e] them less assignments to mark, so by the time they get to the last one they're not so cranky or they're not going to penalise that person for something so small because they've had a rough day'. Unspoken preferences or expectations of markers were also referred to as impinging on the fairness of the grading process. As Caitlin explains, 'talking to some markers, they're like, 'Oh, I don't like Oxford commas'. I'm like, 'Am I supposed to talk to all of my tutors and find out which ones like Oxford commas and which ones don't?''

Trish recounted an experience in her 'very first semester' where she answered an exam question but 'in the wrong spot' so 'rather than write it again, I drew arrows … to show that I had answered that question'. Trish was awarded zero marks for the question, and when she queried the marker, she said, 'Oh no, your information is correct but next time you'll stop and read a whole question before you go and just start writing and answering it. You'll write things in the right place'. As Trish reflected, 'It was so discouraging … I've finished four semesters now and I've never got over … that anybody could be so mean and so unfair … You should be supporting your new people and encouraging them, not putting a knife in their back because you're on this power trip'.

## Emotion, Grading and Student Success

We explored students' responses to teaching and assessment practices in the interviews and their accounts indicated the emotional dimensions that profoundly shape students' sense of being successful. The focus on emotion is crucial for understanding student equity and success, as inequalities operate not only as *barriers*, which can be objectively measured, but as *cultural and symbolic injustices*, that are insidious and difficult to measure. Cultural and symbolic injustices shape the processes in which a person is recognised (and recognises themselves) as worthy, valued, legitimate and successful (Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Burke, 2002; 2012; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2017). Cultural and symbolic inequalities are forms of *misrecognition* (Fraser, 1997) in which a sense of not being good enough, or shame, is felt in the body and in the self (Ahmed, 2004; Raphael Reed et al., 2007; Burke, 2012, 2017). 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; Burke, 2002; Ahmed, 2004). Indeed, recent research has indicated that the imposter phenomenon may be more due to a mismatch between the person's characteristics and their environment than to any inherent "syndrome" that occurs within the individual (Feenstra et al., 2020).

Practices in higher education that are taken-for-granted as neutral and unproblematic, such as assessment and grading, are rooted in systems of inequality (Lillis, 2001). Grading practices are embedded in institutional histories of exclusion of groups who continue to be under-represented in higher education (Lee & Street 2000; Lillis 2001). This is often explained as simply low academic attainment, or even failure, without understanding the relationship between institutionalised grading practices, social inequalities and (institutionally recognised forms of) success. However, without analysis of institutional practices, which are of major significance to academic success, experiences of these practices often reinforce a sense of not being the "right" kind of person in higher education (Burke, 2012). The absence of analytical attention to significant institutional practices in higher education, such as grading and assessment, 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.

The emotional fragility and changing nature of self-esteem was illuminated through students' articulation of their personal expectations in relation to wider discourses of success shaped by grading practices. For example, Ryan talks about his self-esteem, which "plummeted a lot, especially after the grades were released at the end of the first semester; it was definitely deterring because I lost a lot of motivation to do well and I was even considering deferring because I thought it was the end of the world and I wouldn't be able to work out how to do it." This sense of self-questioning was echoed by other students, for example:

> Interviewer: Do you think grades have an impact on a student's self-esteem and their sense of belonging in the university?
>
> Sean: Yeah, definitely. I used to think that maybe I shouldn't do university when I was getting bad marks or marks that I wasn't expecting to get and that's where I was really demotivated with my early years of university. I wasn't getting good marks in my physics degree; I was just sort of going, "Do I really want to do this? Am I sure I want to do this?" And I just kept asking myself that question over and over again and then by third year, I realised I was still asking myself that question but then I was sort of going, "Let's stop asking that question if I really like this and start asking myself, 'What do I like about physics the most'?"

Sean suggests that over time, with appropriate pedagogical support, he shifted his self-questioning away from an uncertainty about his capability to be successful and towards a sense of agency in thinking about what he likes about his studies. This resituated him in relation to his studies and his perception of success, enabling him to persist with his studies.

Students' engagement with grading and assessment practices emerged across the qualitative data as a highly emotive experience, which connected strongly with a sense of self-belief, or not. This signals the imperative of sensitive pedagogical approaches to assessment and student feedback, which has received extensive attention by academic literacy researchers as a crucial dimension of equity (see for example Lillis, 2001; Lillis and Ramsay, 1997; Lea and Street, 2000). This body of work foregrounds the importance of teaching academic literacies to demystify academic practices and expectations, which are often not clearly explained, such as what it means to "be critical" when writing an essay (Lillis, 2001). This work demonstrates the importance of facilitating access to taken-for-granted academic practices and expectations in the context of the discipline/subject being studied as a key part of creating inclusive and equitable approaches.

Experiences of receiving formative, summative, positive and/or negative feedback, and high or low grades, significantly impacted on the emotional state of students and on their will to carry on with their studies. This could lead to elated feelings and happiness, as the following account demonstrates:

> I did get remarks back on one of my assignments last semester. I was really stressed out about this assignment and I had written it but I still didn't think I had any idea if I was talking about the right thing in the assignment. Turns out I was and the lecturer actually… the comments on it was like "You're a great writer, very analytical mind. I can see that we have a PhD student on our hands", and I was like "Heck yeah. First semester, killing it". I was pretty stoked about that actually. I was really stoked about that. (Emma)

The emotional responses to university experiences and students' relation to success through assessment and grading practices led to happiness, worry and fear. Emotions were heightened through the relationship with teaching staff and the forms of support and feedback available. Pedagogical relations between teaching and student play a key role in the emotional dimensions of higher education participation and the ways these emotions can support or impede student success (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017), as the following account illustrates:

> Yeah, I was like "Oh, that's all I need now. I've done that. I don't need anything else" and if I get a fail mark in an essay, "Oh well, I'm just going to go back and say, 'Look, I did it once' that's pretty good". And I feel I had that tutor again this year and it just makes a difference because she's passionate about what she's teaching and the support she gives and she's realistic about it too; she's not just like, you know, if you do a bad job, she's not just going to be like "Oh well, that was really good". She's going to say, "This is why it wasn't good" but yeah, I really like her teaching style and I really liked it back then and it was just about listening to what she had to say and then applying it whereas there's a lot of times I've had someone, as a lecturer or a tutor, and they haven't been clear about things, they've given contradictory information, they've been disconnected from the students. I had one that would say things like "Why aren't you asking for help if you're confused" but then yell at me

> when I asked for help, and I'm like "Last week you had a go at me, why are you telling me to ask you for help"; sometimes I have a worried look because I'm just really boggled by this academic and he's like "Stop looking worried. There's nothing to be worried about". I'm like "Oh, but there's so much to be worried about". (Amanda)

The importance of feedback, assessment and grading practices on students' sense of capability, worth and success, and their emotional well-being while at university, has been identified in previous research (Burke, Bennett et al., 2017). Research uncovering the emotional dimensions of higher education participation has brought attention to how experiences of inequality are felt in the body, significantly undermining institutional commitments to equity (Chawla and Rodriguez, 2007; Leathwood and Hey, 2009; Burke, 2017; Cook-Sather, 2018). Pedagogies for equity need not only be sensitive to the cultural politics of emotion, which can profoundly undermine a students' sense of capability, but also to foster an ethics of compassion, empathy and care (Burke, 2012; Burke, 2017; Carter et al., 2018; Zembylas et al., 2014). This involves understanding the context of students' lived experiences in relation to exclusive higher education practices that, when not redressed through pedagogies of care, reproduce exclusion. Developing assessment and feedback strategies underpinned by an ethics of care in relation to challenging exclusion is imperative for equitably supporting student success.

## Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

As part of the national agenda to build equity in higher education, universities are strategically committed to creating equitable environments for their students that generate a sense of belonging and inclusion. The idea of belonging and inclusion, and the ways they relate to student success, require careful attention as illuminated in the wider literature. Indeed, efforts to create belonging and inclusion, when not done with cultural awareness, an ethics of care and sensitivity to difference, can unwittingly reinforce exclusion. Discourses of inclusion ultimately require the student to fit in to the dominant culture of the university, or be excluded, either through self-exclusion or institutional exclusion through standardising practices (Archer, 2003). Belonging also requires a sense of fitting in and connection that often ignores the ways difference undermines such institutional commitments. Rather, scholars have argued that it is important for there to be closer attention to questions of difference in order to challenge the construction of students as a homogenous group, which is experienced as a form of exclusion. The students' accounts illuminated these issues in relation to positive experiences of belonging and inclusion, where they experienced a sense of connection to a student or university community, which generated a feeling of being valued. In contrast, students talked of not belonging as related to not feeling part of a community, feeling different from peers, having very limited time on or having to travel long distances to campus and not having friends or connection to community at university. For example, Beth explains:

> I guess just with excluded, when I was doing it part-time, like I said, I only went to the tutorials and came straight home – I didn't have time to hang around at uni, so when I was working full-time and studying part-time that made it more difficult to feel included because I didn't feel like I had, I guess, a sense of community whereas when you're full-time and you have more time available to study and to be at uni, I feel more included I guess.

Michael is clear about not feeling a sense of belonging at university. He explains that this is connected to "being a mature age student" and feels like an "outlier" because he is often not recognised by other students as a peer. Another mature student, Amanda, similarly explains that she doesn't have a sense of belonging to a student community but as she is studying on a small campus this isn't experienced by her as a problem:

> I'm quite a lot older than most of the kids – I say "kids" but they're not – people in my cohort. I've just turned 40 and most of them are, you know, just left school so I don't really feel that sense of community, like nobody's invited me

out for dinner or anything like that because I'm so much older than them which is fine – I don't expect that. That's not what I went to uni for and I probably would say "no" most of the time anyway. Yeah, so I don't really have that sense of community there but that's not necessarily a bad thing. I go to a small campus too; if I went to the bigger campus maybe it would be different. (Amanda)

Omar also talks about not belonging as linked to a sense of difference and limited time and connection to being at university:

> Interviewer: Do you feel like you belong at university?
> Omar: I don't know. Not really.
> Interviewer: Why is that?
> Omar: Because I'm just a black face on Zoom – that's not really contributing to uni. It's like I'm there for an hour and then just leave.
> I: Well, how important is the feeling of belonging at university to you?
> Omar: It's pretty important, yeah.

Students who did experience a strong sense of belonging often described this as connected to being part of a community or peer group. This was linked to a sense of being institutionally valued and giving back to others, as expressed by Anna when asked "What context do you feel most included or valued as a student?":

> I think just being able to help peers. Also, being involved – one thing that's helped with my personal growth I think is all the [University E] extra-curriculum and sort of through that I think being asked if I'd do the scribing or if I'd do the student support experience and yeah, so just being included and I think recognised by the university as a willing participant and that involvement, it's been lovely to build relationship and rapport with a new community of people that have been really wonderful throughout the whole experience. (Anna)

Just as misrecognition powerfully shaped student experiences, recognition – or a sense of being institutionally valued – emerged in the student data as highly important to students' sense of belonging. Developing such processes of recognition, to support inclusion and belonging, requires considerate and sensitive attention to teaching and the forms of pedagogical relations being fostered. Fiona powerfully captures this:

Interviewer: Do you feel included and valued as a student at your uni?

Fiona: At [a small campus of University E], yes, very much so. When I was at the [main] campus, because I did one year of social science at [University E main campus] and one semester of nursing in [a small campus of University E], and I felt like I was just kind of treated as like a student or a number, and not as a person. I think because there's so many people and it's so big so it's hard for the teachers to know you really well but yeah, at the [University E main campus], I just feel like we're so well looked after down there. (Fiona)

Recognition requires students to be valued as a person and not a number in the room. This also requires attention to difference, which inevitably becomes a pedagogical challenge in diverse educational contexts (Chawla and Rodriquez, 2007). A sense of exclusion is seen by Isabella as "my fault" and "a bit tricky" because she has "very strong opinions" and does "not always agree with what's going on, especially when we have a group". Despite this, she takes responsibility to "try and keep everyone feeling included" but this has left her feeling a "bit outspoken just trying to get people involved and that's affected me later on".

Students also talked about what "success" means in relation to being connected and feeling a sense of belonging at university. For Trish, this was about "being accepted" and learning that "it's all about being inclusive and supporting minorities". Students expressed a sense of belonging in terms of human connection, kindness and feeling welcomed by others. This also related to being physically on-campus as Ashley explains: "I like the idea of belonging, I like the idea that I can go into the university and feel like I belong there and when you're at home doing study, it's just not the same and you don't feel that, you feel really disconnected from everything." This contrasted with strong expressions of not belonging:

Interviewer: Do you feel like you belong at university?

Christopher: I don't know. I just don't feel like I'm a part of it. I don't feel like I should be there.

I: Is it more like you don't feel like you belong to this university, or is it you don't feel like a university student?

Christopher: Yeah, I don't feel like a university student.

Jaelynn explains such feelings of not belonging in relation to (dis)connection to place, background and embodied personhood. "It was a constant battle to feel like I belonged in their kind of world and I looked like a dag because you know, my parents didn't care about fashion and neither did I and so I constantly felt like a dag from Mt Druitt amongst these very rich, flashy people and so for me, it was very much a cultural… I mean I'm a white privileged person and yet, I feel like the lowest of low in this room whereas I definitely don't feel that way at [University F] which is really nice and I love that looking around, everyone is unique. To me it felt like everyone is so much more authentic at [University F] and I always feel like I belong there."

Difference is challenging pedagogically and requires sensitivity and care. It requires that university teachers are aware of the ways that institutionalised discrimination might be reproducing inequalities in the classroom. Aidan illustrates this in relation to a lack of awareness about institutionalised ableism, which requires him as a student with disabilities to "fight for it" and "prove over and over and over that I actually have the needs that I say I've got":

Having people believe me when I say that because of my documented disabilities I have these needs, is novel. Being able to have transcripts of stuff, without having to fight for it – that kind of stuff is really helpful and supports my included-ness. Having to prove over and over and over that I actually have the needs that I say I've got – I get people who look at my weighted average mark, and who then decide that I must be making it up, you know, like I couldn't possibly have those grades and also be disabled; Your ableism is showing honey. (Aidan)

The students' accounts are powerful in reinforcing the significance of belonging and inclusion for building student equity at multiple levels (institutionally, within student support structures, pedagogically and so forth), and ultimately supporting student success. Research tells us this is not something to be left to chance; it requires strategic thinking about equity, institutional commitments to recognising and valuing diversity and difference, having agile structures and systems that enable staff to be responsive to the diverse contexts of students' lives and providing forms of high quality professional development to support staff to create and reinforce inclusive educational approaches and spaces (Burke, Bennett et al., 2016; Christie et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Carter et al., 2018; Cook-Sather, 2018; Rubin, 2012b).

## Student Choices as a Process of Learning

Choice making was entwined for students with multiple considerations but was for most deeply connected to their dedication to learning and the enrichment of life opportunities offered by higher education. Overall, the students' accounts strongly brought instrumentalist, or job-ready, understandings of student choice into question. James discusses this in relation to "not feeling it" anymore and not having a sense of purpose, rather than academic performance. He explains that a student might be "doing really well class-wise but then [the student is] just as likely next year just to drop out because they don't feel it anymore." He explains further: "you might be doing well but there's no real reason for them to do it, you know, they're just doing it because people expect them to do it or because what else are they going to do." James suggests that successful students choose to study because they are dedicated to their future to the extent that "if you're unsuccessful, you don't care about that – you're just doing this because you want to do it."

Related to these notions of dedication and purpose, a major theme in students' accounts of their educational choices was "curiosity". James talks about always being dedicated to curiosity but this then having an impact on his choices over time:

> I've always been dedicated to my curiosity but the format that it's taken over time has changed. Like originally I wanted to be an archaeologist, then a palaeontologist, and that was in late primary school, early secondary and that changed to just like a biochemist and then the genetic engineering when I moved into university. So, it's changed over time but it's always been satisfying that curiosity. (James)

The students suggested the need for institutional flexibility to support the development of their curiosity and self-understanding. Their accounts uncovered how student choices are not once and for all cemented at the time of initial application but are ongoing as they discover new things about their respective fields of study, and professional pathways to their futures. This is the case for students across age groups, as engagement with higher education inevitably opens up new horizons. This sense of discovery shaped choices in relation to career pathways through a broader sense of what motivated and interested them. This became clearer through their engagement with their studies and learning about the different possibilities available. Amanda explains that having an open mind to continue making choices throughout her studies and about her future direction is important:

> Yeah. I have a feeling… initially I chose when I was thinking about what kind of job I wanted to do, I thought midwifery because having babies, every woman is different and it's not really sick people – it's just helping people manage their condition and have a baby and that kind of thing and that appealed to me and then I didn't get into the midwifery; I got into nursing and I thought, "Well, that's fine. I'll do that first and then transfer over" and then I've learned how many options nursing has and I thought, "Oh, I didn't even realise all of this stuff existed" so I thought, "Well, I'll just stick with this and maybe I don't even have to do midwifery to find something that suits me". I'm quite interested in proactive health so I was thinking more doing community health type stuff, maybe patient education, like community education on a broader scale but, yeah, I don't know yet. I haven't made up my mind what I want to do; I'm still leaving that open to learn more. (Amanda)

Being enabled to make choices as they learned more about their subject and themselves was experienced by students as a widening of opportunities and horizons and was greatly strengthened through the flexibility of their degree programs. The discoveries and learning that unfolded as part of their studies facilitated students to successfully navigate their choices. Their engagement and dedication to their learning became enhanced as they realised the different opportunities available to them, as Page explains:

> Well, because the Bachelor of Nursing kind of fell through, I knew that with Social Sciences, I had all of these different opportunities, depending on my major and because I have a background in advocacy already, I wanted to use the degree to better understand different points of view of things and kind of go up there and go into actually policy change and whatnot. It was something that I enjoyed; I didn't want to get into something serious like, you know, I considered law there for a little bit and I was like, "I would not enjoy being a lawyer; I would much rather argue my way into politics or argue my way up the ranking in a way I actually enjoy". You know, I enjoyed things from my Sociology course before, I loved the different theories and the different ideologies and everything and it just seemed to make a lot more sense. (Page)

The students' successful engagement with their studies was not expressed in narrow, strategic or instrumental ways; there was a sense of curiosity, discovery and joy in learning that the students repeatedly captured in their accounts. Simon, for example, talks about the enjoyment he experiences in his computer science studies:

> I originally did a Bachelor of Physics before, more specifically it's Medical and Radiation Physics but I decided to continue the research side of that degree and I also wanted to do a Bachelor of Computer Science because I discovered that I really did enjoy programming and here I am, enjoying computer science more than I ever have.

Importantly, Simon points out that having the chance to "do terribly" through "taste-testing" opened the doors to successful and rewarding experiences of learning, eventually enabling the discovery of where he wanted to focus:

> I actually entered [University E] in a Bachelor of Science and I wasn't too sure what I wanted to do at the time and I was a bit confused, so I thought I'd try enrolling into different subjects and essentially taste-testing every kind of subject out there and I enjoyed physics a lot. I also kind of enjoyed chemistry but then in my first year, the second semester, spring session, I did terrible at chemistry and that put me off chemistry forever and I thought I'd continue physics because that was the only subject I've done that I really enjoyed and I continued that to the end of that degree but about halfway through my physics degree, about second or third year, I got into the programming side of physics and that's when I discovered that I really enjoyed programming and I started to understand less of physics because I was more focused on the programming side and I started doing worse in the more abstract, heavy, physics concepts which then eventually led me to be a little bit unsatisfied with my marks and that's why I decided I still enjoy physics but not as much as the more core concepts of physics so I decided to try out computer science for a year and I really enjoyed the first year. So then, I'm in my current second year but I also thought computer science does complement physics a lot so I continue research and that's where I am right now. (Simon)

The time and opportunity to explore other pathways before discovering a degree pathway that felt right and made sense was important to many of the students. Their accounts suggest that just going to university for the sake of it is not enough to sustain engagement and support student success, particularly with significant concerns about the cost of higher education. Caitlin explains this in clear terms: Why would I turn up for a degree if I don't, one, need to because I was like, "Degree, expensive. Do I need to do that? If I'm doing it, I want to be very sure that that's what I want to be doing". So I was like, "I'll take a year off and I'll read and figure out… I'll just check into a bunch of different stuff and figure out what I like". She decided instead to study marketing at TAFE because "If it's free, I might as well just get in there". However, she was not inspired by this choice or by her brother's experiences, who was "miserable". This led Caitlin to consider:

> You know what would be great? Studying for six years at university, which made sense to me because I went, "Okay. If you want to do psychology, you have to go to university". To me that made sense – that's something that you would do and also super-interested and it seemed like it ticked every box. Do you know what I mean? It's interesting, it's going to be engaging as a subject. (Caitlin)

Students' sense of curiosity, discovery and excitement for their future was supported by an opening of rich educational opportunities that higher education provided. Choice-making was not about making instrumental decisions but having the capacity to explore, even beyond graduation, as Alexandra explains:

> At the end when I graduate – that's a great question; I still don't know what I really want to do, I don't know exactly the job I want. I have ideas of fields I want to work in but I've started to become very open. Before I was not comfortable being in this sort of space; I was very much, "I need to know exactly what job I want to do", before I knew I was going to just do business, I was going to become a curator and work in this art gallery or this museum and then I was going to transition to this – it was very structured. Now I'm very comfortable with not knowing. (Alexandra)

The opening of university to prospective students before they applied or enrolled was another key factor in students' choice-making about the relevance of higher education for their lives, as explained by Polly:

> I rang the uni one day and said, "Can I come and listen to any of your lectures", expecting a "No" and they said, "Of course you can", so I just rocked up and I thought, "Well, wow, this is really interesting and I'd just like to be part of this just as an intellectual exercise", because I just like learning. Then it was something that became serious. (Polly)

Indeed, students talked about a primary motivator for their choices as about broader forms of personal enrichment, connected to but not necessarily driven by concerns about a future job, as David explains: "I think my primary reason for doing university is personal enrichment I guess; getting any kind of career out of this is secondary but as I continue with my degree, I'm actually looking more and more forward to some kind of career, I guess." As students experience this sense of personal enrichment, their outlook towards their future prospects become clearer: "I just wanted to learn for the sake of learning really, but now it has shifted a little bit more towards a bit of optimism and excitement towards the prospects of having a career specifically in the geographical fields" (David).

Across all differences, including age groups, the students' choices were guided by their ongoing learning journeys and were not cemented in one particular moment in time, a rigid sense of aspiration or by an instrumental strategy about their future careers. Rather the student interviews suggested that choice-making is a process, entwined with educational experiences and opportunities and enabled by a flexible structure that supports their developing and changing understanding of their studies, selves and sense of discovery and purpose.

## Effort and Success

Despite many participants' lived experiences of disadvantage, perceptions of success were often shaped by the long-standing political meritocratic discourse that success stems from effort (Morley & Lugg, 2009). Indeed students' reflections frequently disregarded the challenges brought about by their social position, the impact of social privilege on success, and recognition that individual effort may not be a sufficient measure of conceptualising degrees of success in higher education.

Stephanie, for example, explained that:

> …home life wasn't great.... We were quite poor; my parents are in government housing and it just wasn't a priority for them so if I said, 'Well, I just don't want to go to school', then they just would let me not go to school…If I had actually applied myself, or had somebody kind of pushing a little, then I think I would have done well. (Stephanie)

Misrecognising the potential challenge of her home environment and the impact of absent family support and educational resources, instead, Stephanie internalised the deficit perception of her achievement and rationalised that she could have performed 'better' if she had personally applied herself. She embodied

the wider meritocratic discourse in higher education which attributes the performance of individuals to their own personal effort (Barry, 2001), but ignores the different structural, cultural and social positions that students occupy and the impact that this can have on equal access to educational outcomes (Burke, 2012).

Some participants referred to lack of effort to explain their perceptions of being 'unsuccessful' at university. Fiona, for example said:

> I would say a student that is 'unsuccessful' would be one that doesn't apply themselves, doesn't really put in effort or contribute to class discussion or just doesn't contribute in general. Yeah, someone that has poor time management, leaves all their assignments to the last minute. (Fiona)

Similarly, Trish stated:

> To me, not having success as a student is not putting in the effort…and not participating and hence, failing subjects…they say that sometimes you can fail a subject even if you are trying and I'm not sure if that can happen because it's been my experience that if you put in full effort that you get rewards. (Trish)

For both of these students there was little consideration that personal circumstances could impact student engagement, effort or capacity to work to deadlines. Even Aadhya who described her challenging circumstances living with a significant illness defined being unsuccessful as, "giving up in the middle of uni when things get hard." Instead of acknowledging that individual contexts impact how 'hard' it is to study, discourses of blame narrowed the student's perception, where 'giving up' was seen as a personal character flaw and the marker of an unsuccessful student.

Conversely, a small number of participants implied that effort would be a more equitable measure of success in higher education than grades. When considering his definition of success, Kaleb, for example, explained that:

> It does depend on circumstance as well. If their background is pretty rough and their family life is not the best, if they fail an assessment, I'm not going to be like 'Yep, you failed, you're worthless, blah, blah, blah, blah'. It's, 'I've seen the effort you've put in, you've done as well as those other students who have got this mark but you've tried twice as hard'. So I'm like 'In my mind, you're successful and you adjust that towards that'. (Kaleb)

While there appears to be a connection between effort and achievement, effort will never be a fair measure of success. This is because students from more privileged groups are more likely to possess cultural and material resources that impact the ease, and therefore the effort required to achieve successful outcomes in education. The dominant meritocratic discourse, however, normalises ideas that effort is central to success and therefore frames success in inequitable terms. It is vital that we push back against this discourse to ensure that the experiences of students from underrepresented groups are not misrecognised in higher education.

## Chapter 5: Aspirations and Transformations

This chapter explores the factors that drive students to study, and their visions for their lives after university. In contrast to the prevailing view that students attend university in order to become employable, many of the students we spoke to were motivated by more encompassing desires to give something back to their families and communities. They see university as a way to acquire the skills they need to help improve the world around them and make a contribution to creating a better society.

## Motivation and Aspirations

Students were asked about their motivations for studying at university. They were also invited to reflect on what success looks like to them in the future. All students talked about more than one factor that motivates and inspires them.

Motivations for going to university and remaining engaged in programs were described as being much more than what current policy and career discourse reduce to a concern for being 'job ready'. Students were holistic in their longer-term aspirations, which were overwhelmingly about gaining the power 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. For example, when Aiden was asked 'What would have to happen for you to feel like you've made it through university as a successful student? How would you characterise this after graduation?' He said:

> How many people have I helped, and how much have I helped them. Full-stop. That's it, because the money that I make, and the accolades and the letters after my name are all meaningless unless I'm actually helping a lot of people in a lot of ways. (Aiden)

Thus, this and other research shows that the dominant discourse of 'job readiness', which makes invisible other valuable outcomes of higher education participation for people from LSES and other disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. Lumb et al., 2020) is misrepresentative of those groups. Research reveals that this policy representation still dominates much widening participation work, including school outreach initiatives but also higher education policy foci, which too often conflate inequalities with lack of aspiration (Burke, 2002; 2006; Harrison & Waller, 2018; Spohrer, Stahl, & Bowers-Brown, 2018; Bennett et al., 2015; Whitty & Clement, 2015; Gore, Fray, Patfield & Harris, 2019), which is an important focus of Burke's argument that we must think differently *beyond widening participation* (2012). Such analysis

and subsequent research, including this study, clearly show that aspirations are multidimensional, fluid, contextual and intimately connected to community and family enrichment and personal identity formation.

In order to understand student aspiration it is imperative to carefully listen to students' voices and to develop understanding of what really matters to them (Bennett, 2019). The students in this project strongly asserted that the purpose of participating in higher education was more to them then gaining a job, although they hoped to develop meaningful careers as part of gaining a degree. Indeed, students talked about gaining employment opportunities through engaging in further/vocational forms of education, but wanting more from higher education, as Caitlin explains:

> If you want to do psychology, you have to go to university. To me that made sense – that's something that you would do and also super-interested and it seemed like it ticked every box. Do you know what I mean? It's interesting, it's going to be engaging as a subject because it's going to be challenging enough because I feel like TAFE was not. (Caitlin)

Aspiring to be a professional who had the knowledge and skills to make a difference for people, whether as a leader, teacher, nurse or a doctor, was a prime motivation. Emily explains:

> I'm not content with an exercise science degree; I want to be an exercise physiologist – that's where I feel as though I can make more of a difference in people's lives. (Emily)

Aspirations were shaped as students engaged in their programs of study, and new possibilities for their futures emerged. This was often related to personal experiences, which created a sense of meaning for them across their studies, their lives and their future hopes. 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. This emerges in Baylee's account of the connections she made with her studies, her personal experiences and her commitment to her rural community:

> the amount of times I've broken my feet is just unbelievable. So yeah, but then I just found that I was really interested in learning about all of the underlying physiology of it and then, when I looked into becoming a doctor, they recommended doing biomedical science as an undergrad so I figured that I probably should

do what they recommend because I'm the first person in my family to go to uni … I'm really interested in rural health because, you know, coming from a rural town, it's very hard to find good doctors and people that actually connect with the community, and that's sort of what I wanted more of like an integration with the community so I felt that being a rural doctor would help me meet a lot of people, help me help the people out, get a bit of information out there because you know, being one of the first people in my family to go to uni, it's very much shown me that people are misinformed about things and it's easy for people to not understand science or medicine at all and figure, you know, I enjoy studying so I might as well help some people out. (Baylee)

Being a professional and having a career that gave students more power to make a difference, especially to those treated unfairly, was **described as the ultimate success**. This was related to a sense of belonging to communities for which students strongly identified. Dean's account of this is powerful in relation to the experiences of exclusion of people with disabilities that were personal to him, and that motivated him to make a difference on behalf of others. He believed that having success at university would empower him to contribute to caring for and helping others have access to life-changing opportunities:

> one of the driving forces has been bad experiences in the past and the desire to succeed, the memories of being treated shit by people and their ability to walk all over you with their qualifications or education, and the exclusion from society because of disability, has been an absolutely driving force to succeed and level that playing field. So there is a need and a desire for a success just for the remainder of my life and also the care of other people and wanting to change their lives – they're my driving things. (Dean)

Marcus similarly talked about his motivation to succeed at university in relation to empowering change for himself and others. His focus was on gaining an "advocacy role" so that he could "make connections" for those isolated from key government structures such as NDIS and Centrelink in order to help change lives. He describes the relationship between his motivation to learn and the sense of satisfaction he experiences from helping others:

> It was a motivator from the beginning. It was a motivator and an option, but it still is a motivator and every time I help someone, I guess I enjoy

it and get a lot of satisfaction out of helping someone negotiate the systems of government that is alienating them from services, whether those services are financial or actual human service services that might empower them. I guess that's been some of my subjects have been around that; they've been quite interesting and helpful in that area but yeah … (Marcus)

Students who had experienced structural inequalities (for example the systematic exclusion of people with disabilities or with care experienced backgrounds) were highly motivated by their personal experiences to gain a degree in order to advocate on behalf of others. Page explains that "As someone who grew up being told that I couldn't do a lot of things because I was in foster care and I was going to end up the same as other people, like every other foster kid – that was also another motivator but I definitely loved the idea of getting to learn new things". Through the encouragement of others to undertake an Enabling pathway to higher education program, and then as an Enabling student gaining a distinction, she explains that her motivation was reinforced to contribute to human rights:

> So, not only, I guess, my aspirations aren't just child protective but just human rights, like everybody should be entitled to being able to access things that they need to within the community. (Page)

Camilla discusses her commitment to study Law as motivated by her aspiration to contribute to legal changes to support greater animal rights:

> I guess there's other motivating factors as to why I want the law degree; I'm really into animal rights and all of that sort of thing. I think once I get the law degree and everything like that, I would like to possibly change some laws in regard to animal rights and really push for that sort of thing. (Camilla)

These aspirations to make a difference were often combined with students' hopes for creating 'stable' and 'comfortable' lives for themselves and their families, as well as becoming professionals who have the capacity to significantly contribute to their communities and to society more broadly:

> I have a big thing in wanting to actually contribute to society. I'm quite conscientious in that way and so I feel like I need to excel as much as I can and get as much skills as I can to further the job and I'm practical with the fact that whatever knowledge I have to learn, the skills I have to acquire, they're going to compound through time so if I don't start university, I'll never

catch up the top docs. So, it's like something drawing towards and something drawing away from me and it's like I need to excel because I can have a high paying lucrative job that I can be extremely proud of, or the opposite thing that could happen would be wait for my dust and I'll always regret that and I think that the second one is probably a higher, stronger motivator than the first at times. They're still to have a strong legacy, it's still to help society, it's still to support my family ... (Dean)

Making a difference and changing lives was also about their personal hopes for their futures. This was expressed by students who "wanted to do better" and to avoid being "stuck in the same job" (Dominque, p. 44). However, these aspirations were reinforced by a sense of contributing something beyond the personal. Dominique explains this as "my calling into community services" because she "actually wanted to help people and make a difference" and needed to have "some knowledge and practice skills" to do this.

Baylee also reflected this sense of determination and "desperation to actually succeed". Her account brings gender equity to the fore, when she explains:

> I'd like to work in a field that I'm proud to work in and that I want to work in and that I could go to work and enjoy every single day, you know … I like to be positive in terms of I'd like to be the first woman ever in my family to get a degree. I think power to 'the chicks' [women], you know. (Baylee)

A sense of giving back also extended to immediate family and for student parents. Damien explains that he was motivated by "being an inspiration to the kids" and showing for his children that "It's never too late". He hopes that as his children grow older "they'll look at what I've done and be inspired by it" (Damien).

Students are highly motivated by their aspiration to develop impactful careers, challenging limited notions of employability to much broader concerns with making meaningful contributions to community and society. In other words, student motivation is driven by the potential that higher education offers to them for transformation at the personal and social levels.

## Transformation

While we know that those who attend university undoubtedly experience change (Stone & O'Shea, 2012), the depths and variety of such changes often go somewhat unrecognised. The data collected as part of this project allowed a more comprehensive picture of processes of transformation with students frequently alluding to deeply personal and embodied transformations connected to a sense of self in relation to the world. As discussed above, this was about aspirations for transformation that higher education was seen to offer, but transformation is a process experienced in and through higher education participation and learning. The following section explores the notion of transformation according to two overarching themes: the first relates to more circumstantial or material change that university enabled for these participants, whilst the second theme refers to the more personal or internal transformation that was discussed. These themes reveal the complex and intricate tensions that university participation can bestow as well as the sometimes unexpected repercussions of students' university experiences.

The first theme explores the shifts that students reflected upon that led to material change, conveyed in terms of changes to career aspirations and also shifts in life circumstances or expectations. During interviews, the students referred to defined shifts in the ways in which they considered their future beyond university. This change was sometimes relatively small but often university had provided a space from which individuals were able to 'try out' different identities and thereby explore the alternatives to what they had presupposed was their final educational destination. Chloe reflected on how she had little idea of what a 'defence lawyer' was but her time at university had allowed her to 'meet […] people who do work in those fields and I guess learning more about the systems as well and realising that that's where I want to direct my energy.' Similarly, Simon described how when commencing university: 'I wasn't too sure what I wanted to do at the time and I was a bit confused.' For him it was the decision to 'try enrolling into different subjects and essentially taste-testing every kind of subject out there' that essentially allowed him to discover a desire for scientific programming.

These changes were not only about redefining career aspirations but could also be about discovering what someone does not want to do, a type of 'reality check' in terms of initial career aspirations. This is exemplified Baylee who explained how at the beginning of her university career she wanted to be a doctor she desired that 'crazy city life. I wanted to be an emergency doctor.' However, university attendance provided a space to realise the 'stresses' of that life, resulting in a shift in career aspirations to 'something a bit more chilled out, better hours, less mentally and physically demanding.' Whilst changes in degree focus and objectives is not generally accepted as indicating academic success, what the participants in this study indicated was how this was a form of success for them. The space and time afforded by university attendance to 'try-out' different subjects allowed a number of participants a better understanding of where their aspirations ultimately lay. We explore this theme further in relation to the section on student choices as a process of learning (see pp. 69–72 of this report).

Given the diverse backgrounds of participants in this study, it is perhaps not surprising that another success factor was a defined shift in expectations or life circumstances. Primarily such changes were defined in relation to better career prospects and also, higher income post-graduation, but for some, these shifts were less dramatic or conspicuous. For example, for Dominique, simply getting into university was a success beyond any of her initial expectations of life. As she so succinctly explained:

> Going back to my high school, being told "University is not an option" and then getting in to university, I was like "Hey, there's my success. I'm actually just proven a lot of what people have been saying". (Dominique)

There is a sense of pride and proving others 'wrong.' For Dominique, the act of enrolling was such a fundamental change in what was expected in her environment where future destiny was already prescribed: 'Like in our high school…leave school like Year 10, you get a basic job, or if you go to Year 12 you just go to the local TAFE and get a local job' (Dominique). Such sentiments were echoed by others in the study, who regarded attendance as an opportunity to redefine futures that had, in some cases, already been foreclosed or prescribed:

> I guess it's a highlight of my life to have achieved that level of success when I thought it was out of my reach. (Marcus)

> Being so introverted and having severe anxiety, actually going to a place that's full of people and the hustle and bustle, that's success for me. (Madison, p. 22)

The second theme that emerged in the interviews illuminated how transformation could be experienced in an embodied sense as a transformation of self. The richly descriptive nature of the data allowed a more nuanced analysis of such personal transformations to emerge.

Participants described shifts in perspectives as a result of attending university. This might involve simply changing opinions or preconceived ideas on a topic or a taken for granted idea, an 'opening up' of worldview that was generally appreciated by the different students involved:

> I've learned a lot more about how to have conversations with people who don't necessarily agree with your standpoint which has been really insightful… which is something that I'll take away from uni that I'm so grateful for because I've talked to a lot of different people about lots of different issues that I never would have done previously to going to uni. (Gila)

> I just started to see things differently. (Hayley)

These shifts in thinking were sometimes quite dramatic. Isabella explained, having grown up in difficult circumstances where 'some of the things I went through were quite horrible really,' coming to university enabled the space to rethink personal perspective on life. As she further explained:

> I think it was about realising that I didn't hate the world, and the world didn't hate me and that I did have a place within the world. I just needed to first, accept the world and then try and rebuild some of my ideas. (Isabella)

Such changes are generally not foregrounded in the more official discourses of success, yet for a number of the respondents, it was such changes in perspective that underpinned their sense of achievement in the higher education environment.

Attending university is often equated to a sense of increased confidence and self-esteem, particularly for those students from under-represented backgrounds (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2020). The data in this study equally supports this contention, with students frequently equating the notion of success with such transformations. The impacts of such shifts were often multiplied because the confidence of these learners was generally low at the commencement of their studies. Hence, as learners gradually moved through their studies and achieved acceptable grades or the 'norms' of success, their sense of capability and ability to achieve dramatically shifted.

> seeing the progress in the last two-and-a-half years, and what I actually can achieve and the potentials of what I can go and do – for me, that's really exciting. (Anna)

> but then I've actually had grades that have lifted me up and I've felt like "I am smart. No, I am smart" and they really change the way I think about myself. (Camilla)

Such changes in confidence and self-esteem were key to understanding and describing success, frequently conveyed by the marks received in assessment items. As a result, achieving such official markers of success often had emotional undertones for learners. These were highly charged signifiers of belonging, and so poor grades had significant embodied repercussions:

> I know if I've not done well on a subject, I feel pretty crap. (Brooke)

> getting those 25 percents in maths tests made me feel really crap, made me feel like I wasn't worthy of anything, I wasn't smart, you know. (Madison)

> when I get HDs, it's just the feeling of elation is just more than anything else I have in my life at the moment and it just provides me with something that makes me so happy and last week. (Trish)

Such insights provide timely reminders of how when 'success' is equated only to assessment results, the repercussions of not achieving expected standards, can be felt at a very physical level (Burke, 2017). Given the experiences of institutionalised misrecognition that many students have experiences at the cultural level of inequality, and through pathologising discourses of deficit (Burke, 2012), the repercussions of 'failure', as determined by the constructed norms of an educational institution, should not be underestimated.

The transformations described by these participants also reflected shifts in deeply-held perceptions of self, which may lead to new self-knowledge or understanding in a more global or encompassing sense. One example of this change was Camilla, who perceived herself as 'shy' and not very out spoken. For Camilla, attending university had led to a deep personal growth, which underpinned her sense of success:

> now, I'm very outspoken, I collaborate, I've just really grown so much through my university. So that really has contributed to my success. (Camilla)

Similarly, Gila described how she no longer considered success after university as simply being about gaining employment but rather contemplated this in terms of developing 'as a global citizen and a human being' (Gila). Madison explained how 'Being so introverted and having severe anxiety' just attending university was a form of success and elaborates by reflecting how 'I look back 10 years or even less, and I couldn't catch a bus on my own, so, you know, getting up each day and going in to classes, interacting with people … that's a personal success – talking in class, it's like "Ooh, wow you did it" (Madison). Dean described that university had provided a community of 'people that were like me' – for him, such involvement completely shifted how he thought of himself as different or an outsider and instead provided 'some of the brightest moments of my life because it was like "Okay. So I'm not fully alone. There's other people that are just as alone as I am" (Dean).

## Chapter 6: Critical Life Events

This chapter explores the impacts of unplanned intrusions into students' lives and wellbeing that reduce their capacity to succeed at university. Critical life events, of which COVID-19 is the most universal current example, include serious illness, personal tragedy and family breakdown. These episodes can have dramatic, multifaceted and long-lasting impacts on students' engagement with higher education. It is important to note that although all students (and indeed all people) experience critical life events, the impact of these is exacerbated by wider multidimensional inequalities, as research in the UK powerfully illustrates (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2013; Ingram et al., 2018). Our study suggests that students from LSESB are particularly vulnerable to critical life events, which compound their social, economic and cultural disadvantage. There has been little research into the impact of life events on student success and socioeconomic inequities, yet they are known to have a notable effect on student progress (Roland, Frenay & Boudrenghien, 2016). Personal reasons are often the cause of attrition, and withdrawing students are often from equity group backgrounds (Harvey & Szalkowicz, 2017). Critical life events can occur at any time in an individual's life, yet university enrolment is sometimes considered as being in an untouchable bubble by institutions, such as when success is considered as being synonymous with students graduating in the shortest possible time frame. Participants in this study indicated the impact on their studies of critical life events which occurred during their schooling, or while enrolled at university.

Critical life events that occurred prior to university enrolment impacted some students' success at university. Students' background knowledge and skills were sometimes limited due to events occurring earlier in their lives: "I did a quarter of Grade 7 and then due to various interconnected circumstances, didn't do any education until I enrolled myself into Year 11. Yeah, did a quarter of Year 7, then nothing until Year 11 and then 12" (Ryan). In many cases this limited the degrees they were eligible to enrol in and affected their engagement and performance once they did enrol. The incidents related to bereavement, car accidents, disabilities and illnesses (their own and others'), living arrangements, and employment: the latter then also impacted on financial situations. The period during which data in this study was collected included a specific 'critical life incident' which had varied but universal impact – COVID-19. While it is hoped that such circumstances will not occur again in the near future, the effects are useful to consider as they may produce similar effects to other large-scale community-based disasters resulting in widespread isolation and anxiety, such as the bushfires seen in NSW and elsewhere in 2019.

Most students will experience mild illness at some time during their studies, and while this may be inconvenient, it is unlikely to have significant impact on the students' experiences or outcomes. Serious health matters experienced by students in this study and considered here included stroke, heart disease, autoimmune diseases, cancer and mental health illnesses including bipolar disorder and in some cases leading to psychotic episodes. Students were also affected when close family members or friends experienced serious illness. Serious health issues caused students to have less time and energy to devote to their studies, resulting in lower grades. Additionally, extra-curricular activities could not be accessed, with both factors leading to a devalued degree. Some students, such as Grace, needed to reduce their study load, leading to additional years of study and delaying entry into the workforce:

> I was diagnosed two years ago with MS so I just found that at the time I was going through all the testing for it still, and a lot of appointments, so I just found it really overwhelming, also dealing with the diagnosis, like the psychological effects of it and then all the physical stuff I had to deal with, so it just made more sense for me to be part-time. (Grace)

Lower grades also impacted students' access to some further studies with minimum GPA requirements. Health issues often led to additional stressors for students. Health treatment could be costly, and serious illness could lead to loss of employment, in both cases causing financial hardship. Illnesses suffered by students or those close to them could also be a catalyst for study, providing motivation and helping students succeed at university. This effect was noted by a number of participants who enrolled in degrees relevant to health needs of themselves or family members.

Financial circumstances or relationship breakdowns during enrolment could also lead to undesirable living arrangements, with students from LSES backgrounds having fewer options. Participants spoke of overcrowding, either with family members or in share houses. Family homes could suffer from noise issues, internet access and computer sharing, and difficulty finding a suitable workspace. Share houses had noise issues too, and were sometimes in ill-repair. Co-inhabitants could be cause for concern in relation to drug use and other unsocial behaviour:

> with really cheap rent also comes a really, really terrible falling apart house; my bedroom used to flood, I had maggots falling from the roof one time, my kitchen was outside and a snake was trying to eat a rat in my kitchen one time. I ended up moving out of the house …mostly just because one, a housemate moved in and it turns out he was a heroin addict and he did heroin in my bedroom … while I was at work. (Baylee)

By contrast, students in receipt of scholarships appreciated that they did not need to work, so could focus on studies and take advantage of extra-curricular, value-adding opportunities. Those able to live on or close to campus likewise noted the sense of belonging this imbued, and valued their easy access to campus resources such as libraries, computers and various services.

Students who experienced critical life events, especially illness or disability, during enrolment could be affected more severely than other students by institutional processes and decisions. One example of this is a student having five exams scheduled over the first three days of an exam period. Another student gave an example of the university rescheduling a component of their course at short notice, which is difficult to manage for students with family and/or work commitments: "this semester, Semester 2 of this year, was brought forward for me… well, attempted to have been brought forward for me by three weeks, with only two days' notice" (Konrad).

Work and family commitments can make some degree programs more manageable than others. For example, a midwifery student found that they had to be on call for births at any time. This would be difficult to manage, especially for a student with carer duties and/or employment along with other study requirements.

COVID-19 provides an example where multiple factors were impacted, suddenly, and in some cases simultaneously. Universities moved to online classes, students were in some cases banned from campus and so lost access to peers, computers, resources and services. "I've not enjoyed it at all pretty much, last semester, doing it remotely. If it had been an online course that I was signing up for I never would have started it" (Trish). Some lost employment, leading to financial problems, and in some cases lost their accommodation. For studying parents, days became full of schooling and occupying their children once schools closed:

my wife was working, she was able to support me while I took a little bit of time off. I was actually working a little bit as well … and I was able to just slot that in evenings, weekends, stuff like that … we had my youngest one in the house all day every day and the older one in the house all day every day, trying to home school … my entire day revolves around managing my daughter's school work … she has special needs as well; she's got a ADHD diagnosis and a little bit of dyslexia and dysgraphia so it's really quite challenging. (Peter)

Students with health conditions suffered additional anxiety and restrictions. Interestingly, COVID-19 provided some small advantages. One student whose employment ceased during COVID-19 lockdown (but possibly was eligible for financial supports during this time) had more time for studying.

Universities now have a multitude of services designed to improve equity for disadvantaged students. Generally, students in this study were aware of these (though perhaps had not always been aware of them) and found them very useful. Respondents also noted the support they received from individual teaching staff who were overwhelmingly understanding and supportive, often alerting students to services. There were some barriers to accessing services, related to students not thinking they qualified or feeling less capable because they used them. Even those students who appreciated the services noted that in all likelihood, no amount of service provision could alleviate all of the difficulties they faced. Extra time to complete an assignment was beneficial, but did not improve a student's capacity to focus on a task, and did not increase the resulting GPA. "I like to get HDs. When the opportunity of getting a HD is taken from you, bit of a shame, based on the situation" (Trish). Accordingly, a student may not be eligible for a degree program they aspired to. Pragmatically but also unfortunately, a number of students who had experienced critical life incidents had accepted that not every educational goal they held would be met. Several expressed the importance of realising a balance in life that was achievable according to their own individual circumstances:

It's in terms of the amount of time and the amount of mental capacity that you have – if you have an essay, it's like okay, the essay is important, but also having a place to sleep next week is probably more important, so trying to have to deal with that, yeah, in terms of stress levels and in terms of time and in terms of exhaustion basically. (Caitlin)

At the very least, critical events experienced by students from LSESB caused delays in progress or reductions in some measures of success, such as grades, in their studies at university, and at the worst they caused students to leave study before degree completion. A compounding effect was often noted, where illness caused financial stress, which caused anxiety, which led to poor grades and so on. University services are recognised and appreciated in lessening the impact of some critical life events, but some processes continue to provide unnecessary barriers. It is acknowledged that there are cases where there is little that universities can do to alleviate students' situations: "those supports can only go so far". Despite this, it is worth streamlining processes and evaluating services, as well educational regulations, practices and structures, to ensure they do not add to burdens experienced by students at difficult times. In such cases, delays in progress, and even attrition, should not be treated as failure, but as another step on the individual journey. Even students who leave university prior to completing a degree will likely have gained useful skills during their enrolment, and may return to study at a later date (Harvey & Szalkowicz, 2017).

# Conclusions: Quantitative Study

## Conclusions: Quantitative Study

The present study aimed to provide a better understanding of SES differences in students' perceived success at six Australian universities. We found that students from LSESB tended to report less success than students from HSESB[1] on several factors, including grades, special provisions, peer engagement, late assessments, sense of belonging, mental health, satisfaction with university, university imposterism, associating feedback with failure, expecting to complete university, and expected time to complete university. Some of these findings are consistent with prior research (e.g., MacInnis et al., 2019; Martin, 2012; Productivity Commission, 2019; Robbins et al., 2004; Rubin, 2012; Rubin et al., 2016; Southgate et al., 2014; Verhaeghe et al., 2011). However, it is important to recognise that students from LSESB reported greater class attendance and a greater association of university admission with success.

## Mediation Effects

A key goal for the present research was to investigate potential explanations for SES differences in perceived success. Table 3 provides a summary of the relevant results. Looking at Table 3, it can be seen that social connections and economic resources mediated the associations between SES and success variables in most cases, each explaining some variance in 10 out of 13 associations. Hence, students from LSESB may experience less success at university on some measures, in part, as a result of fewer friendships with other university students (social connections) and less finances (economic resources). Some of these results are consistent with previous research that has found that social connections at university mediates the association between SES and mental health (Rubin et al., 2016) and that money mediates the association between SES and social integration (Rubin & Wright, 2017). However, the present research demonstrates that the mediating effects of social connections and economic resources extend to a larger array of success-related outcomes than previously thought (e.g., grades, late assessments, satisfaction with university, university imposterism, associating failure with feedback, expecting to complete university, and expected time to complete university). As argued in previous sections, such findings need to be understood in relation to students' lived contexts and experiences, multi-dimensions of inequality and wider considerations of success. This includes, for example, that success can be achieved incrementally over time given that many more students from LSESB study part-time and view

learning from any "failures" to be an important and educative part of engaging in higher education (Burke et al., 2016).

Cultural expectations also tended to play a mediating role, mostly in the form of students' expectations about what university would be like (explaining variance in 9 out of 13 associations). Hence, students from LSESB may experience less success in conventional understandings, in part, because they do not have the contacts to know what to expect at university. This finding highlights the importance of "college knowledge" provided by students' friends and families (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

Time for studying operated as a mediator in six associations that related to feelings of belonging and success (e.g., sense of belonging, mental health, satisfaction with university), expectations about completing university and the time to do so, and associating feedback with failure. These results are reinforced by research that identified the significance of ignoring the unequal time pressures in which students are expected to demonstrate a propensity towards conventional measures of success (such as grades and completion) through which they are assessed and judged (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Burke, 2018). Time for socialising also operated as a mediator in relation to sense of belonging and university imposterism. Again, prior research has found that the time constraints of students from LSESB mediate their lower level of social integration at university (Rubin & Wright, 2017). The present findings show that SES differences in time also mediates other success-related variables.

Family support for the decision to go to university and for study were the other significant cultural mediators. These variables mediated the associations with expecting to complete university and mental health, respectively.

Finally, with regards to aspirations, interdependent motivations mediated the negative associations between SES and (a) frequency of class attendance and (b) viewing university admission as success. Again, it is important to appreciate that students from LSESB reported *greater* class attendance and a *greater* association of university admission with success. Hence, their greater interdependent motivations to be a role model for their community and to help their families after university explained their relative *advantages* over higher SES students in these two areas.

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1 Please note, that as discussed earlier, we did not impose arbitrary cut-offs on our measure of SES in order to distinguish students from LSESB and HSESB. Instead, we used the SES index as a continuous scale, and we interpreted higher scores on this index as indicating higher SES (Rubin et al., 2019).

## Suppression Effects

Unexpectedly, a number of the indirect effects listed in Table 3 represented *suppression* effects, rather than mediation effects. That is to say, the indirect effect had the opposite sign to that of the total effect, indicating that the direct effect between SES and the success variable was significantly *larger* than the total effect, rather than significantly smaller. These suppression effects are indicated with italics in Table 3. They are important because they indicate pathways that help to explain SES *similarities* in perceived success, rather than SES *differences* in perceived success.

The presence of a negative association between SES and interdependent motivations (aspirations) suppressed (reduced the size of) four positive associations between SES and success, and these positive associations became larger after accounting for the indirect effect of interdependent motivations. Specifically, SES was positively associated with (a) peer engagement, (b) sense of belonging, (c) satisfaction with university, and (d) expecting to complete university, and these four associations became significantly *stronger* after controlling for SES differences in interdependent motivations. This pattern of results suggests that students from LSESB hold greater interdependent motivations to be a role model for their community and to help their families after university, which operated to partially close the SES gap on these four aspects of success.

In addition, SES differences in social and economic resources suppressed SES differences in the frequency of class attendance. Again, this finding makes sense given that students from LSESB had a *higher* frequency of class attendance than students from HSESB. The lower levels of attendance shown by students from HSESB became even lower after controlling for their greater social connections and economic resources, suggesting that their relative advantage in these related dimensions helped to sustain their class attendance, perhaps because they attended class to meet friends and their greater economic resources meant less need to engage in paid work, which might otherwise conflict with their class attendance. Again, these results point to two separate pathways to class attendance. As described above, the better attendance of students from LSESB is mediated by their higher interdependent motivations, whereas the comparatively lower attendance of students from HSESB is suppressed by their higher social connection and economic resources. In simple terms, students from LSESB appear to attend class to be a good role model for their communities, whereas students from HSESB appeared to attend class to connect with friends and because they did not need to engage in paid work.

The poorer mental health and higher imposterism of students from LSESB were suppressed by their families' lower expectations that they should attend university. Hence, controlling for these lower expectations resulted in a larger SES difference in mental health and imposterism. These results make sense if we imagine a person from a LSESB whose family makes it clear that, contrary to working-class stereotypes, they expect their son or daughter to attend university. In this case, the family's counterstereotypical expectations are likely to exacerbate feelings of anxiety and imposterism among university students from LSESB (e.g., "My family expected me to come to university. Am I letting them down by feeling like I don't belong at university?"). In contrast, the presence of consistent, stereotypical family expectations should help to reduce these feelings ("No-one expected me to come to university. It makes sense that I feel like I don't belong here.").

SES differences in social connections suppressed the negative association between SES and the view that university admission represents a form of success. Hence, controlling for the greater university friendships of students from HSESB amplified the size of this negative association. Conversely, the presence of this SES difference in friendship helped to reduce the SES difference in viewing university admission as success, possibly because the greater friendships experienced by students from HSESB normalised their admission to university, making them feel less successful.

Finally, time for socialising suppressed the positive association between SES and grades. Compared to students from LSESB, students from HSESB tended to have more time for socialising and better grades. However, when the SES difference in time for socialising was controlled, the SES difference in grades became significantly larger. Hence, the greater time for socialising experienced by students from HSESB suppressed (reduced) their relative grade advantage, most likely because their greater number of university friends distracted them from their studies.

In summary, the present results partly confirm our preregistered hypothesis that the four dimensions of inequality (social connections, economic resources, cultural expectations, and aspirations) would mediate the relationship between SES and success. Specifically, we found that the success of students from HSESB was associated with their greater university social connections, economic resources, and cultural expectations about university. Unexpectedly, however, the story for aspirations was different. Although there was no SES difference in independent motivations, we found that students from

LSESB had greater interdependent motivations to be a role model for their community and to assist their families after university. Furthermore, students from LSESB had greater interdependent motivation, which helped to (a) close the SES gap in peer engagement, sense of belonging, satisfaction with university, and expecting to complete university, and (b) account for their better class attendance and greater tendency to view their university admission as success. Hence, the present research findings suggest that the greater interdependent motivation of students from LSESB is an important socio-psychological resource that may cause them to view their university admission as a sign of success, engage more with their peers, experience a greater sense of belonging and satisfaction with their university, feel more optimism about completing university, and even attend class more. If this is the case, then attempts to assimilate students from LSESB into universities' middle-class culture may have the detrimental effect of stymying this interdependent motivation and its positive benefits. The old advice to "never forget where you came from" seems relevant here, as these findings support the point that the role of community engagement and making a difference through and beyond higher education is a powerful part of developing a sense of success at university for students from LSESB.

## Moderation Effects

The moderating role of age in the relationship between SES and economic resources, cultural expectations, and aspirations provide interesting insights into the differences between older and younger LSESB students. In particular, we found that older age weakened the positive relation between socioeconomic status and economic resources. Although the relation between SES and economic resources is still significant at all levels of age, the results suggest that the strength of this effect begins to decline with age. This is likely due to LSESB students having higher economic resources as they get older, as opposed to HSESB students having lower economic resources as they get older.

Notably, this effect was significant in moderated mediation models in which various aspects of success were the outcomes. These findings suggest that the mediating role of economic resources between SES and success varies as a function of age, such that economic resources is a more powerful predictor of success among younger students. Interestingly, this moderated mediation effect was significant for many success variables that were not significantly mediated by economic resources in the simple mediation tests (i.e. cognitive engagement, schoolwork engagement, university imposterism, feedback as failure, expecting

to complete university, time expected to graduate and general feelings of success). In these cases, age uncovers mediation effects through its moderating role.

Additionally, the age moderation results for expectations about university demonstrate the age differences in expectations about university for LSESB students. In this case, older age strengthens the relationship between SES and expectations about university. In other words, for students who are older, SES is a stronger predictor of university not meeting their expectations compared to students who are younger. As with the relation between SES and economic resources, the relation between SES and expectations was still significant at all levels of age. However, the results suggest that the strength of this effect increases as age increases.

This finding was novel, given that not much is currently known about the relationship between SES, age and expectations about university. However, we suggest that this effect may occur because the massification of university means that younger generations in general have higher levels of university education than older generations. Thus, most young people, regardless of socioeconomic status, are likely to know other people who have gone to university or have some vicarious exposure to what university will be like. In comparison, older students from LSESB with working class networks are less likely to have this exposure and are thus less likely to possess the "college knowledge" that would cue them in to what to expect at university.

This moderating effect of age on the relation between SES and expectations about university was also significant in moderated mediation models in which various aspects of success were the outcomes. The moderated mediation findings suggest that the mediating role of expectations between SES and success varies as a function of age, such that expectations about university are a more powerful predictor of success among older students. Like economic resources, this moderated mediation effect was significant for many success variables that were not significantly mediated by economic resources in the simple mediation tests (i.e. grades, attending class, peer engagement, late assessments, expecting to complete university, time expected to graduate and general feelings of success). In these cases, age serves to uncover mediation effects that are not there when age is not accounted for.

Finally, age also moderated the relationship between SES and interdependent motivations for attending university. In this case, older age weakened the relationship between SES and interdependent motivations. In other words, for students who

are older, SES is a weaker predictor of having interdependent motivations for studying at university compared to students who are younger. This relation between SES and motivations was significant at all levels of age but became weaker for older students compared to younger students. Like the expectation moderation, this finding was novel, given that not much is currently known about the relationship between SES, age and university student motivations. In this case, we expect that the maturity and similarity in life stage, if not life circumstances, associated with age would be driving this effect. That is, students who are older are more likely in general to have chosen to go to university to serve altruistic rather than individualistic goals. Interestingly, this moderation effect did not extend to moderating the mediation of motivations in the relationship between SES and any of the success outcomes. This suggests that age does not influence the role of motivations in the relationship between SES and success.

Overall, our results suggest that age is an important intersection to consider when seeking to explain or improve SES differences in student success. LSESB students are more likely to come to university at a later stage in life, and these results demonstrate that these age differences bring with them a set of different economic circumstances and expectations. These age-based differences then have flow on effects to the relationship between SES and success. As noted by previous research, age must be taken into account when seeking to solve issues of SES in university (Rubin & Wright, 2015).

## Strengths and Limitations

The quantitative part of this research had several strengths and limitations. Key methodological strengths included a relatively large sample size overall ($N$ = 2,665) that included students from multiple institutions ($N$ = 6). In addition, our dialogic methodology enabled broader contextualisation of the quantitative data and analyses. This brought a multi-dimensional perspective of inequality to the project, drawing from Fraser (1997, 2003), and supported a multifaceted approach to measuring perceived success. Finally, our research was preregistered (but see Rubin, 2020), used a stringent significance threshold ($α$ = .005), and a conservative approach to mediation analyses (Yzerbyt et al., 2018).

In terms of limitations, the causal directions of our reported associations are unclear. However, from a theoretical perspective, it is more likely that differences in SES caused differences in our success variables rather than vice versa. For example, it is less theoretically plausible that obtaining good grades or attending class attendance more regularly causes increases in students' SES than vice versa. Nonetheless, the causal direction between SES and the four dimensions of inequality and between these dimensions and success variables is certainly inconclusive, and future research should consider ways of addressing this issue more carefully. We will continue to examine this through deeper engagement with qualitative data and analysis in our ongoing project work.

A second potential limitation of the current study is that all of the measures of success were based on self-report measures, and self-report measures may lack validity. However, contrary to this view, self-report measures of grade point average have been shown to have a large positive association with actual, objective grade point average (Frucgt & Cook, 1994; Lounsbury et al., 2005). Hence, the current results may be regarded as being valid in this respect.

It is also important to note that the current sample differed in several ways from the general population of Australian university students, based on information from Australia's Department of Education, Skills, and Employment (2019). In particular, the current sample included smaller percentages of part-time students (12.8% compared to 28.3% in the general student population) and international students (9.9% compared to 30.7%). Hence, the current results may be more applicable to full-time domestic students. The percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was comparable with that in the general student population (2.33% vs. 1.9%). However, the percentage of female students was substantially greater in our sample than in the general student population (72.7% vs. 55.5%). The reason for this

latter discrepancy is unclear. However, it is reassuring to note that our key pattern of results remained relatively stable when gender was included as a covariate (for further details, please see Footnote[2]).

Many of the associations that we identified were significant but small in size. The average absolute significant association between SES and success was $r$ = .10, and the average completely standardised indirect effect size was .03. (When considering indirect effects, a small effect = .01, a medium effect = .09, and a large effect = .25; Kenny, 2018). These weak associations raise concerns about the practical significance of our findings. There are two points to note here. First, "weak" associations are normal in the field of psychology, where the average effect size is only around $r$ = .18 (see our preregistration document). Second, even small effects may be important when extrapolated to large populations, which is the case in the context of the population of university students (Rubin et al., 2016, p. 734).

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2 We identified outliers on the variables reported in Table 3 using a +/- 3 *SD*s criterion (Osborne & Overbay, 2004). We repeated our mediation analyses excluding these outliers. The nonsignificant mediation and suppression effects remained nonsignificant with the following exceptions: Family support for attending university became a significant mediator of the association between SES and: (a) satisfaction with university, β = .02 (*SE* = .005), 99.5% CI [.003, .034] and (b) feedback associated with failure, β =-.02 (*SE* = .006), 99.5% CI [-.040, -.004]. Time for study became a significant mediator of the association between SES and frequency of late assessments, β = -.01 (*SE* = .004), 99.5% CI [-.025, -.001]. Finally, two effects that were significant in the main analyses became nonsignificant when the analyses were reconducted with outliers excluded: (a) Economic resources no longer mediated the association between SES and university imposterism, and (b) interdependent motivations became marginally nonsignificant in the association between SES and frequency of class attendance, β = -.01 (*SE* = .003), 99.5% CI [-.020, .000]. We also repeated our mediation analyses including the following covariates together: gender (male or female), age, year of study, and degree subject. The significant indirect effects remained significant with the following exceptions: Interdependent motivations was no longer a significant mediator of the association between SES and frequency of class attendance, β = -.01 *SE* = .00, 99.5% CI [-.019, .000], and economic resources was no longer a significant mediator of the association between SES and imposterism, β = -.02 *SE* = .01, 99.5% CI [-.050, .003]. However, it should be noted that interdependent motivations remained a significant mediator of SES and frequency of class attendance when each of the covariates were entered into the mediation model separately, rather than together. Hence, this mediation effect is relatively robust to the presence of each covariate when they are entered separately. In addition, economic resources remained a significant mediator of the relationship between SES and imposterism when year of study and degree subject were entered separately as covariates, but the mediation effect became nonsignificant when age and gender were entered separately. Hence, age and gender appeared to be influential covariates for this mediation effect.

# Conclusions: Qualitative Study

## Conclusions: Qualitative Study

### Understandings of Success Among Students From LSESB

Students' understanding of Success includes:

- Engaging in rich learning processes that contribute to completion of courses;
- Developing analytical and critical thinking;
- Developing the capacity to contribute to their own and others' flourishing and well-being;
- Giving back to the communities to which they have a sense of belonging and connection;
- Feeling that their values, experiences and perspectives are authentically recognised;
- Being enabled to thrive in their future trajectories.

Turning to the qualitative part of our research, we found that "success" was regarded by students from LSESB as a contested term that evoked a wide range of emotional and structural considerations that were often divisive in nature. Students' perspectives of success offered broader conceptions than the more limited policy and institutional definitions, including being well-prepared to thrive in their future trajectories but also seeing success in engagement with rich learning processes and developing the capacity to contribute to their own and others' flourishing and well-being. 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.

From a pedagogical perspective, students from LSESB indicated that learning about how to think analytically and critically was amongst the most important and empowering parts of their success. Consistent with the results from the quantitative survey, students also perceived participation in learning (e.g., class attendance), regardless of outcomes, as highly valuable for them and their families.

From a more long-term perspective, many students regarded success as becoming a professional and having a career that provided them with the power to make a difference, especially to those treated unfairly. Importantly, none of these elements of success seemed to outweigh the others. Hence, a key conclusion here is that success cannot be reduced to being only about passing all courses or being job ready.

### Dimensions of Inequality and the Importance of Support

Our quantitative research identified four key dimensions of inequality: social connections, economic resources, cultural expectations, and the institutional recognition of students' aspirations. We found that these four dimensions of inequality were also apparent to varying extents in our qualitative analyses. Importantly, however, our qualitative analyses were able to probe more deeply into *why* these dimensions of inequality were important for students from LSESB. An emerging theme in this context appeared to be in the quality of resources, opportunities and pedagogical engagement offered by universities, with students from LSESB linking their concerns to difficulties in accessing the necessary social, economic, and cultural resources, and having their aspirations supported and recognised by family, community and higher education.

First, social connections, relations and commitments were a key concern, as reflected in students' comments about both their families and friends. Family impact on students' success was complex and variable. However, some students were concerned that their families would not relate to their educational futures. On the other hand, many students were fully supported by their families, particularly at an emotional level, despite their families not having previous experiences of higher education. Those students who expressed concern about their families being disconnected from their experiences at university appeared to be compensated to some extent by the emotional support and sense of belonging that they felt that they received from their friendship groups or peer relations at university.

Economic and educational resources represented a second dimension of inequality that impacted on students from LSESB. Students reported that inadequate financial resources significantly impaired their capacity to succeed in their university studies (e.g., not being able to afford course mandated textbooks). Lack of financial resources provided a constant source of distraction and stress for many students. Importantly, scholarships were regarded positively in this context, offering not only a source of financial support, but also symbolic support and a sense of belonging at university. Aside from their financial benefits, the mere existence of these scholarships sends a message that universities are aware of and responsive to the circumstances of students from LSESB, and this responsiveness provides a sense of institutional support. Notably, students from LSESB were also concerned about time as well as money (see also Rubin & Wright, 2017). Insecure types of work and long and irregular hours caused time inequalities and stress that would not affect students from HSESB as much (ibid.).

The effects of time inequalities could be alleviated to some extent by financial resources and social networks and support, which could be used to share work among others.

A third dimension of inequality was cultural expectations and practices regarding university. The expectations of students from LSESB affected their learning experiences in several ways. At a general level, some LSESB students felt that there was a lack of opportunity for them to draw on their own cultural experiences, values and knowledge to assist with learning at university. This lack of institutional recognition for their sense of personhood and value often undermined self-esteem and led to a sense of unworthiness. At the more practical level, some students felt frustrated because they had difficulty taking advantage of placement opportunities due to their paid work commitments. Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, students from LSESB, particularly first-year students, benefitted most from teaching and assessment practices that made explicit and demystified those academic expectations, conventions and requirements that are often implicit or taken-for-granted. Students sought this information from formative assessments, clear assessment criteria, instructive feedback and examples or guides, and studying with peers. It makes sense that students from LSESB were particularly concerned about obtaining a clear understanding of teaching and learning expectations given the relative lack of access provided to academic knowledge that students from families with high levels of HE representation benefit from (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Consistent with this concern about knowing how things work at university, changes to pedagogical practices were often experienced as disruptive for students from LSESB. Hence, some students saw the changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic as being "destructive" to their learning.

The particular cultural expectations and practices of students from LSESB were also apparent in their broader relationship with their university. Student support services provided a crucial bridge between student and institution in this context, with most students feeling very positive about student services. However, many students suggested that these services could also be improved by increasing awareness of their availability, decreasing waiting times for access, and including mentoring and appointments with psychologists. Again, the theme of "support" is quite clear here, with the need for institutions to ensure the redistribution of key resources and opportunities to provide meaningful and high-quality support for students from LSESB. The concern about institutional support was complemented by a concern about social support, with students reporting that a sense of belonging and inclusion at university was very important to them. Unsurprisingly, students wanted to be recognised as people rather than as a number in the classroom, giving them a sense of value and mattering in their HE participation.

Recognition of student aspirations, the fourth dimension of equality, also figured in students' responses. Our research participants described a range of significant, longer-term aspirations. However, simply wanting a job was not expressed as their sole motivation. Instead, students from LSESB saw their employment as a means to an end, where that end was to gain the power to make a difference in their communities. Hence, students' motivations for their career ambitions were tied into the notion of "giving back" or contributing in meaningful ways to the community (e.g., as a leader, teacher, nurse, or doctor or as a representative for community rights). Again, these themes were consistent with the quantitative results, which highlighted the key role of interdependent motivations to (a) be a role model for their community and (b) assist their families after university. It appears that students from LSESB were concerned about closing the support loop, whereby they placed themselves in a position to "pay back" the support that they needed to get through university by supporting others in their communities. This support economy and emphasis on human relations and well-being, can be contrasted with the financial economy, that is more prominent in policy discourse.

Aside from the four dimensions of inequality, a fifth theme of critical life events emerged as a key issue in the qualitative data. Research in the UK suggests that students from middle class backgrounds have access to resources and support structures that are unavailable to many students from working class backgrounds (see e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2013), and this suggests that students from LSESB are particularly vulnerable to critical life events (e.g., illness, loss of housing) compounding their social, economic and cultural disadvantage. Our study shows that students from LSES backgrounds viewed critical life events as being particularly problematic because they tended to cascade into multiple life areas. For example, an illness could affect paid work, which could affect finances and housing. Again, students appreciated the support that was provided by university services in these cases, but they were also aware that this institutional support can only go so far, and it would not always make a sufficient difference to their situations. In some cases, leaving university was regarded as a viable interim solution, rather than a final destination.

In summary, students from LSESB were concerned about social, economic, cultural, aspirational, and critical life event inequalities that impacted on their opportunities for success at university. A common meta-theme to emerge when discussing these inequalities was that of the redistribution of "support." All students require support, but support is not equally accessible to all students. Students from LSESB articulated the importance of having access to social and economic support from their families, friends, and universities in order to help meet the various challenges that they experienced at university. Furthermore, students from LSESB benefitted from institutional forms of recognition of the value of their personhoods, experiences and perspectives. In response, universities need to help build positive and meaningful connections (online and on-campus) by developing policies and practices that foster supportive and inclusive social, financial, pedagogical, and cultural environments. We should note that this issue of providing support is a sensitive one that needs to be handled carefully. This should be about a process of redistribution to make available high-quality resources, opportunities and support structures to students from LSESB to redress longstanding social, economic and cultural forms of inequality and disadvantage.

The qualitative study was able to bring to the fore the lived experiences and understandings of success from the perspective of students from LSESB. The analysis was able to draw out the heterogeneity of the students' identities, values and perspectives whilst also contributing richer insights into how success is felt, embodied and experienced. One of the limitations for the qualitative study however is the focus only on students from LSESB. In order to better understand the nuances and complexities of SES inequalities, further research adopting the 'paired peers' methodology undertaken by Bathmaker and colleagues in the UK should be undertaken.

## Bringing it All Together

This project aimed to provide a comprehensive and integrative understanding of success in higher education and when and how it is predicted by students' SES. In particular, we aimed to (a) enhance existing understandings about what constitutes "success" by using a broad range of indicators of success, (b) identify SES differences in success, (c) identify which dimensions of success show the largest SES differences, (d) identify mediator and moderator variables that explain SES differences in success, (e) identify students' from LSESB own attributions and definitions of success, and (f) identify how socio-demographic factors may impact on how students achieve and also conceive of success. Taken together, our quantitative and qualitative research findings converge on four key conclusions.

First, our quantitative results showed that students from LSESB tended to report feeling less successful at university on some dimensions, in part, as a result of fewer reported friendships with other university students (social), fewer finances (economic), and less clear expectations about university life (cultural). Our qualitative findings showed that these social, economic, and cultural inequalities are problematic because they result in less social, economic, and cultural support for students from LSESB. All of these forms of support are more important to students from LSESB than those from HSESB because students from LSESB are more likely to need these forms of support when they experience critical life events, such as illnesses. Consequently, many of our recommendations below focus on improving these various forms of support.

Second, our quantitative results highlighted two key areas in which students from LSESB perceived *greater* success than those from HSESB: (a) more class attendance and (b) associating their university admission with success. Students from LSESB are proud of their university admission and more committed than students from HSESB in their class attendance. Our qualitative research findings elaborated on this general academic commitment by showing that students from LSESB were very concerned about obtaining a clear understanding of their teaching and learning expectations while at university. Overall, we can form a picture of a typical student from LSESB as being proud to attend university, turning up to class, and wanting to know how to succeed.

Third, our quantitative and qualitative results both highlighted the importance of interdependent aspirations. Our quantitative results showed that students from LSESB, and especially younger students, reported a greater interdependent motivation to be a role model for their community and to assist their families after university, and this greater motivation helped to close the SES gap in peer engagement, sense of belonging, satisfaction with university, and expectation of completing university. Hence, interdependent motivations provided a valuable socio-psychological resource at university that appeared to propel students from LSESB towards certain forms of success. Consistent with these results, our qualitative results showed that students regarded their participation in learning as highly valuable for them, their families and their communities. Our qualitative results also added some nuance to our understanding, showing that although students were keen to succeed in order to meet their families' expectations, many students were also concerned that their families may not fully relate to their educational futures. Hence, being the first in their family to attend university represented a clear form of "success" for students from LSESB but also carried with it some challenging emotional aspects around their sense of belonging and personhood.

Finally, an important part of project was to consider the ways in which other variables intersected with SES to predict success. Our quantitative results highlighted the importance of considering age in conjunction with SES (see also Rubin & Wright, 2015). Specifically, we found that the positive association between SES and economic resources became weaker among older students, most likely because there is less variability in economic resources among older students, which effectively reduces the SES gap on this dimension of inequality. In contrast, the

positive association between SES and expectations about university became stronger among older students, possibly because older students have less up-to-date academic knowledge in their (older) social networks about what to expect at university. Both of these moderation effects extended to moderated mediation effects, whereby the size of the indirect effect of SES on success via various dimensions of inequality varied as a function of age. In particular, this indirect effect tended to become weaker with increasing age in the case of economic resources, but stronger with increasing age in the case of expectations about university. In other words, SES differences in economic resources were a more important explanation of SES differences in success among younger students, and SES differences in interdependent motivations were a more important explanation of SES differences in success among older students. These findings indicate that we need to pay attention to the age of students from LSESB when considering which forms of support might be most effective in closing the SES gap in success.

Overall, the project has illuminated the complex and nuanced ways that students understand success at university, which challenges traditional narrow definitions. Students from LSESB understand success as related to accessing the rich learning processes offered by HE participation, engaging in discovery about themselves and their field of study via flexible degree structures, developing their capacity for analytical and critical thinking, having a sense of mattering and being valued at university and being empowered to give back to the communities for which they have a strong sense of connection and belonging.

# Conclusions, Synthesis and Recommendations

## Conclusions, Synthesis and Recommendations

### Recommendations for Policy & Practice

Based on our current research findings, and our synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of this project, we have put forward the following recommendations for Australian higher education policy and practice. In particular we recommend ways the government and universities can build a better understanding of students from LSESB and promote both economic, and social and cultural equity. We also propose avenues for future research that arise out of our research findings.

**Building a better understanding of students from diverse LSESB**

Our research shows that students from LSESB regard access to and participation in university as a form of success. The quantitative data universities and governments currently collect on the rates of LSESB students accessing university needs to be enriched by institutional research that examines the shared, but diverse, experiences and beliefs of these students about their participation in the university. Such research can form the foundation of improved strategies of student engagement in all areas: curriculum, strategy-making, pedagogy, financial support, and more.

**Recommendation to universities:**

1. Universities should conduct institutional research that focuses on the views and experiences of students from diverse LSESB, and draw from these research insights to inform decisions around equity policy strategies and planning around areas such as pedagogy, curriculum and staff professional development.

2. Universities should develop forums to engage with the collective voices of LSESB and other underrepresented students, and listen to their views about ways to support and improve their experiences at university.

**Economic Equity for Success**

Our research shows that students from LSESB associated their success with access to better financial support. Inadequate income was a major stressor in the lives of many of our participants, and it created a range of obstacles to the depth of their engagement with curriculum and the completion of their studies. The need for excessive paid work in order to support themselves through university put real and damaging strains on the lives of many of our participants.

**Recommendation to government:**

1. The government should provide an adequate living allowance for students from LSESB. This financial support would remove the need for students to undertake excessive paid work, provide flexibility for navigating life crises, and provide the appropriate time to focus on their university studies.

**Recommendation to universities:**

1. Scholarships should be more widely available and advertised to potential students in a universal, transparent and accessible manner.

2. Textbooks should be provided online or subsidised publicly so that students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage can access the mandatory materials in order to gain a broad understanding of subjects regardless of their financial means.

3. Emergency fund schemes should be promoted to assist students from LSESB when they encounter unexpected life events that impede their university studies.

4. Financial support should be provided to students whose courses require them to perform unpaid practicums and placements. Universities should review the instances of such course requirements across their institutions, consider their impacts on equity, and find ways to provide financial support to students effected.

**Social and Cultural Equity for Success**

Our research shows that the success of students from LSESB may be enhanced through a more flexible and inclusive university structure and culture.

**Recommendation to government:**

1. Alternative pathways to university, particularly free enabling programs, remain crucial enablers for students from LSESB to access and succeed at university. These pathways need to be fully supported, sustained and expanded.

**Recommendations to universities:**

1. Universities should recognise and redress the time inequalities students from LSESB face. For example, simple changes in timetabling and assessment structures can make all the difference for students. Financial support can also alleviate time inequalities.

2. Teaching staff should be provided with professional development opportunities to provide quality formative assessment, clear assessment criteria, instructive feedback and examples or guides to help students from LSESB understand assessment expectations and practices.

3. Inclusive curriculum, pedagogy and support across all higher education courses should be provided for all students under a strength-based framework that works to challenge multiple inequalities.

4. Universities should demonstrate a clear strategy to foster student belonging in the context of diversity and inclusion. This requires strategies to build inclusive teaching and learning environments across all programs of study that support and value the different forms of success that students are striving towards.

5. Students from LSESB thrive in an environment in which they feel recognised and cared for. Staff/student ratios should provide adequate resources for responsive and high quality support, teaching and learning.

6. Flexibility in degree programs is key to supporting processes of student choice-making, self-discovery and sense of purpose, helping students sustain engagement across the full duration of their studies.

7. University policies should enable students with a greater life load to study part-time while they continue to receive financial assistance.

## Recommendations for Further Research

This project has highlighted the need for LSESB students' perspectives on university learning, and on success in higher education, to be better understood. We have identified further avenues for future research around how SES is measured, the particular impacts of changing educational contexts on students from LSESB, and the nature of students' aspirations and motivation in higher education.

1. Future research should adopt a multidimensional, continuous approach to the measurement of SES. A criticism of previous research is that it has focused on limited, single-index measures of SES, such as students' postcode (see page 29). The present research overcame this problem by using a multidimensional measure that consisted of 11-items that covered parents' highest levels of education, the prestige and status of parents' occupations, subjective perceptions of family wealth during childhood, the perceived social class of parents and the self, and students' subjective social status. This multidimensional approach allowed us to get closer to the latent concept of SES and to avoid the idiosyncrasies of any one particular measure.

2. Future research should consider the interaction between students' identities, the university context and the ways this interaction shapes aspiration, choice-making and motivation. Both the quantitative and qualitative research findings underline the importance of the interdependent motivations of students from LSESB. Prior research has suggested that, at university, an *independent* motivation (to be successful for self-benefit) is given greater value in higher education than *interdependent* motivation (to be successful for community benefit; for a recent review, see Stephens et al., 2019). However, our project suggests that interdependent motivation is central to a sense of success for students from LSESB. Previous research has shown that students from LSESB do better at university when they work together in groups (Dittmann et al., 2020) and when they write short narratives that highlight their background-specific strengths (Henandez et al., 2021). Others have argued that students' aspirations are tied to their sense of becoming and their motivation is sustained by meaningful engagement with learning and connection to a sense of social purpose (Burke, 2012). Based on these insights, a critical area for future research is to develop "wise interventions" (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2020) to leverage the relationship between interdependent motivation and success in the context of student equity.

3. As a result of the COVID pandemic, the present research took place during a seismic shift in the mode of university education from offline to online. Many students in the qualitative research commented on this critical life event. Assuming that this shift further accelerates the move towards the online environment in higher education, a key challenge for universities is to ensure a strong sense of belonging among university students from LSESB (Rubin, 2012).

4. Further research is required about the relationship between educational, career and life aspirations for students from LSESB. This further work would enable valuable comprehension and practical implications for building more targeted approaches to developing students' knowledge about higher education, careers and future trajectories. At the start of university participation, our research has shown the importance of providing alternative pathways for people from LSESB. Furthermore, this project has shown that many students aspire to develop meaningful careers that enable them to make a difference to the lives of others, which helps them to persist, flourish and succeed in their studies. However, grasping how educational, career and aspirational pathways intersect, especially as they are rapidly evolving, is complex and requires further research. Career decisions are being made in the context of an increasingly complex series of 'choices' and nomenclature, including now the introduction of microcredentials, across an extended and non-linear student lifecycle. Further research would inform the sector through providing principles and practices to enable students from LSESB to navigate the maze of higher education, and their educational, career and life aspirations. Informed through collaboration with colleagues across higher education in each area, as well as industry and other key stakeholders, such a project has potential to provide an important and timely approach for students being enabled to effectively navigate the rapidly changing contexts that have come to reshape higher education.

5. Qualitative research similar to that carried out in the UK through the 'paired peers' methodology (Bathmaker et al., 2013) would further clarify and illuminate socioeconomic inequalities in relation to understanding student success in, through and beyond higher education. This work would explore pairs of students undertaking similar degree pathways but situated differently in relation to socioeconomic background to better understand the ways that SES impacts ongoing and changing experiences of success.

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# Appendices

**Appendix 1.** Demographic Profile of Universities in this Study

| State/Institution | Students from a Non English speaking background | Students with a disability | Indigenous | Low SES[1] | All Commencing Domestic Undergraduate Students |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **New South Wales** | | | | | |
| University D | 79 (1.2%) | 487 (9.3%) | 279 (4.1%) | 1565 (23.2%) | 6,721 |
| University E | 99 (1.9%) | 528 (10.1%) | 143 (2.7%) | 922 (17.7%) | 5,217 |
| University F | 896 (7.6%) | 555 (4.7%) | 239 (2%) | 3487 (29.6%) | 11,758 |
| **Victoria** | | | | | |
| University C | 224 (2.9%) | 652 (8.5%) | 76 (0.1%) | 1452 (18.9%) | 7,672 |
| **Queensland** | | | | | |
| University B | 273 (3.4%) | 365 (4.5%) | 114 (1.4%) | 819 (10.1%) | 8,100 |
| University A | 43 (1%) | 243 (5.9%) | 134 (3.3%) | 904 (22%) | 4,106 |
| **Total among the six participating universities** | **1,614 (3.7%)** | **2,830 (6.5%)** | **985 (2.3%)** | **9,149 (20%)** | **43,574** |
| **TOTAL across ALL Australian Universities** | **10,194 (3.7%)** | **19,240 (7%)** | **6,109 (2.2%)** | **48,002 (17.5%)** | **274,196** |

Data drawn from Table 11.4: Commencing Domestic Undergraduate Students(a) by State, Institution and Equity Group, 2019, *https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2019-section-11-equity-groups*, Creation Date 8 September 2020, TRIM Reference D20/978552

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1 The measure of socioeconomic status used here by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment is not the same as the one we devised and used in this report. For the purpose of this table students are classified as being Low SES if their permanent address is in an area in the bottom 25% of the 2016 SEIFA Education and Occupation Index for 15-64 year-olds. This measure is based on a geocoded SA1 (Statistical Area, 2016 boundaries).

**Appendix 2.** Interview Participant Demographics

| Pseudonym | Participant Number | Age | Gender | Ethnic Minority | ATSI | Intl. Student | Straight from High School | Enabling Pathway | Degree | First In Family |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sierra | 1 | 19 | Female | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Education Primary | Yes |
| Marcus | 2 | 50 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Social Science | Yes |
| Dean | 3 | 21 | Male | Yes | Yes | | Yes | Yes | Bachelor of Psychological Science | Yes |
| Eric | 4 | 23 | Male | | | Yes | Yes | | Nutrition and Dietetics | No |
| Page | 5 | 19 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor of Social Sciences | No |
| Michael | 6 | 41 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Commerce | No |
| Alexander | 7 | 68 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Business/Commerce | Yes |
| Kaleb | 8 | 19 | Male | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Secondary Education | Yes |
| Maisie | 9 | 21 | Female | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Environmental Engineering (Honours) | Yes |
| Aadhya | 10 | 19 | Female | | | | Yes | | Pre-Medicine and Health Sciences | Yes |
| Grace | 11 | 33 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Nursing | No |
| Amanda | 12 | 40 | Female | | | | No | | Bachelor of Nursing | Yes |
| George | 13 | 88 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Visual Arts | Yes |
| Anna | 14 | 40 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Batchelor Arts | Yes |
| Philippa | 15 | 19 | Female | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Commerce | Yes |
| Rhys | 16 | 26 | Male | | Yes | | No | No | Bachelor of Education/Arts | Yes |
| Bonnie | 17 | 20 | Female | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Psychological Science | Yes |
| Sean | 18 | 20 | Male | | | | No | No | Engineering | No |
| Simon | 19 | 23 | Male | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Computer Science | Yes |
| Fiona | 20 | 24 | Female | | | | Yes | | Nursing | Yes |
| Isabella | 21 | 26 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) | Yes |
| Madison | 22 | 24 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Teaching Primary (Special Education) | Yes |
| Antonia | 23 | 19 | Female | Yes | Yes | | Yes | | Bachelor of Law & Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) | No |
| Camilla | 24 | 37 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Psychology | Yes |
| Courtney | 25 | 20 | Female | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Laws | Yes |
| Claudia | 26 | 20 | Male | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Laws | Yes |
| Caitlin | 27 | 22 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychology | No |
| Gila | 28 | 20 | Female | | | | Yes | | International Studies | No |
| Tyler | 29 | 22 | Male | | | | Yes | | Economics/Arts | Yes |
| Robert | 30 | 35 | Male | Yes | | | No | No | BSc(Hons) Research In Biological Sciences | Yes |
| Ji-hoon | 31 | 22 | Male | Yes | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Physiotherapy | Yes |
| Pam | 32 | 20 | Female | Yes | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Nursing | Yes |
| Baylee | 33 | 20 | Female | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Biomedical Science | Yes |
| Alberto | 34 | 51 | Male | Yes | | | No | Yes | Engineering (Civil) | Yes |
| Trish | 35 | 57 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor of Commerce | No |
| Dylan | 36 | 23 | Male | | | | Yes | | BA Arts/BA Education | Yes |
| Aidan | 37 | 39 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor Human Service/Master Social Work | Yes |
| Polly | 38 | 70 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor Creative Writing and Publishing | Yes |
| Damien | 39 | 44 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Nursing Science | Yes |
| David | 40 | 20 | Male | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Arts | Yes |

| Pseudonym | Participant Number | Age | Gender | Ethnic Minority | ATSI | Intl. Student | Straight from High School | Enabling Pathway | Degree | First In Family |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kathy | 41 | 22 | Female | Yes | | | Yes | | Law/Arts | Yes |
| Emily | 42 | 35 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor of Exercise Science, Master of Exercise Physiology | Yes |
| Kiara | 43 | 48 | Female | | | | No | No | Arts (Religion/Anthropology) | Yes |
| Dominique | 44 | 21 | Female | Yes | Yes | | No | No | Social Work | Yes |
| Stephen | 45 | 25 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor of Information Technology | Yes |
| Hayley | 46 | 22 | Female | Yes | | | Yes | | Arts/Social Science | Yes |
| Alexandra | 47 | 21 | Female | Yes | | | Yes | | BA/BSSoc | Yes |
| Stephanie | 48 | 37 | Female | | | | No | No | Health Sciences | Yes |
| Konrad | 49 | 23 | Male | Yes | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Applied Science and Master of Podiatric Practice | Yes |
| James | 50 | 22 | Male | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Science | No |
| Chloe | 51 | 26 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Criminology/Bachelor of Laws | No |
| Brooke | 52 | 36 | Female | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor of Nursing | Yes |
| Matthew | 53 | 25 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor of Computer Science and IT | No |
| Ryan | 54 | 25 | Male | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychological Science With Honours | Yes |
| Peter | 55 | 39 | Male | | | | No | Yes | Bachelor Arts | No |
| Christopher | 56 | 26 | Male | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) | Yes |
| Ashley | 57 | 28 | Female | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Human Services/Bachelor of Counselling | No |
| Clara | 58 | 22 | Female | | | Yes | No | No | Bachelor of Social Science Psychology | No |
| Noelle | 59 | 39 | Female | | | | No | Yes | BA Animal Ecology | No |
| Jaelynn | 60 | 31 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) | No |
| Callan | 61 | 28 | Male | | | | No | No | Psychology Honours | No |
| Amelia | 62 | 24 | Female | | | | Yes | | Psychology | Yes |
| Charles | 63 | 24 | Male | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Extended Civil Engineering (Honours) | No |
| Chih-Cheng | 64 | 25 | Male | Yes | | | No | No | Bachelor of Science | No |
| Beth | 65 | 25 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychological Studies (Honours) | Yes |
| Saben | 66 | 19 | Male | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Law | No |
| Doha | 67 | 48 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) | Yes |
| Sophie | 68 | 40 | Female | Yes | | | No | Yes | Bachelor | No |
| Sadiq | 69 | 21 | Male | | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) | Yes |
| Omar | 70 | 20 | Male | Yes | | | Yes | | Bachelor of Social Science (Psychology) | No |
| Emma | 71 | 26 | Female | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychology | No |
| Paul | 72 | 26 | Male | | | | No | No | Bachelor of Psychology | No |

"the barriers are being torn down... where I can compete on an equal space... and I can stand my own ground a bit"