Beyond hard outcomes: 'soft' outcomes and engagement as student success

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This paper questions current policy discourses that equate student success with hard outcomes like retention, completion and employment. It offers another view, one that uses 'soft' outcomes and student engagement literature to widen our understanding of student success. In the paper, we first draw on literature to explore student engagement, usually understood as a means to achieve success, and 'soft' outcomes as acceptable student outcomes, as success. We present possible indicators for these forms of success and a matrix of factors which influence such success. We then examine these ideas using data gathered from a project that investigated success as experienced by post-school foundation learners in Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The findings suggest that the ideas have value. Finally, we identify some implications for teachers, arguing that, contrary to some current views, all four quadrants in the matrix are the business of teachers.

Keywords: student outcomes; student engagement; soft outcomes; skills development

Introduction

Since 1999, successive governments in Aotearoa/New Zealand, like governments in Europe including the UK, Australia and to a lesser extent the USA (Hyland 2003), have followed post-school educational strategies that pursue skills development for economic competitiveness and social inclusion and cohesion. In three Tertiary Education Strategy documents (Ministry of Education 2002, 2006, 2009), successive governments included a strategy for helping people not yet ready to play active roles in the workforce to develop foundation skills so that they can operate successfully in a 'knowledge society'. The second Strategy document suggested 'all New Zealanders need a "foundation" of knowledge, skills and dispositions to support them to participate in the economy and society' (Ministry of Education 2006, 22). The knowledge, skills and dispositions required centre on literacy, numeracy and language development that would not only enhance work readiness, but also have positive benefits for immediate families, whanau (Māori, meaning extended family groupings) and the broader community. The second Strategy document judged that by 2006 foundation learning had begun to move from 'a relatively marginal position within the tertiary education system to being a core activity...' (Ministry of Education 2006, 22).

In the same document, government prioritised improving student outcomes and success. In foundation learning, as in other areas of the 'tertiary landscape', such

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success is to be judged by 'hard' quantifiable outcomes, for example, how well students have been retained, how many completed their courses, and work-related outcomes such as how many jobs are won by graduates of foundation programmes (Ministry of Education 2006). While governments value such 'hard outcomes' for accountability and political reasons, hard outcomes do not give a holistic picture of student learning experiences. In the 'hard outcomes' model, students' own experiences of success are largely discounted. Students' perception of successful learning is hard to quantify for accountability purposes and lacks punch politically. We question equating student success only with hard student outcomes and think two alternative approaches may better serve to help understand student success. Both attempt to explain success in terms of student experiences. One approach sees success in terms of 'soft' student outcomes (Butcher et al. 2006). 'Soft' outcomes do not measure success objectively; they measure it according to learners' perceptions of progress towards their own and programme goals. The second approach relates to student engagement outcomes, derived from students' cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning (Chapman 2003).

This paper draws on two research projects conducted in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The first investigated success in acquiring 'soft' outcomes as perceived by post-school foundation learners studying literacy, numeracy, language and basic subject skills. The second, in progress, explores student engagement in higher education. In preparing literature reviews for these projects, we noticed a congruity in the major ideas supporting 'soft' outcomes and student engagement. This paper first draws from the 'soft' outcomes and 'engagement' literatures to rethink and synthesise student success using their experiences of learning. It then uses data from the completed foundation learning research project (Zepke, Leach, and Isaacs 2008) to assess the viability of the synthesis. The paper concludes by suggesting some implications for teachers resulting from the rethinking.

'Soft' outcomes and student engagement

As Butcher and Marsden (2005) observe, learning success is not something that is tidily explained by how many individuals achieve certain targets. Neither can learning success exclude the subjective experiences of learners. As both Kelly (2001) and Hyland (2003) suggest in different ways, learning is neither solely an individualised nor a systems produced process. Bennett, Dunne, and Carré (1999) discuss the emergence of core, generic, transferable and key skills in the UK's policy discussions. This confusion of labels applies to similar things: skills needed by people wishing to achieve employment outcomes. Such skills include recognition that some outcomes include subjective elements. Kelly (2001) conflates these multiple terms into 'key skills'. These can be learnt and used in a wide variety of situations. They enable learners to be effective, flexible, adaptable and mobile within the labour market. Kelly's list of key skills includes communication, application of number, information technology, problem solving, improving personal performance and working with others. Hyland (2003) adds that learners wanting employment or progression to further learning must also seek admission to communities of practice for which relational, political and cultural skills are needed.

Green (1998) suggests that not even key skills are adequate surrogates for student success. True, Kelly's list includes skills that have social and subjective dimensions

with potential application outside employment. But framed within a vocational framework, key skills do not necessarily take note of Hyland's (2003) concerns for wider political and cultural outcomes useful in communities of practice outside the work place. Nor do they accommodate the concerns of, for example, Isaacs (2005), who sees outcomes based on key skills as marginalising skills valued by cultural minorities. Most importantly perhaps, they do not measure progress achieved by learners towards their own and programme goals. While not aiming to specify skills beyond the work place, a project funded by the European Social Fund examined schemes developing skills with strong potential beyond the vocational (ECOTEC 1998, cited in Butcher and Marsden 2004). According to them, these schemes satisfied employer requirements for motivation, flexibility, reliability and stability while also measuring success in terms of how well learners felt qualified to meet wider social challenges.

These 'soft' outcomes have three characteristics setting them apart from hard outcomes. Success is not measured directly or tangibly but by distance travelled by learners towards programme goals rather than by their final achievement. 'Soft' outcomes differ from key skills in that they are sensitive to context (Butcher and Marsden 2004). Measuring success with 'soft' outcomes has a subjective dimension including the experiences of learners. A number of 'soft' outcome models supported by a range of success indicators have emerged (Butcher et al. 2006; Dewson et al. 2000; Steer and Humm 2001). 'Indicators are the means by which we can measure whether the outcomes have been achieved. The term *soft indicators*, therefore, can be used when referring to the achievements which may "indicate" acquisition or progress towards an outcome' (Dewson et al. 2000, 2). Many typologies draw heavily on the work of Dewson and colleagues at the Institute of Employment Studies in the UK. They emphasise that 'soft' outcomes may include achievements related to interpersonal skills, such as social skills and coping with authority; organisational skills, such as personal planning and scheduling; analytic skills, such as exercising judgement, managing time or problem solving; and personal skills, such as insight, motivation, confidence, reliability and awareness of health. While most of the 'soft' outcomes model include categories, such as key work, attitudinal, personal and practical skills, they can vary widely, being sensitive to context. For example, the Soft Outcomes Universal Learning (SOUL) Record project in the UK identified over 80 'soft' outcomes for six different voluntary organisations (Butcher et al. 2006).

Gauging student success using 'soft' learning outcomes validates student experiences and distance travelled. But the 'soft' outcomes perspective on student success is incomplete. It neglects the outcomes achieved when students are engaged in their learning. The extensive student engagement literature is helpful in illuminating this second dimension of student success. Student engagement can be defined 'as students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning...' (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008, vi). Student engagement research employs a variety of lenses (Bryson and Hand 2007); each enables successful outcomes of engagement to be identified.

One lens spotlights student motivation. As Hu and Kuh (2002) observe, a vital factor in student success is the motivation and effort the learners generate themselves. Ryan and Deci (2000) postulate three psychological needs that inhibit or advance engagement: autonomy, competence and a sense of belonging. Outcomes

for success, therefore, include students working autonomously, feeling competent to do required learning and feeling they belong in their programmes and institution.

Another lens focuses on engagement occurring in classrooms and institutions. Kuh et al. (2006) place teaching and teachers at the heart of engagement. Teachers who expect high academic standards, support students to achieve these standards, challenge students to 'stretch further than they think they can' (Kuh et al. 2005, 178) enhance engagement. Ahlfeldt, Mehta, and Sellnow (2005) found that students' levels of cognitive challenge and the development of personal skills were highly correlated. The importance of learning relationships is also emphasised (Kuh et al. 2006). Active learning in groups, peer relationships and social skills are important in engaging learners. Moran and Gonyea (2003) found that peer interaction had the strongest predictive capacity for engagement and success outcomes. Such outcomes include being able to interact constructively with teachers and peers, meet academic challenges and learn actively and collaboratively.

The socio-political context for learning offers a third lens on engagement. Active engagement creates students who make legitimate knowledge claims in a world of uncertainty, act in the world by engaging effectively with others and have a firm sense of themselves (Barnett and Coate 2005). McMahon and Portelli (2004) offer a democratic-critical conception that goes beyond viewing engagement as a matter of strategies, techniques or behaviours. To them, engagement is participatory, dialogic, active and critical. Such engagement requires learning behaviours and dispositions beyond the individual efforts of the learner. This applies particularly to students, often labelled 'non-traditional', who lack the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973) needed to integrate and succeed. They may have different interpersonal skills, habits, manners, linguistics, educational credentials and lifestyle preferences (Berger 2000) than those required for success in mainstream educational settings. Johnson et al. (2007) argue that it should not be left to 'non-traditional students' to build their cultural capital without support. The outcomes achieved by students engaged in this way include the ability to make legitimate knowledge claims, build cultural capital and engage effectively with others, including the 'other'.

A fourth lens considers the impact of factors, such as family background and economic status. What happens outside the institution is sometimes more important than what happens inside (Zepke, Leach, and Prebble, 2005). McInnis (2003) identified new realities determining the priority students give to study. They seem less engaged as they increasingly study part-time and are employed for more hours. Krause et al. (2005) found that over half of the students in part-time employment offered family reasons for seeking employment. Some wanted to gain greater financial independence from their family; others, and this was particularly so for non-traditional students, were supporting their families. Mature learners often had children and needed help with child support (Zepke, Leach, and Isaacs 2008). Outcomes achieved by managing challenges from the external environment include negotiating study accommodations with employers and institutions, relating constructively with and accepting support from family, friends and employers.

Rethinking student success

We have argued that student success cannot be captured adequately by government favoured 'hard' outcomes. We drew on 'soft' outcomes and student engagement

research to develop an alternative view of student success, one centred on outcomes that are achieved at various points of their journey towards their personal and programme learning objectives. Table 1 lists some possible success outcomes from the 'soft' outcomes and student engagement literature.

We suggest that students can achieve success on their learning journeys on one, some or all outcomes in Table 1. But we do not claim that our lists are definitive, only that these outcomes enable us to rethink success in a number of ways: (1) successful student outcomes can be recognised as points on a journey, not just as a destination; (2) successful learners have been actively engaged in their learning journey; and (3) student success has been achieved individually, and with the support of others both inside and outside educational institutions. We suggest that the outcomes listed in Table 1 lead to four propositions about student success in learning:

- success resulting from individual effort;
- success resulting from working with others;
- success resulting with institutional support; and
- success resulting with support from the non-institutional environment.

The four propositions can be paired and placed on two intersecting axes. Success achieved through individual effort and collaboration can be paired on opposite ends of one axis; success generated with institutional support and influenced by a supportive non-institutional environment can be paired on the other axis. When intersected, a matrix of factors in student success results (Table 2).

However, these four quadrants are not discrete entities with tightly defined boundaries. Indeed, as learners are different and have diverse learning experiences, success is influenced by factors within all four categories. For example, work skills, such as team work, can be learnt by individual effort as well as when working

Table 1. Possible 'soft' and engagement outcomes.

From the 'soft' outcomes literature	From the engagement literature
Students' progress to personal and programme goals in	Outcomes due to student engagement
Team work	Worked autonomously
Problem solving	Felt competent to achieve academic success
Basic literacy/numeracy/language	Met academic challenges
Learning to learn	Learned actively and collaboratively
Motivation	Interacted constructively with teachers
Self-esteem	Related constructively to peers
Feelings of responsibility	Made legitimate knowledge claims
Future focus	Engaged effectively with others including the 'other'
Self-awareness	Increased their cultural capital
Relationship building	Had a firm sense of themselves
Wellness	Related constructively to family, friends and/or employers
Time management	Sought and accepted essential support from family, friends and/or employers
Self-organisation	Negotiated conditions needed for their learning

Table 2.   Student success matrix.

	Institution support	Non-institution support
Individual effort	(1)	(2)
Collaborative effort	(4)	(3)

collaboratively; a practical skill like self-organisation can be learnt in institutional or non-institutional environments. While personal engagement and institutional support can be assigned to the institutional category, they do not differentiate easily between successes achieved by individual or collaborative effort. The critical and self-determination aspects of engagement could be sourced to all four categories. So we do not suggest that student success originates in one or other category, or that Table 2 assigns priority to any particular quadrant. Rather, we see the four quadrants as a more holistic and rich view of success.

Our rethinking applied

Rethinking student success as outcomes achieved according to distance travelled or engagement by the learner is a start. But the outcomes listed in Table 1 do not yet show how students may be enabled to achieve them. We now use data from a completed research project commissioned by the Institutes of Technology Polytechnics of New Zealand (ITPNZ) Foundation Education Forum to explore how the outcomes may be achieved. The project brief was to find out how learners in selected foundation programmes experienced success and how institutional and non-institutional factors contributed to that experience (Zepke, Leach, and Isaacs 2008). The research was located in a qualitative and interpretive framework. It used focus groups to interview a convenience sample of 96 foundation learners in 18 groups from six Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs). The sample was selected by administrators in each ITP to be roughly representative of the foundation learners in that institution and to have enough experience in foundation programmes to be able to reflect on their experiences and to speak about them. Focus group interviews were semi-structured and took between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were read and analysed repeatedly to identify indicators of success in four categories of 'soft' outcomes: work skills, attitudinal skills, personal skills and practical skills.

We report data under each of the four success categories: (1) individual and institution influenced experiences of success; (2) individual and non-institution influenced experiences of success; (3) collaborative and non-institution influenced experiences of success; and (4) collaborative and institution influenced experiences of success.

Individual and institution influenced experiences of success

Research participants reported experiencing more success in this quadrant than any other. They focused on their individual achievements and how this was positively influenced by the institutional environment and the teachers. For many, the learning environment fostered success. Students valued the open and relaxed atmosphere they

found in foundation learning: *everyday . . . I look forward to coming and ah to learning* (A1). They were overwhelmingly positive about teachers. They saw them as enthusiastic, passionate, caring, approachable, encouraging and understanding people who held consistently positive attitudes about them: *the tutors here actually do care* (C8); *they see the potential in you* (F18). They talked about their growing competence in skills: *I have improved my English* (D11); *I couldn't do three pages of writing. . .and now I can do that easily* (D10); and in personal development *I was very shy. Now I have sort of come out of it* (C8). Many students talked of their growing self-awareness, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-determination: *Now I trust myself more, I know that I am not completely thick, I know that I can study and I'm more confident* (A1). Respondents in most groups had something to say about how teachers and the environment motivated them to strive for success: *the tutors did support me, like giving good feedback and you want to do more and more and it keeps growing as the days go on* (F16). Insights about successfully learning were frequent: *how to study in certain ways, academic writing, how to think a little bit differently, to critically think* (A3); *I've learnt heaps, learnt how to deal with people* (E14).

Individual and non-institution influenced experiences of success

This quadrant was the least evident in the data from our foundation learning study. Some students identified non-supportive experiences with family and friends. Their determination enabled them to be successful by drawing on their own resources to overcome the lack of support they experienced. Surprisingly, perhaps, this suggests that negative environmental factors can be used to create successful outcomes: *I'm mostly self-motivated really, there's no concessions given at home, for homework and things like that* (C9). Some respondents want to prove their families wrong: *well they think I can't do anything* (F16). Sometimes friendships are ended: *those that don't understand have to go by the wayside. I'm not going to give up my goal* (F18). It is worth noting here that these findings are supported by those in a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative study on student retention (Zepke, Leach, and Prebble 2005). Students in that study reported that the most important factor in them continuing to study when it was difficult to was their own determination to succeed.

Collaborative and non-institution influenced experiences of success

Sometimes student success results from team effort outside the institution. For most, non-institutional support comes mainly from family and friends. Support falls broadly into three clusters. First, support related directly to the learning: *from my partner with things like maths* (C9); *I just sort of rack his brain every now and again, which has been good* (E13). Second, support of practical kinds enables attendance and provides time to study. Help with childcare seems a particularly important success factor. *I'm lucky. I've got a friend who looks after my kids after school* (E13); *without my Mum I wouldn't have been able to come to Tech because she looked after my son because there was no childcare available* (F18). Third, support as encouragement: *I always say 'I can't do this' and they just say 'there's nothing impossible, so if you want to do it go through it, you can do it'* (C7). Mothers were especially important: *she just keeps on telling me to keep my mind set on what I want to do* (B6). Children too: *especially my daughters. . .They say, 'Oh Mum, good that you are studying'. They sit*

with me at the table and try to help me. They have been very, very good... (C8). Friends and flatmates can be understanding: *my flatmates have set up a separate study area for me in our sunroom upstairs* (C9). Workmates and bosses also influence for success: *my boss has been really supportive...giving me so many hours off work so that I can come to course* (B4).

Collaborative and institution influenced experiences of success

Participants agreed that good relationships were important and that institutions enabled them: *I really love the environment here, like lots of the students reach out and are caring sort of people* (B5). Many felt that if people did not get on, learning would suffer: *if we don't support each other the boat sinks, so to keep it afloat, support* (E13). There was ample evidence that group relationships prospered: *the difference here is that we concentrate getting to know each other and getting comfortable and then studying and that makes the studying easier* (A1). A number of groups agreed with the sentiment: *I must say that* (institution) *is more of a big family than a learning institute* (E13); *I mean the whole thing is a community here* (C9). Consequently participants were enthusiastic about opportunities available to work in teams. Group members helped each other to succeed: *instead of just sitting down and writing we did a lot of working with each other, a lot of interacting* (on) *group projects and communications* (A3); *I think* (the group) *just pulled everyone up* (B6). Team work did not stop at the classroom door: *we still link and connect and...support one another, if someone's like struggling, ya know someone else was there to help, it's phenomenal really, so it's really, really important* (A3). Participants also identified a variety of institutional support systems contributing to their success. Most frequently mentioned were learning support services and the library: *I get confused sometimes but I always go to learning support and the library* (E15). For some their primary support comes from the institutions: *the institution is where the real support comes from for sure* (A3).

    The students in this small study saw themselves as successful. The data presented here suggest that the student success matrix (Table 2), developed from 'soft' outcomes and student engagement literature, worked successfully with the data gathered in the foundation learning project. While we cannot generalise from one small-scale study, or a couple of literature reviews, we do think there are some possible implications for higher education teachers.

Implications for teachers

Indicators from all four quadrants influence student outcomes and success, to a greater or lesser degree. None of the quadrants can be ignored. Further, they interact in complex ways. Teachers, on this evidence, played a major role in that success. We conclude this article by summarising how teachers might help students to achieve successful outcomes.

For student success, teachers and institutions work to improve the quality of teaching

This quadrant held many of the factors the foundation students identified as leading them to achieving success. It is also the quadrant that many teachers focus

on. It encapsulates their role as teacher enabling individual students to learn. It contains many of the features of good teaching reported in the literature (Kuh et al. 2005; McClenney 2004; Yorke 2006), for example, the personal qualities teachers bring to teaching; the relationships they build with students; the learning environment they create; the enriching educational experiences they design; their expectation that students will succeed; their approach to teaching; the methods they use; the prompt and constructive feedback they provide; and the ways they challenge and extend individual students. The challenge here is to get to know individual students well, to respond to their needs, to find ways to foster their learning, enabling them to develop their self-determination and to succeed. McInnis and James (1994, 15) summarise implications for teachers:

> Our suggested priorities for institutional policies aimed at maintaining student academic commitment and success begin with basics. Improving the quality of teaching in the most fundamental ways will make a difference.

For student success, teachers and institutions encourage collaborative learning in learning communities

This quadrant features in much recent literature on higher education. Increasingly, there is recognition of the value of collaborative learning in fostering student success. Collaboration can take a variety of forms, inside and outside the classroom. It begins with building relationships between students to enable them to work together. It encourages them to respect diverse views, work with others, engage with views different to their own and learn actively with others:

> Through collaboration with others in solving problems or in mastering challenging content, students develop valuable skills that prepare them to deal with the kinds of situations and problems they will encounter in the workplace, community and their personal lives (McClenney 2004, 19).

A popular form of collaboration is the learning community. This is 'a particularly powerful way of not only actively involving our students in learning, but also of promoting a deeper and richer learning than is typical of the college experience' (Tinto 2002, 3). In this quadrant, teachers, particularly those with large classes, are challenged to find ways to incorporate collaborative learning into their teaching. For example, it is a challenge to find ways for students to actively engage during large lectures; to learn collaboratively in an online environment; and to learn collaboratively in contexts where they are competing for places in a subsequent course. It also challenges teachers to find ways to assess collaborative work fairly.

Also within this quadrant are the support services provided by an institution, for example, learning support, library, medical and financial support. Often these services are run quite separately from academic programmes. Some research shows that there need to be closer links between them, with teachers being better informed about what is offered and how to access it (Bruning 2002; Hinton and Tickner 2000). There are also benefits to student learning when support can be integrated into courses and learning (McInnis, James, and McNaught 1995). Teachers need to find ways to do this successfully in their practice.

For student success, teachers and institutions are alert to students' relationships outside the institution and engage with students' communities

While factors in this quadrant lie outside institutions, and arguably outside teachers' control, they do impact on student learning and success. Evidence from the foundation learners suggests that non-institutional support fosters success in a variety of ways and for some students is essential. Data from our foundation learning study suggest that teachers cannot ignore these factors; they need to know about the collaborations and support the students have outside the institution. They can instigate learning collaborations between students outside of class with people they know in their workplace or chosen vocation. They can check that non-institutional support systems are available to students and are aiding success. They can make constructive suggestions when support systems fail or interfere with learning. Ideally, they will take non-institutional issues into account when engaging with individual students, for example, when factors beyond the student's control make assessment deadlines untenable.

Student success improves where teachers and institutions are aware of and support learning outside the classroom

This is the second quadrant that many teachers believe lies outside of the scope of their responsibilities. We argue that teachers could make a huge difference for some students – ensuring success when failure is possible, even likely. Of the four quadrants, this one was least evident in the foundation learners' data yet it revealed the crucial role that students' determination can play in their success. In the face of lack of support, even explicit opposition, from family and friends, some students drew on personal resources to ensure they succeeded. Teachers need to have established relationships with students so they know when individuals lack non-institutional support. In these circumstances, teachers can be empathetic, reinforce students' personal determination to succeed, provide ongoing support and encouragement, be understanding of and flexible about the difficulties these students are coping with. Their care and concern may enable more students to succeed in the face of significant personal barriers. There is a key role for teachers in relation to non-institutional influences on student success.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have drawn on two research projects, on foundation learning and student engagement in New Zealand, to integrate constructs about 'soft' outcomes and student engagement in a four-cell matrix. We examined this using data from the foundation learning project. We argue that this demonstrated a reasonable fit, suggesting the matrix has value. We then used the findings to suggest some implications for teachers, highlighting the need for teachers to be aware of, be empathetic about and engaged with non-institutional influences as well as institutional influences on students' individual and collaborative success. While we are pleased with this first examination, we acknowledge that the data are limited. Some of the 'soft' outcomes and student engagement aspects, for example critical engagement, embedded in the four quadrants did not appear in these data.

Nevertheless, we are encouraged by the results to date and want to take the exploration further.

Acknowledgements

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