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Community, Engagement and Connectedness: Reflections on Pathway Programs at a Regional Australian University. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

The progressive democratisation of Australian higher education has numerous causes including the increase in the number of universities and therefore university places across the later 20th and into the 21st century, as well as initiatives by governments of different ideological hues to increase the total percentage of the population with a university degree. This latter impulse, in particular, has increased significantly the number of students entering university via pathway programs, meaning programs which provide the opportunity to undertake study to inculcate university-standard skills and enable matriculation into university for people who are otherwise ineligible. The students in pathway programs are sometimes disengaged from learning, coming from so-called non-traditional pathways that may signify a disconnect between them and their institutions of learning. This practice report, therefore, examines efforts to address "connectedness" in pathway programs at a regional university in Australia. The pathway programs at UniSQ College are underpinned by an inclusive and holistic teaching philosophy that supports students' access to higher education. Through the lenses of social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and collaborative engagement, practitioners examined and reflected on ways in which this philosophy was embedded in the day-to-day work of UniSQ College through deliberate efforts to promote and maintain connectedness. By reflecting on and articulating these connections, we have provided a base for developing a future evaluative framework that will critically examine the extent to which our practices, through student engagement, foster connectedness.

***Keywords**:* Community; engagement; pathway program; enabling education; holism; connectedness.

Introduction

Higher education has experienced associated processes of democratisation, massification and neoliberal pressure. Enabling and pathway programs—also referred to as preparation, bridging and access courses (designed to enable people traditionally excluded from higher education to enter university)—have been at the centre of these processes. By providing a pathway, universities have made higher enrolments from more diverse groups possible. However, documented patterns of low retention and articulation have also prompted criticism that the programs may misuse public money and even lower standards (Pitman

et al., 2015). In this context where education is expanding but is also subject to judgment and criticism, understanding practices that may encourage students to engage with their study, their academic teachers, their institutions, and even their identity as students is critical. Through an examination of one of the largest and oldest pathway programs in Australian higher education at the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ), this paper reflects on the nature of connections in these programs through the lenses of social engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioural engagement, and collaborative engagement. The value of this reflection lies not only in its range of studying large-scale programs, but also the diversity of cohorts, including the often overlooked cohort of incarcerated students.

Background

The notion of interconnectedness—subject-to-subject, subject-to-student, student-to-community—is not new. Community connectedness is a widespread idea that speaks to the origins of education in local communities and places of worship (where one also finds the interrelated thread of a pedagogy of care) and finds secular expression in the pedagogy of the ancient Greeks through to more recent dialectics (e.g., Clarke, 1971). In the later 20th century in western education, there was a departure from the interconnectedness that featured in many traditional education systems, characterised by an increasing imperative for academic skills to be rationalised and reduced to quantifiable outputs. This occurred partly as a result of scientific reductionism, but also because of the rationalisation that was given impetus by the economic downturn in the 1980s (Soudien, 2011). In universities, rationalisation approaches, fed by the need to articulate discrete and transferrable skills for employment and portability purposes, arguably led to fragmentation and compartmentalisation of subjects, of academic and support functions, and, in some cases, of the student as an individual from learning outcomes. In many higher education institutions, compartmentalisation was manifested in the separation of support and student wellbeing functions from the curriculum and the classroom to separate units. This separation was exacerbated by deficit views of student ability and, as Duong (2003) argues, the expectation that students "conform to schools [or other educational institutions] rather than schools serving the needs of students" (p. 290).

Holistic education is concerned with the closely bound interrelationship of the student, the learning environment and the learning community. Thus, it focuses on the connectedness of the student to the learning institution. In the secondary school context, this kind of connectedness has been addressed by researchers through the concepts of school bonding, school climate, teacher support and student engagement (Blum, 2005). The interrelationship between social engagement and social connectedness, in particular, is well established (e.g., Paiva et al., 2021). The presence of social engagement—being actively involved in formal and informal social pursuits—is likely to result in social connectedness—having social ties—and vice-versa. This, by extension, applies to engagement and connectedness in a broader sense in the learning context. Engagement, therefore, is a useful lens for reflecting on connectedness in learners. Student engagement is arguably an outcome of effective bonding of the student to the school or other learning institution and is an indicator of a supportive institutional climate (e.g., Allen et al., 2021). Moreover, the lens of student engagement is useful here because many of the students that form a part of the cohort that we discuss in this paper may have been at least somewhat academically marginalised and thus disengaged from their secondary school learning experiences.

The gradual return to connectedness in higher education occurred alongside a global move from restricted elite to mass education (Marginson, 2016; Trow, 2007). This change has impacted the types of communities within universities, and the ways in which students form connections with these communities. As universities have sought to expand, pathway or enabling programs, which provide preparation for and access to undergraduate study for previously excluded students, also expanded (Agosti & Bernat, 2018). However, this expansion is contentious, and has been accompanied by concerns that expanding access not only threatens higher education quality (Burke, 2013; Shah & Whannell, 2017), but places unsustainable pressure on public expenditure (Marginson, 2013; Sadler, 2017). Higher education has become increasingly subject to regulation and standardisation (Bradley et al., 2008), with a particular emphasis on measuring and evaluating the impact of widening participation efforts. Despite years of funding, program development, and an overall exponential growth in the numbers of students accessing higher education, globally there has been a concerning failure of the widening participation movement to reverse the underrepresentation of equity groups benefiting from university education (Baker et al., 2020; Callender et al., 2020; Gale & Parker, 2017; Marginson, 2016). Pathway programs, which can offer nuanced programs to niche student cohorts, play an important role in addressing this persistent problem (McKay et al., 2018; Pitman et al., 2016). Students undertaking these programs are predominantly from targeted equity groups (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011), including from regional and rural, Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, along with those with disabilities and those from families with no prior university experience. While all students benefit from improved approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and support, it is these students who gain most from programs that create effective avenues for genuine student engagement, connectedness and belonging.

The Setting: UniSQ College

The UniSQ is a regional Australian university with three campuses across southern Queensland and has as a key strategic goal the provision of opportunities for "access with success" (University of Southern Queensland, 2022, p. 3) for its diverse student cohort. The work of UniSQ College (UniSQC) is underpinned by an inclusive and holistic shared teaching philosophy that values students' prior knowledge and experiences, and celebrates diversity. This philosophy has emerged through the shared and recursive practices of staff and has generated a supportive, collaborative, equity-focused approach to education. This approach is tacit, innate and embedded in our day-to-day work, only becoming visible to participants though deliberate reflection. It is through this process of reflection that UniSQC's efforts to forge for both students and staff a sense of connectedness and belonging emerge as cohesive and comprehensive. The UniSQC offers programs and initiatives to develop student belonging and connectedness, some of which address the needs of specific cohorts, and others which focus on providing UniSQC-wide embedded support for all students. The largest program at the UniSQC, the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP), provides a suite of enabling courses designed to transition students into undergraduate study. A core course within this program is TPP7122 Study Management, which is characterised by its exceptionally large and very diverse cohorts. The size and variety of cohorts can present challenges providing course content that will cater to students' needs in relation to their existing capacities and their future study needs.

A second enabling education program, the Accelerated Entry Pathway Program (AEPP), funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP[1]), is specifically designed for Year 12 HEPPP target school leavers with no or low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores to allow those students access to and preparation for higher education. AEPP is an annual, intensive on-campus program that runs for two 10-day blocks. In 2017, AEPP was developed to replace the former Tertiary Preparation Program Intensive Pathway (TPPIP). Since then, AEPP has had 409 students complete the program, with 79 students continuing in the TPP and 270 accepting places at UniSQ (with a number of students accepting offers at other universities). AEPP aims to help students to strengthen their academic literacy skills and successfully transition to university.

Students in UniSQC are supported by an Academic Advisor team through an online community interface called The Zone. The Zone assists students, especially in their first semester, for a smooth transition to university study and developing attitudes and skills for academic success. It provides a range of information and activities to develop the Six Senses of Success: purpose; connectedness; academic self; self-efficacy; growth and resilience; exploration and enjoyment, which are adopted from the Five Senses of Success model (Lizzio, 2006). The Academic Advisor team monitors students' progress and connects them with relevant support services when needed.

A final student cohort serviced by UniSQC is incarcerated students who constitute a significant proportion of the student body, the majority in TPP. In fact, this program was initially developed in the 1980's specifically to service incarcerated students through a paper-based distance delivery mode. Today, UniSQ leads the sector in the provision of university education in correctional centres, with approximately 1,100 incarcerated students undertaking over 2,000 courses in 2021 (University of Southern Queensland, 2021), mostly through programs offered by UniSQC.

Methods

Student connectedness is a key philosophy in UniSQC. This practice report is a reflection on staff approaches to developing and implementing a shared pedagogy of connection through community, care, and engagement. A conceptual framework of student engagement developed by Redmond et al. (2018) acknowledges the "interconnectedness of cognitive, socio-cultural, affective, behavioural, ecological and organizational factors and even the actions of students as a collective" (p. 185). This framework categorises engagement into social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and collaborative elements. We use these five elements of engagement in this paper to examine how much the pedagogical practices in pathway programs at UniSQC succeed in fostering connectedness by engaging students across these interrelated categories. Through individual then collaborative reflection, six educators in UniSQC reflected on their teaching practices. In the following five sections, we start by introducing each of Redmond et al.'s (2018) categories of engagement and then describe our practices at UniSQC.

[1] HEPPP is an Australian government initiative that provides funding for universities to implement strategies to improve access to undergraduate studies. The HEPPP cohort which comprise the focus of this study are students from regional and remote areas, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and low SES background students (Dept. of Education, 2022).

Social Engagement

Social engagement is the interaction between student to student and student to staff, inside and outside of the learning environment, including academic and non-academic activities (Redmond et al., 2018). It is evident that students' confidence and retention increase when they have strong social connections with staff and peers (Sharp et al., 2014). Social engagement and connection with peers also helps to develop a group identity. A sense of belonging with group identity, in a higher education setting, assists to create the perception of being a member of the academic community (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Early interventions to create group identity and social connections is established in The Zone before students commence their first semester. Students enrolled in The Zone are most active during this pre-semester period which suggests that students value the early social engagement and sense of community. AEPP provides a comprehensive introduction to university life, which positively impacts students' sense of belonging and ultimately helps them succeed in higher education by increasing student confidence while forging strong ties within the university. This is achieved by the provision of morning teas and lunches, social sport, low staff to student ratios, peer support, along with activities provided for students staying in the Residential Colleges to attend the program. This development of connection through belonging and sense of community, the feeling that one belongs, through positive social engagement, leads to increased emotional engagement which is also linked to positive cognitive and behavioural engagement.

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement, or emotional reaction to learning, is related to both feelings and attitudes associated with learning (Redmond et al., 2018). Fredricks et al. (2004) state that emotional engagement influences a student's willingness to do work, based on both positive and negative reactions to an institution, including academic staff and classmates. A positive emotional experience can lead to "simple liking to deep valuing of, or identification with, the institution" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p.61). Connection occurs through this deep valuing or emotional engagement with an institution. Eccles et al. (1983, as cited in Fredricks et al., 2004) outline four components that underpin emotional engagement: *interest, attainment value, importance*, and *cost*. Importance is linked to the perceived benefit of a task to future goals while cost is the negative aspect of study such as balancing work-life commitments. The Zone addresses these components at the early stage of student transition and raises students' awareness of the need to consider the purpose of their studies, recognise motivations and manage expectations through the pre-enrolment activity. The pre-enrolment activity consists of, 1) setting goals by choosing an undergraduate program that the student wants to gain entry into, 2) articulating assumptions by understanding the program and course structure and taking placement tests, and 3) managing expectations by considering the difficulties that may occur, (such as health issues and attending work and/or family commitments) and making individualised study plans. The activity is designed to help students feel that they are in control of their studies, which enhances students' sense of agency.

Positive emotional engagement in students also impacts retention. It has been documented that enabling programs have a low retention rate over the program (Hodges et al., 2013). However, Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that perceived relatedness to teachers, parents, and peers uniquely contributed to emotional engagement. AEPP fosters belief in student success (attainment value). Underpinning this is a genuine connection to staff, which is formed early in the program through small class sizes, social activities (interest), and shared meals. Staff availability and approachability including afternoon drop-in tutorial sessions, positive feedback, growth mindset activities, and past successful AEPP student talks, are set up to encourage the belief that students can succeed, thus increasing student confidence and self-esteem. This then creates positive emotional engagement to the program, seen in the high retention rate (94% in 2020). The AEPP pedagogical approach enhances students' learning and experiences into and beyond their first year. This connection through relationship in AEPP via emotional and social engagement is seen in the success of its peer support group, the *AEPP hour*. Since the implementation of AEPP hour, there is now a mix of first to third year undergraduate past AEPP students returning once a month for lunch and social sport. Students interact socially while also being able to seek support if needed. Student feedback received about this activity indicates the value of social and emotional engagement in helping students establish and maintain connections: "having these meetings can remind us of the good days. Coming and seeing and talking is everything. It's worthwhile to come and gives the feeling of AEPP again."

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement can be viewed as a dynamic phenomenon involving processes that promote student engagement and interaction with instructional tasks and learning environments; it is an inherent aspect of all learning processes (Boekaerts, 2016). A crucial aspect of cognitive engagement with learning materials and learning environments is being able to discern and establish connections within course content and learning environments. To establish such connections, course content

must be perceived by students as both relevant and important (Buelow et al., 2018, p. 314). One way of encouraging this perception is by embedding reflection tasks within courses to promote connections in learning environments (Chang, 2019). Reflective thinking and writing tasks provide students with tools for discerning and establishing connections between course content and their own prior knowledge and experiences, raising self-awareness of personal thinking styles and status of learning (Sabariego et al., 2020). The course TPP7122 Study Management promotes connection through cognitive engagement with the course materials by embedding a range of reflective thinking and writing activities to encourage reflection and connection with what is being learned. Efforts to engage students are particularly important given the large size and diversity of course cohorts each semester. Enrolments may reach 600-700+ students in semesters 1 and 2.

The sheer size and diversity of TPP7122 cohorts presents a challenge creating a course that is perceived by students to be both relevant and important. Through a focus on students' lived experiences, the course aims to promote cognitive engagement with course topics by helping students establish connections between new knowledge and prior knowledge and experiences. Through building cognitive connections, students can re-evaluate lived experiences and current learning, and find personal significance in what they are studying. Boud (2001) notes that, "This process of re-evaluation includes relating new information to that which is already known, seeking relationships between new and old ideas" (p.12). Through inclusion of reflective thinking and writing activities, the course helps students connect thought and action, and provides opportunities "for students to describe their internal processes, evaluate their challenges, and recognize their triumphs in ways that would otherwise remain unarticulated" (Allan & Driscoll, 2014, p. 37). In doing so, students not only develop their learning but are also re-assured that their prior knowledge and experiences are valued and valuable (Marta et al., 2020). While it is difficult to measure the degree of students' cognitive engagement with course materials, there is evidence from student surveys at mid and end of semester that many TPP7122 students have found the course relevant and important. For example, students noted that: "It has forced me to look at myself and the way I learn", "the assignments required a lot of very personal self-reflection. These activities turned out to be very insightful."

Behavioural Engagement

Behavioural engagement is a positive attitude towards and conduct in learning, and behaviourally engaged students are not only actively involved in learning but connected to learning. This connection to learning also extends to peer encouragement (Redmond et al., 2018). In sociology, the majority views that individuals are social constructions, and the university is one of the important social locations where identity formation occurs. (Kaufman, 2014). Kaufman states that university is not only a place to advance academically but also to form a sense of self that positions students in a particular culture alongside a set of corresponding social roles. Baxter Magolda (2014) considers recognising this identity formation process crucial for university students since university experience requires reconsideration of one's role and responsibility in the world regardless of the student's age and background. She describes that developing self-authorship, or the internal capacity to construct one's beliefs, identity, and social relations, enhances a student's capability to work interdependently with diverse others. These concepts indicate that identifying oneself as a student or a member of the academic community and applying self-regulated learning interrelate with collaborative engagement.

However, developing student agency and self-regulating behaviours does not occur easily, particularly for the students in UniSQC, who are often the first in their family to attend university, and have often been away from educational settings for a long time. For the very specific cohort, year 12 school leavers in AEPP, AEPP incorporates developing academic literacy and transitioning to university in its courses, which contain a variety of group work and interactive workshops. AEPP students undertake an assessed group work presentation and participate in an interactive, hands-on career workshop developed to help guide students through possible different career paths, understand their own motivators and strengths, and understand how to navigate through university handbooks. Furthermore, for the greater cohort, the Zone provides tools for students to monitor their progress. There are quizzes, checklists, and other resources for different stages of a semester, such as enrolment, locating course materials, assignment submission, and planning for the following semester. The activities, that students can check if they have completed academic and administrative tasks, are particularly popular. It affirms students' progress and increases their confidence. In addition, the curated information and links to support services within the university on The Zone are also well received. Having the Academic Advisor team as a point of contact makes it even easier for students to access the services. The Zone is designed to prompt students to identify challenges and proactively seek help.

Collaborative Engagement

Interconnectedness through collaborative engagement links with relationships and networks with peers, university staff, educational institutions and industries (Redmond et al., 2018). As previously described in relation to the other engagement

elements, students in UniSQC are encouraged to participate in peer learning inside and outside of academic settings and provided with a range of opportunities to connect with academic and support staff. Those resources and activities may affect multiple elements of engagement (Tualaulelei et al., 2021). University efforts to foster students' sense of connectivity with their learning communities and engagement in their courses is increasingly directed toward improving online student experiences. This is especially so at universities such as UniSQ where student cohorts rely on the flexibility of online study to balance study with other competing demands. Indeed, disrupting the digital divide to provide disadvantaged students with equal access to digital technology is a cornerstone of widening participation efforts. However, this necessarily excludes incarcerated students who have limited or no internet access.

Developing a sense of community through connections for incarcerated cohorts is challenging, as contact with students is limited to third party contact through correctional centre processes. Regular daily processes which limit movement and communication within correctional centres, compounded in recent years by the impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns, present further barriers to helping students develop a sense of community and partnership with the University. That approaches to the provision of higher education in each jurisdiction and indeed each centre is variable, contextually situated and at times contentious adds another layer of complexity. Further, the increasing use of cloud technology and the impact of industry demands, such as work placements, present further challenges in the provision of higher education programs which students can realistically complete while incarcerated. While there has been a shift across the higher education sector from paper-based distance education delivery models to digital learning, this change has been adopted to varying degrees and in a range of ways by different correctional centres. Some are limited to the provision of paper-based materials to students, often for security concerns about digital content and devices; others provide access to learning materials through correctional centre technology, primarily as downloaded PDF documents. Others have adopted UniSQ's offline technology solution (Farley et al., 2016), through which education officers access course materials and software through an online "kiosk", and download these to UniSQ-provided personal digital devices, which are then allocated to students. Students then study through a digital platform which offers experiences like those of students studying online.

Regardless of the mode through which incarcerated students access programs, their successful participation in learning is dependent on the community of support which works closely and collaboratively to develop a sense of connectedness for incarcerated students. A "whole package" approach engages the support of stakeholders across the university including the library, examinations and scholarships offices, student support and career development officers, and learning advisers. Most importantly, this community includes the managers of correctional jurisdictions and individual centres, along with the officers who work directly with students to facilitate the delivery of content, peer support, and communication between students, lecturers and the broader UniSQC community. Site visits by UniSQC staff also provide opportunities to connect with correctional centre staff and, importantly, students. Critical to this success is the capacity to work flexibly and reflexively to build and sustain a network of relationships and connections, and provide avenues for iterative feedback and evaluation processes. Further efforts to help incarcerated students develop connection to the university community includes the digital course *Unlocking the Future*. This course provides interactive access to university website information, and online and "campus-based" orientation and "student life" information, fostering a sense of familiarity with the university community students are unable to access directly.

Conclusion and Future Direction

Measuring connection through engagement is challenging since the definition of engagement lacks clarity and accordingly it is hard to interpret findings with accuracy (Fredricks et al., 2019). Our experience in reflecting on UniSQC courses against the engagement framework developed by Redmond et al. (2018) suggested that many of the categories of engagement were not mutually exclusive, and that, in some cases (such as social and emotional engagement) the division was artificial. This observation is consistent with the perspective that knowledge, the student and all aspects related to the learning experience are part of an indivisible whole. The framework, nevertheless, remains a meaningful tool in framing an examination of the way in which we create a holistic, connected learning experience for students studying in the UniSQC pathways program. Our reflections, furthermore, revealed that in many areas, we were providing a connected experience through engagement. For example, in the development of early student to teacher and student to student relationships. Connectedness in education can be considered synonymous with community—community of peers, educators, and the whole institution.

While there was value in this reflection in that it has helped bring practitioners together and demonstrated a shared learning and teaching philosophy across UniSQC, there were some limitations. The reflective activity drew primarily from anecdotal evidence and was not based on a formalised framework. Moreover, while the reflection identifies practices that fostered connectedness, it did not identify gaps in our processes and approaches. Nevertheless, drawing these practitioners together

and identifying common approaches, paves the way for the next step, to develop a more coherent and comprehensive approach UniSQC wide, along with a more rigorous evaluation method. Better measurement tools (an evaluative framework) will help us identify gaps in our processes and improve practices. There is value in using the lenses of the different types of engagement developed by Redmond et al. (2018) as it shows that connection is not a simple concept but multi-layered. Connecting with academic self, peers, university staff, and/or the institution is interrelated. Connection is developed through multiple engagement elements and has an inherent challenge with quantifiable measurement and types of connection.

The literature indicates that connectedness plays a significant role in student success. Set against the context outlined earlier of neoliberal impulses that have the implication of reducing education to elemental and functional aspects, the holistic emphasis on educating the whole individual emerges from this analysis. As students, especially in pathway or enabling programs, enter university with a range of needs and backgrounds, there is a need to create connections and develop meaningful relationships with our cohort. This brings us back to the traditional goals of education, the acquisition of wisdom and valuing of lifelong learning, while developing unique individuals that form part of the community, that rediscovered holistic education provides. Through a process of reflection on connectedness using the lens of engagement, we have laid the groundwork for further enhancing these important connections and highlighted the central role such connections play in facilitating non-traditional students' successful access to higher education.

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