Reflections of a student engagement program designed and delivered by academics

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Article Info

Abstract

Student support programs in higher education are commonly delivered by professional institution staff who are not directly involved in students' courses. In this paper, we report on a unique student support program within a School of Education and the perceptions of the academic staff who designed and delivered the program. Methodologically, written and spoken critically reflective encounters were used to explore dimensions of student support: connectedness, mindsets, self-management, academic capabilities, and professional identity. We perceived the program positively influenced some students in developing feelings of connectedness, building self-management skills and understanding commitment, and in establishing a foundation for a student experience that fosters a pathway towards a teaching career. Tensions were revealed relating to the ethical responsibilities of supporting all students to continue study and staff's own personal study experiences were found, at times, to contribute to assumptions about how students should engage with study. Findings suggest that addressing student needs across the dimensions first necessitates a shared understanding of what constitutes student success and how this is interpreted within a support program. Assisting academics in gaining deeper insight and understanding of what it means to be a student, particularly an academically vulnerable student, was a benefit of the program.

Introduction

Beyond the interactions experienced as part of teaching and learning, there is restricted scope for academic staff to provide what might be considered personalised support and pastoral care to university students (Groccia, 2018). Historically, the role of academic staff was to provide quality teaching, learning and assessment opportunities for students (Akareem & Hossain, 2016; Oonk et al., 2020), however, in contemporary higher education contexts, it is becoming increasingly common for academic staff to support students with both their academic and non-academic challenges (Crawford & Johns, 2018). While existing research has investigated student and institutional perspectives and experiences of student support and engagement initiatives (Balwant, 2017; Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019; Nepal & Rogerson, 2020; Tai et al., 2019), there is an absence of research on the experiences of academic staff in the design and delivery of student support programs (Chipchase et al., 2017; Coleman et al., 2021; Crawford & Johns, 2018). Against this background, an engagement program targeting students identified as academically vulnerable was designed and implemented by four teacher education academics – the authoring team – at a regional Australian university. In this paper, we report on our perceptions of student support and how the program was able to enable student success.

The program supports students with engagement and achievement in their studies and provides individualised support by program staff. The principles underpinning the design of the program were: targeted communication between academic staff and students (O'Shea et al., 2016); mutual agreement between academic staff and students about approaches to study; the establishment and reinforcement of student responsibilities (Tinto, 2017); methods to establish and support student accountability (Cook-Sather, 2010); and considerations of student wellbeing (Boulton et al., 2019). Here we aim to understand, from the perspectives of the academics involved in the program, what success might look like in the context of engagement and effective retention of students. Using an evaluative framework for student learning services proposed by Lane et al. (2019), the research was guided by the question: How does our academic support program support academically vulnerable students? This question was divided into three sub-research questions:

1. How do we, as academics, conceive of student success?

2. How do we understand the ways in which the program contributes to the success of academically vulnerable students?

3. Where do we identify gaps in how the program is able to support academically vulnerable students?

Given the changing landscape of university approaches to teaching and learning, as well as the multiple challenges encountered by 'modern day' students (Tight, 2020), achieving, and maintaining, student engagement has become a critical focus for Australian universities. With this focus, many universities have established programs and initiatives specifically designed to enable student retention which incorporate targeted benchmarks or outcomes (i.e., less than 10% attrition of first year students) (Crawford & Johns, 2018). We anticipate that the challenges, surprises, and accomplishments explored in this study may inform and guide future approaches to student engagement and retention in the higher education sector.

Literature review: Understanding student success

Academic success and study completion in higher education were once perceived as the responsibility of the student alone (Crosling, 2017). By contrast, in the current academic climate, it is typical for universities to provide a range of student services, educational processes and programs underpinned by inclusive approaches that acknowledge student diversity, unique backgrounds, and situational experiences. This reflects a paradigm shift whereby universities are focused on student retention and are expected to share the responsibility with students for academic success, persistence, and study completion (Crosling, 2017). In response to pressures surrounding student retention, universities have incorporated a plethora of programs and interventions designed to provide support and services, and to foster a positive student experience, which are ultimately premised on the motivation to keep students engaged and studying. Such approaches are variable and institution-specific, but often are formulated, administered, and monitored by particular engagement and retention staff and teams at an organisational level (Roberts, 2018). Although the utilisation of university-wide engagement and retention teams allows for organisational control and monitoring (Scott et al., 2008), major limitations of these approaches are that student individuality, understanding of personal circumstances, and awareness of course of study are not closely valued or understood. In addition, these programs often preclude academic staff and, thus, can be limited in addressing course-specific academic needs.

Tight (2020) draws attention to the increasing focus on retention and engagement in the higher education sector, suggesting that economic rationales for maintaining student enrolments largely drive institutional interest. Student retention, for example, is often included in the institutional statistics produced for universities as a/n (poor) indicator of educational quality. Student attrition influences an institution's university ranking, and financial implications can result according to attrition rates (Burova, 2016). In his systematic review, Tight (2020) demonstrates how the terms 'engagement' and 'retention' have increased in frequency over time as a topic of research literature but argues that only focusing on these aspects results in reductionist and narrow interpretations of students, rather than holistic and experiential understandings of what it is actually like to be a student studying today. Tight's (2020) critique aligns with Weuffen et al. (2018), who challenge narratives of student retention and engagement because of their deficit focus. Similar to Tight (2020), they suggest that discourses should emphasise student success in terms of holistic wellbeing instead of narrow indicators of academic achievement and engagement.

While discourses of engagement and retention remain contested, both in terms of institutional motives, and in the implied deficits of students (e.g., as responsible for the inequalities and challenges they face [McKay & Devlin, 2016]), they have served to increase support and services for students on-the-ground. It remains most common for institutions to support students through services that exist in parallel to curricula and learning activities, even though research suggests that the relationships students form with academic staff are significant in shaping their university experiences (Xerri et al., 2018). In this study, we explore how a retention and engagement program designed and developed specifically by academic staff, supported students identified as 'academically vulnerable', defined as students who failed 50% or more of their units (a full-time load of 40 hours equivalent equates to four units) in any one semester study period.

The Academic Support Program

The Academic Support Program operates in the School of Education as a re-engagement and retention initiative. The program has operated for more than three years and has involved up to 50 students at any one time. Once identified as 'academically vulnerable', a note is placed on students' academic transcript formally detailing their status as 'conditionally managed', and for the following study period, they are restricted to enrolling in a maximum of three units (i.e., 75% of a full-time study load). Students are contacted by the Director of Student Engagement or a member of the Academic Support Program team to discuss support options.

The aim of the program is to return students to a 'healthy academic standing', defined in the program as a student who successfully passes all enrolled units in the subsequent study period. The program includes a small team of teaching academics whose role it is to provide students with additional personalised support to engage in study. The team is led by Charlie, who is the Director of Student Engagement in the School and has been involved in learning and teaching in higher education for over 15 years. Other members of the team include Kai, a lecturer specialising in equitable education with 10 years' experience in higher education teaching; and Rowan and Blake, both lecturers with more than 5 years' experience in higher education teaching and 10 years' experience in secondary school teaching.

In practice, the program involves the identification of students by the central academic division. The central division then passes on student details to a nominated academic from within the relevant disciplinary school - in this case, the School of Education. Students are then allocated to a member of the Academic Support Program team, whereby team members are assigned a maximum of ten students to work with over a thirteen-week semester.

Contact is initiated by the team member via email, with follow-up phone calls made as required. Students are expected to meet, ideally face-to-face, with their assigned academic to discuss their conditionally managed status. These conversations are designed to ideally focus on what strategies and supports students may require to succeed (i.e., achieve a pass standard) in currently enrolled units. The strategies and support offered by the Academic Support Program team vary depending on the students' perceived needs. While the program is designed with flexibility to enable adaptive and personalised support approaches, the strategies and approaches applied are informed by relevant literature and evidence (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; Cook-Sather, 2010; Lane et al., 2019; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983; Strayhorn, 2016; Tinto, 2012, 2017).

In general, students will meet with their nominated team member twice throughout a semester with regular (fortnightly) email or phone contact. These meetings may involve students discussing assignments they have due and how they are managing their time to complete them. A regular strategy in the program is for students to be encouraged and supported to create a study plan in order to visualise and more effectively manage their time. Students remain in the program until they have returned to a healthy academic status.

Dimensions of support for learning framework

In 2019, Lane et al. proposed a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of support for student learning, through which they identified five student-centred dimensions. In this paper, we utilise Lane et al.'s (2019) framework to critically reflect on how our academic support program works to support students.

The 'dimensions of support for learning' framework was developed to guide the evaluation of university initiatives designed to support student learning. While Lane et al. (2019) provide the tool as a means of evaluating programs from the student perspective, we have used the framework to consider from a facilitation perspective, how a program was perceived to align with the different dimensions. This offers a novel application of the framework, in that it enables the exploration of how facilitators (in this case, academic staff) understand and conceive of their roles in relation to aspects of the student learning journey identified as important. The framework, synthesised from a literature review of more than 330 academic research outputs, as well as consultation processes with institutional staff and students, identified five student-centred dimensions vital to supporting student learning: connectedness; mindsets; self-management; academic capabilities; and professional identities. Each dimension is described briefly below.

Connectedness

In the context of students, connectedness reflects a sense of belonging to their institution of study, with their discipline, their course, and to their peers. It includes the establishment of networks through the development of productive relationships with staff, other students, with industry professionals and others relevant to the student's learning. In addition, collaboration skills are identified in enabling connectedness, including interpersonal skills, teamwork and through supporting others.

Mindsets

Mindsets refer to the beliefs that people have in regard to self and others. In the context of student learning, mindsets relating to curiosity, sense of purpose, self-belief, and self-determination were identified as important to student learning. Lane et al. (2019), in reference to Dweck (2006), highlight how having a growth mindset assists students to understand that their knowledge and skills can be developed, which contributes positively toward motivation.

Self-management

The dimension of self-management recognises the imperative for students to "build their own learning strategies within their personal, work and study lives" (Lane et al., 2019, p. 960). It relates to the skills and abilities students practice to support their learning, such as strategic thinking, time management and priority and goal setting.

Academic capabilities

The development of academic capabilities relates to the knowledge and skills of a student's area of study as well as generic skill development. This dimension recognises the course content skills that students require and are exposed to through curriculum, which are often associated with occupational requirements. However, academic capabilities also relate to transferable generic skills such as numeracy, editing, critical thinking and communication; skills likely to assist students both while studying and in their everyday lives.

Professional identity

The dimension of professional identity refers to the need for students to find and use information about career paths, prepare for gaining work and to develop a sense of belonging to a professional body. Developing their own capabilities of the career-building process is one way that students can be supported to develop capacity in this dimension (Lane et al., 2019).

Method

We use collective narratives gathered through self (written) and collaborative (spoken) reflective encounters to explore how dimensions of student support (Lane et al., 2019) were embedded in our academic support program. While we explore our experiences of one program, we contend that learnings may be transferable to other institutions endeavouring to find innovative ways of supporting students identified as vulnerable or at risk.

We recognise our research to be an insiders exploration (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) situated within a social, cultural, economic, and political organisational context; the University (Kincheloe, 2005). In this work, we position ourselves within an interpretive paradigm (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) and

emphasise that our understanding of the phenomenon - the academic support program - critically reflects the underlying meanings, purposes and interpretations of our thoughts and reflections (Morehouse, 2012). In interpretivist research, the aim is not to identify 'truth', but rather to understand phenomena from a subjective lens, recognising this as one of many possible understandings.

To methodologically ground our inquiry, we draw on the works of Fook and Gardner (2007) to inform our understanding of critical reflection and on Pässilä and Vince's (2015) work in using critical reflection within groups of people to support organisational learning and change. Fook and Gardner (2007, p.14) note that "critical reflection is a process (and theory) for unearthing individually-held social assumptions in order to make changes in the social world". In this study, we reflect on our assumptions about supporting students with the intent of improving how the academic support program is structured to assist academically vulnerable students in the future. Fook and Gardner (2007, p. 14) go on to say: "reflection is more than simply thinking about experience. It involves a deeper look at the premises on which thinking, actions and emotions are based". Pässilä and Vince (2015) suggest that critical reflection can be a process used collectively to promote learning and change. When engaging in collective reflection, Pässilä and Vince (2015) suggest there are opportunities/tensions in exposing individuals' experiences as well as opportunities to identify differences between organisational objectives/process and everyday practice. Through collective reflection, it is possible to reveal organisational norms and for new practice approaches to emerge (Pässilä & Vince, 2015).

Similar to collaborative autoethnographic methodologies (Chang et al., 2013; Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016; Lapadat, 2017), we acknowledge the importance of the ethics of our research and recognise that collaborative, critically reflective research is not without ethical considerations. We have adopted ethical principles in the conduct of the research through seeking voluntary consent to participate, de-identifying reflections and conversation transcripts and preserving participant confidentiality by applying gender-neutral pseudonyms (Beasy et al., 2020).

In this study, the authoring team individually created a series of written reflections about their experiences and expectations of the program which were then shared among the team prior to participating in collective reflective conversations. The first reflective writing piece was written one week before the program commenced; the second, six weeks into the program; the third, one week after work with students had ceased; and the fourth, two weeks after work with students had ceased. Each individual reflective writing piece was guided by a provocation, shown below, and numbered accordingly:

1. What are our expectations of ourselves and students in the program and how will we know what success looks like?'

2. How are we working with students and what is shaping our practices?

3. What have been our highlights/lowlights of the program and how have we been challenged? And, in what ways do we perceive that the program contributed to student success?

4. How did the dimensions of support for learning feature in our work with students in the program?

Critically reflective conversations were held by the team in the same week that the individual writing was prepared. Sharing each team member's written reflection ahead of time allowed for the preparation of questions and queries about each other's experiences of the program to be raised during conversations. Each reflection was approximately 500 words in length and each conversation lasted approximately 60 minutes. Conversations were conducted over Zoom and recorded. Recordings were transcribed verbatim using transcription software. All data were collated in NVIVO for deductive thematic analysis using Lane et al.'s (2019) framework as well as inductive coding of any additional prominent themes that emerged in the data (Guest et al., 2011). Coding was initially completed by the first author, before cross-checking was conducted by the second author to ensure consistency and reliability of the codes (Guest et al., 2011). The coded data was then reviewed and discussed in subsequent whole team meetings. To organise our findings, we first present interpretations of student success revealed through data collected, then present relevant findings in relation to Lane et al.'s (2019) dimensions of support for learning framework. In the text, abbreviations are used to identify by who, when and how data was collected e.g., 'Blake GC1' refers to data generated by Blake during the first group conversation (GC); 'Rowan WR3' refers to data from Rowan and their third individual written reflection (WR).

Findings

To interpret findings, we understand it is first important to explain how we conceptualise success, including student success and program success; presented below. In proceeding sections, we present findings related to each of the support for learning dimensions (Lane et al., 2019). We note that some dimensions were more apparent in the data than others; a finding that we discuss later in this paper.

It was found that, collectively, the team had similar ideas about what constitutes student success; however, differences were observable among the team in how success was understood within the program. Rowan's reflection, for example, highlights a tension within the program: "If students return to a 'healthy academic status by the semester's end, we could consider our job done but again, we were not encouraged to expect this for every student". While the aim of the program is to return students to a healthy academic status, Rowan identifies an 'accepted reality' from within the team that assuming all students will progress positively towards improved academic engagement and performance is unrealistic. The aim of the program also raised ethical dilemmas for the team – "What if we assist students to obtain a university degree preparing them for a profession that we suspect they will not be able to conduct?" Blake discussed how this raised the tension between supporting students and doing "what's in the best interests of the person" which questions our duty of care as professionals and as representatives of the institution.

A point we came to frequently discuss was the difficulty in measuring success, both of the program and of ourselves. We deferred to quantitative metrics (i.e., passing of units) as indicators of program success alongside qualitative metrics including student feedback on the impact of the program. We all agreed that program success would include "increased engagement, an excitement about joining the teaching profession, [and] a strong commitment to trying to become the best teacher they can be" (Blake). Having explicit conversations as a team about how to effectively measure the program's success highlighted our interest in ensuring more than just academic engagement. Rather, we were aware of the need to support students to build a professional identity as a teacher. At times, however, this pursuit brought into question our ethical responsibilities as teacher educators and university employees.

Contributions to the Dimensions of Support

Connectedness

Lane et al. (2019) identified three elements of connectedness; sense of belonging, networks, and collaboration; as being vital to student support programs in higher education. Our reflections suggested that our program addressed two of these elements; a sense of belonging and networks, though, our perception of the program supporting students in developing a sense of belonging was limited. For example, reflections revealed that at times, we were encouraging students to critically reflect on their place within a course, to think about their sense of belonging and to consider if teaching was the right career choice. Data suggested that this guidance was motivated by our own levels of care for students:

> Look, you need to rethink where you want to go with your career. Or I'm not sure that teaching is the best option for you at the moment. I have said that. That's because I care for them (Charlie, GC2).

In this way, it could be suggested that we were attempting to establish a connectedness to us as mentors but not necessarily a connectedness within their chosen profession. Findings also revealed the team's attempts to strengthen the connection between students and the institution and that our relationships with students seemed to assist in doing this:

> I thought it was really interesting that I think in all of our reflections we talked about how our role facilitated a connectedness to the institution that perhaps was previously lacking...on reflection, it also clearly shows that I was almost, you know, an ambassador for the institution as well, that I perhaps, hadn't really thought about before (Blake, GC4).

As a group, we reflected on the significant disruptions experienced by students during 2020 and considered how these had influenced students' sense of belonging. There was the perception among the team that social distancing during COVID made it difficult to connect with students generally and this contributed to students' lack of a felt sense of belonging to the institution and to the teaching profession. However, the connection with academic staff in the support program was seen as a way of supporting students' sense of belonging, "potentially, you might be the only relationship that the student has at university, or we might be" (Charlie, GC2).

While the professional connection to an academic staff member was perceived as a defining feature of the program – i.e., enabling students to access advice and support from academic staff outside of their enrolled units – these connections were most successful when a relationship was established:

> I was able to develop relationships with a few of the students I was supporting, all female, and these relationships tended to succeed because they recognised me as a support person – someone who 'had their back' and someone they could reach out to for advice. These students weren't afraid to be honest with how they were progressing and when things were hard or they had missed a deadline, they told me (Kai, R2).

Overall, reflections suggest that the program supported students in developing connectedness, though this was inhibited by the conditions of isolation created by COVID. Furthermore, data revealed that the program itself was a form of connectedness for students with the institution that was especially valued when relationships with program staff were established. Developing professional and personal relationships cultivated value and meaning for the students and formed a solid foundation for establishing and building a sense of connectedness.

Mindsets

Reflections revealed that, in order to support students to develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), program staff had to challenge their own assumptions regarding the mindsets that students would have when entering the program. In many ways, our collective narratives revealed some misguided assumptions that the students we were supporting may hold similar mindsets to our own when we were students.

> I held the belief that all students prioritised their university studies and dedicated themselves professionally to developing as a pre-service teacher. This belief was based on university commitments taking priority over obligations such as employment, sport, and social endeavours...that students will be treated as independent learners and adults (Charlie, R1).

So, I went in with very much an academic student support mindset. I now realize there are other things going on which mean that it can't just be academic support (Blake, GC3).

At the same time, the team reflected on the difficult work of challenging students' mindsets and some of the ways they would do this within the program. It was revealed through group conversations that often staff would take different approaches. Charlie approached challenging students' mindsets through reminding them of university expectations and the necessity to take responsibility for learning i.e. "If a student I work with comes in with that mindset and is non-accountable then I'm gonna be hard on them" (Charlie, GC1). Kai approached similar situations by reminding students of the broader context of university that influences student engagement and success:

> So many of the students I talk to say, 'I'm not very good at university', 'I can't do it', 'I'm just not good enough'. I try to remind them that university is only one way of understanding the world, and that we need to separate ourselves personally from the work we are doing professionally – learning to become a teacher (Kai, R2).

Reflections suggest that the work of supporting students in developing a growth mindset occurred in one-on-one conversations between staff and students. The strategies were perceived most successful when conversations occurred in person or over the phone. For example, Kai mentions the explicit strategies she employed when working with students:

> For the students that I developed the best working relationships with, this [mindset] was the area I felt I was able to make the biggest contribution. I maintained a strengths-based approach and worked to ensure students understood that I believed in them. I had explicit conversations with students about developing a positive self-perspective and spoke about strategies they can use when they catch themselves using negative self-talk (Kai, R4).

We found that in-person, phone, or online personal communication provided effective environments for students to express their perceptions of their study engagement and performance, and often allowed for staff to ascertain individual student mindsets towards their academic situations. Engaging in this communication enabled staff to gauge the mindsets of students, discuss what contributed to these, and work mutually to develop strategies to construct growth mindsets based on positive thinking. A key element of this process was staff exhibiting and communicating belief in these students.

Self-management

Students enrolled at university are predominantly categorised as adults based on their age. As such, academic staff typically adopt the perception that what comes with being an adult is a level of independence towards learning,

a level of responsibility to seek and engage with learning opportunities, and the capacity to self-manage a structured approach to meet the demands that university study necessitates. However, reflections revealed that students in the program regularly faced challenges outside of study skills, related to work commitments and caring responsibilities, challenges which made self-management more complicated than we may have first perceived and had not considered. What is more, we found that the extenuating circumstances of COVID-19 meant that our work with students involved many conversations about social, emotional, and mental wellbeing:

> If I had to describe the communication and engagement that I had with students during 2020 there was more time devoted to the mental, emotional, and social factors that influenced students rather than discussion directly about academic performance (Charlie, R3).

> Students' wellbeing and financial stability has had to be their number one concern and study has inevitably had to take a backseat for some (Blake, R3).

> I thought I could offer practical advice around writing, reading, and upskilling those academic skills. But really, what I ended up offering most of the time was empathy, understanding, and some tips and tricks around time management (Kai, R2).

Common across our approaches in working with students was a tendency to model the strategies we were supporting students to develop. We found this an effective strategy but does imply a close working relationship with students is needed for it to be effective.

> I found often I would be having conversations about helping students to identify strategies for themselves of when they might need certain, you know, support or how to do self-management better, not so much what the self-management is, but rather, how is it that you can access that? or What does it look like for you when you're in need of help? or How will you know, when you've reached a point that you need an extension? (Kai, GC4).

Findings revealed that often there is a disjuncture between the academic staffs' own the personal experiences of university studies and the students whom they support. Evidence from the reflections suggests that, as an academic group, our views on students' capacity to self-manage were embedded in how we approached our previous studies as students, and also in how we approached our current work, family, and external commitments. Nevertheless, much of our work with students centred around self-management skills related to difficulties in prioritising multiple commitments and subsequent study engagement and performance.

Academic capabilities

A challenge for us as academic staff in establishing relationships with academically vulnerable students was that they were not always receptive in recognising that they needed support, or in accepting support when offered. On occasions, students were uneasy or uncomfortable in identifying what areas of their academic skills and conduct needed development and tended to be reluctant to target academic capabilities and associated strategies that required advancing.

> I came into this role thinking that students would need support in developing the academic and institutional capital they require to successfully engage with study – I think this is true for some students, but not all. And my ability to influence this, I found, was pretty limited (Kai, R3).

Several experiences with students revealed that academic challenges were not always directly correlated to low level academic capabilities. Rather, limited self-management skills contributed to a lack of willingness to enhance academic capabilities, and directly towards the extent of academic engagement and performance.

> … student honesty really seems to be something that makes a difference to how it is that we can be supporting students. When there isn't that honesty, it's really difficult to then be able to navigate forward, how best to be approaching that support (Kai, GC2).

> I noticed was that both of us [Rowan and Kai] were talking not about helping students with their assessment, but rather helping them interpret and actually make sense of what they needed to do, which is about that academic capital, that students seem not to have a way of being able to make sense of this foreign academic language that's thrust upon them once they arrive at university (Rowan, GC4).

Blake suggests that as an academic, they are likely most skilled in providing support related to developing students' academic capabilities, yet "This turned out to be the dimension in which I think I had the least impact! I feel like the students I had weren't yet at a stage where they could engage with academic skill development." (R4). This raises questions regarding the necessary skilling of academics in supporting students in a program such as this. Furthermore, these experiences demonstrate that greater education around the role and purpose of the academic support program need to be clarified early in establishing the staff-student relationship, and an agreed willingness to be open and honest may facilitate a more constructive approach to academic capabilities.

Professional identity

Overwhelmingly, the ways in which professional identity was articulated within the data revealed a concern for the ability of students to be successful teachers and the duty of

care that our university has to support individuals engaged in studies. Despite our understanding of the importance of professional teacher identity, there were multiple occasions when each of us was apprehensive about supporting specific students in their desired choice of career direction:

> In terms of my own reflections on this program, the dimension of professional identity dominated my thinking. I kept wondering whether the students I was working with (who had some challenging social/emotional issues and difficulty with time management and resilience) were going to be able to become successful teachers (Blake, R4).

At times such thoughts contested our professional values, ethics, and subsequently our approaches in working with students, particularly when these approaches were grounded in fairness, equity, and positive student outcomes. Moreover, it was hard to dedicate focus to short-term solutions to study problems and not consider the long-term sustainability of our support and future careers of the students.

> We seem to be focusing a lot on the student and the attributes that make students successful. You know, we know that the system itself privileges a certain subset of characteristics that really come from middle class origins and those that have had these sorts of skills from a very young age. What we also know is that our universities want to have more diverse people coming into them. Secondly, we also know from teaching and teachers we need to diversify, you know, the teachers that are out there as well. My rebuttal there, in a sense, would be how do we actually navigate the system that we have to try and cater for the diverse people that we're coming into contact with... So I just wonder, where does that leave us? Where does that leave us in the roles that we have in supporting students? And... points around duty of care, and just that tension between support and actually doing what's in the best interests of the person, really come to play (Kai, GC2).

Although the best interests of each student were at the forefront of the support we administered, it was not uncommon to compare the observed academic conduct of these students at that time to how similar professional conduct in an educational environment might appear in the future. We found ourselves doing this regularly with a mindset relevant to duty of care and teacher readiness. Despite these patterns of thought, our collective priority was to encourage student engagement, assist them in their academic journey, and to optimistically contribute to a student experience that prepares these students for a teaching career.

Discussion

This paper sought to add new insight regarding university student engagement and retention by considering a perspective sparsely represented in the literature: that of the teaching academics involved in student support programs.

Student retention has long been a priority for universities, but the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasingly diverse student cohort and a changing understanding of student retention and institutional responsibility, has seen a growth in programs focused upon engagement and retention. These programs are diverse, like the students they aim to support, making evaluating their effectiveness challenging. What is more, the success of these programs is likely to be defined differently by individual schools and universities, the staff involved and the students themselves. Guided by Lane and colleagues' (2019) evaluative framework for student learning services, we discuss our findings to consider the strengths of one academic support program, as well as its gaps, and reflect upon whether our understanding of 'success' may have impacted upon these.

One of the greatest benefits of the program perhaps, given our collective reflections, was its capacity to assist academics in gaining deeper insight and understanding of what it means to be a student, particularly an academically vulnerable student, in the current higher education landscape. Findings suggest that we typically felt we were able to support students across the five dimensions; connectedness, mindsets, self-management, academic capabilities, and professional identity; but became increasingly aware that this capacity was reliant upon establishing a solid relationship with students, a relationship often hindered by their complex lived experiences. In this way, as found elsewhere (Crosling, 2017), 'connectedness' appeared central to many of the positive reflections with students in the program. We felt better able to help students develop a positive self-perception and to communicate our belief in them (mindsets), better able to model strategies like strategic thinking, time management and goal setting (self-management), and better able to help students identify and address any scholarly shortcomings (academic capabilities) once they felt a sense of connectedness with us. Similarly, we felt more equipped and comfortable broaching potentially sensitive questions about the students' choice of career (professional identity) once a collaborative and productive relationship - once a 'connectedness' - was established. That is not to suggest that any one dimension is more imperative than another. Indeed, our reflections revealed that the five 'dimensions of support for learning' in Lane et al.'s (2019) framework are rarely mutually exclusive, despite the developers suggesting otherwise.

Findings revealed that the novelty of a support program designed and delivered by academics was not always an advantage. While as academics, we were able to bring high levels of scholarly and course-specific knowledge to the program, our own experiences of being high-performing students and doing study, influenced our approaches to working with students. The students in the program were 'academically vulnerable' and/or disengaged, which often meant that their experiences were different to ours. The data revealed that, at times, we found it difficult to relate to students which potentially impeded that invaluable 'connectedness' earlier discussed.

We found that, broadly, we all had similar ideas about what constitutes student success. This too appeared to be a strength of the program initially. As our reflections

progressed, however, we questioned the extent to which these views reflect a system where 'success', even that we ourselves experience, privileges certain 'middle class' characteristics that do not necessarily lend themselves to welcoming diverse groups to the tertiary experience. Charlie's belief, for example, "that all students prioritise their university studies" might align with their own experience but did not align with the realities of the many students in the program whose lives and responsibilities increasingly "spread out much further than their course and institution" (Tight, 2020, p. 697). Our involvement in this program, notwithstanding, assisted in 'holding up a mirror' to our assumptions and those of the university, which will likely inform future iterations of such programs and include a recognition of "the dual responsibilities of students and institutions in enacting inclusivity" and moving "beyond reductive standpoints" where failure is framed as individual student deficit (O'Shea et al., 2016, p. 1).

Also revealed was that despite holding similar perceptions of student success, there was evidence of some inconsistencies regarding how success of the program was understood within the team. Moreover, some of us grappled with the idea that the program's success was not necessarily contingent upon the success of every student. Rowan's reflection that "we were not encouraged to expect [...] every student" to return to a healthy academic status (i.e., successfully passing all units) highlighted a discrepancy between our understandings of 'academic capability' and 'professional identity' and that of the program. While student attrition may well be a reality at all universities across all courses (Wueffen et al., 2021), it was apparent that some of the authors felt that starting with an assumption that a portion of students withdrawing would likely be from our cohort was counterproductive. Indeed, such an assumption, we felt, had the potential to negatively affect other dimensions of support for learning. Lane et al. (2019) explain that connectedness for example, a dimension found to be so imperative here, is underpinned by the extent to which a student feels valued by others. Mindsets, too, relate in part to the beliefs that people have of others. Should academics in such a program begin with students positioned in deficit, it might be suggested that success is unlikely. Blake's reflection appears to confirm this:

> [Academic Capabilities] turned out to be the dimension in which I think I had the least impact! I feel like the students I had weren't yet at a stage where they could engage with academic skill development (R4).

Our experiences highlighted an exasperation that, in many cases, students were not receptive to recognising that they needed support, or in accepting the support offered. In discussing self-management, Lane et al. (2019) suggest it is vital that students "identify and use their own learning strategies" and "engage in behaviours that will produce a desired result" (p. 962). This undoubtedly first requires students to identify their learning weaknesses and recognise that engaging with the Academic Support Program could, in part, contribute to building these kinds of productive behaviours.

Finally, our collective narratives revealed some concerns that student success in our context required ensuing success as a beginning teacher, though we questioned whether this received sufficient consideration. Several authors described ethical dilemmas surrounding supporting students to succeed in a degree when they had fears regarding the students' capacity to later succeed in their chosen career. In referring to Lane et al.'s (2019) framework, José Sá and Serpa (2020) suggest that success in part refers to a student's capacity to internalise the competencies and knowledges required in their professional field. Questions as to the ethics of focusing upon short-term (university based) solutions without adequate regard and reflection to the long-term (professional) sustainability of the students' future career, were raised as conflicted feelings about our own duty of care to our professional body. In this way, our study raised further questions still to be answered: Is it ethical for academics in such a program to be primarily focused upon retaining students and ensuring their current academic success; and is it ethical for us to focus upon supporting the students in our immediate courses and not necessarily those they go on to teach?

Despite presenting some novel understandings to a field where the contributions and perceptions of academics to student support have been previously sparse, we recognise three limitations in this research. First, the sample was limited and consisted of just four teaching academics. While this intimate sample size foregrounds deep understanding of personal experience, it would, nonetheless, be beneficial in future to expand the study to include other programs and academics with diverse backgrounds and teaching experiences to validate or extend our findings and to potentially identify any differences experienced based upon program design, identity, context and/or stage of career. Second, participants were all from one School and one University necessitating that our findings be understood within this specific context. A more comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of academics involved in engagement and retention programs is likely if further research is conducted at other universities, in Australia and internationally. Finally, data for the research was collected during a unique 'COVID-affected' period which resulted, at times, in all students studying entirely online. It is possible that our findings regarding: the complex and diverse needs of the students in the support program; the prevalence of ''connectedness' as an important domain to student support compared to other domains; and our own sense of pressure to retain as many students as possible, were reflections of the current social and higher education environment. Studies that continue to investigate the perspectives of academics in student engagement and retention programs and their success post COVID-19 are, therefore, recommended.

Conclusion

Within the field of student engagement and retention in higher education, there is an absence of literature regarding the roles and experiences of academic staff and little evidence of support programs designed and implemented by academics. The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of how academic staff perceived student success within the context

of engagement and retention for academically vulnerable students with reference to Lane et al. (2019)'s framework. Through both written and spoken collaborative and critically reflective encounters, four academic staff explored literature-driven dimensions of student support: connectedness, mindsets, self-management, academic capabilities, and professional identity, embedded within an academic support program. Findings suggested that addressing each of these dimensions first necessitates a clear and shared understanding of what constitutes student success and how this is interpreted within a support program. Academic staff were challenged by their role in student engagement and retention and in their uncertainty surrounding their ethical responsibilities towards supporting all students. Our study also revealed that at times, academic staff were influenced by their own previous study experiences which contributed to assumptions about how students should approach and engage with study. The staff reported that, for some, the academic support program positively influenced students in developing feelings of connectedness, building self-management skills and understanding commitment, and in establishing a foundation for a student experience that fosters a pathway towards a teaching career. Not all students, however, were responsive or receptive towards staff attempts and efforts to provide support broadly. Notwithstanding, we perceived that when students were responsive, regular communication and establishing a professional student-staff relationship, the facilitation of positive engagement with study and the construction of a growth mindset, was possible.

Our understanding of student support was located in the framework developed by Lane and colleagues – intended for evaluating student support programs – and was a useful frame in assisting us to consider the varying ways in which students can be, and need to be, supported in higher education. While we did not attend to each dimension equally in our interactions with students, the framework acted as a tool for our sense-making of students' needs, and at times, validated our approaches and hunches relating to the diverse needs we encountered.

The methodological approach of critical reflection was useful here in assisting us to gain a better understanding of the program and how it worked to support students. Critical reflection among the academic team enabled a deep understanding of how staff work in the program and how work with students occurs relationally. This was further supported by the adoption of the framework developed by Lane and colleagues which facilitated our reflective process and gave structure to thinking through the different contributions a program may make to the student experience. We recognise a limitation of this study in that it does not include the views of users – the students accessing support. Further evaluation and user feedback will be important for continued learning, growth, and adaptation to the program.

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