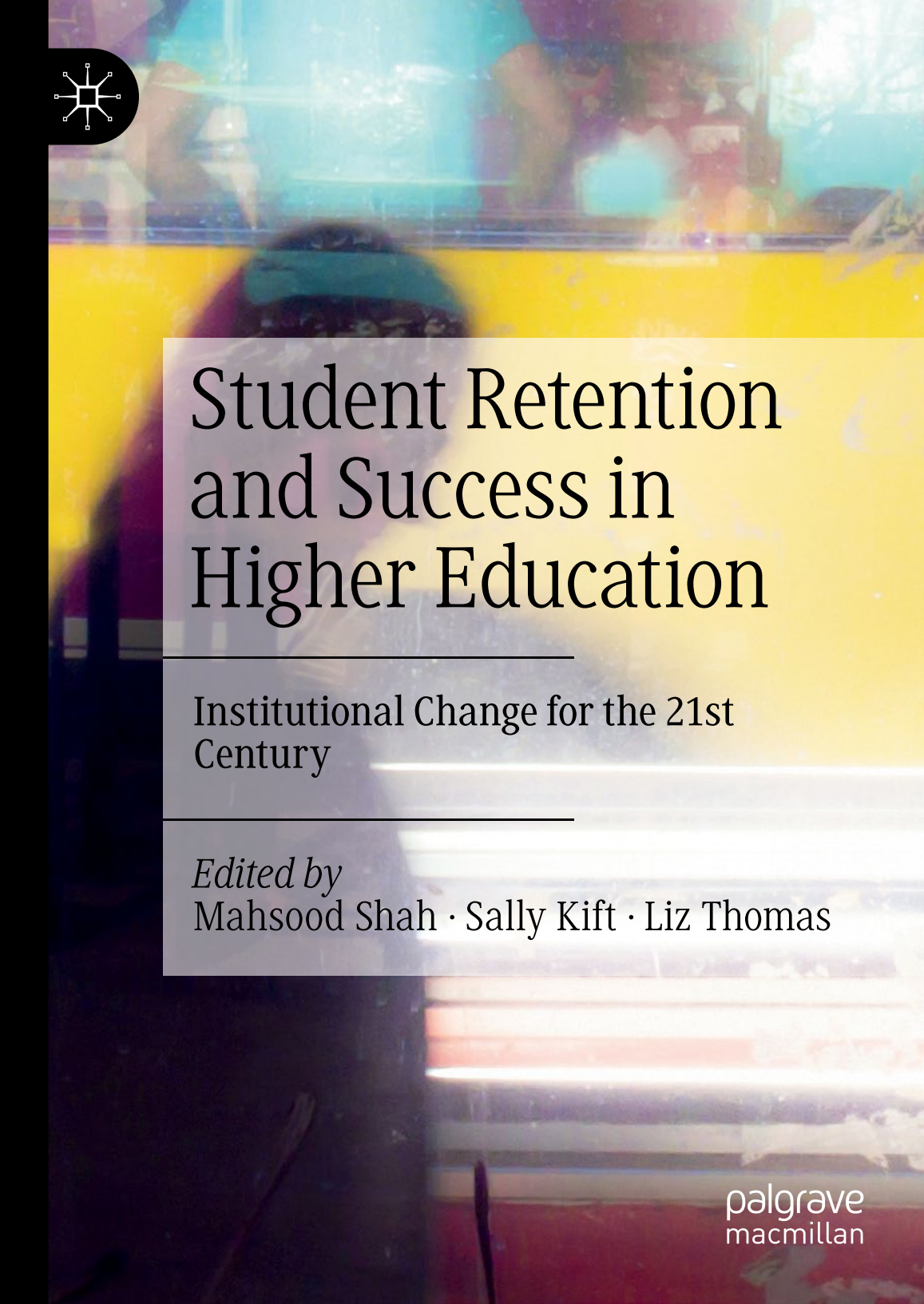

Student Retention and Success in Higher Education

Institutional Change for the 21st Century

Edited by
Mahsood Shah · Sally Kift · Liz Thomas

palgrave
macmillan

Student Retention and Success in Higher Education

"Exploring student success and retention through a cross-section of conceptualisations, definitions, models, approaches, institutions and countries, this book offers a deep and wide range of ideas for consideration. Through the lenses of data, evidence, scholarship, research and reflexivity, the reader is challenged to examine their own and broader assumptions about the complex and challenging areas of University student retention and success".

—Marcia Devlin, *Former Senior Vice-President and Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, Victoria University, Australia*

"Drawing on research evidence and practical examples from Australia, South Africa, Europe and the US this book offers a valuable evidence-led and highly reflexive account of student success and student retention. The book is rooted in the firm belief that institutional change is the key to improving student success, and it provides research informed practical guidance about how to achieve this. The authors encourage us to think deeply and carefully about what we mean by the term student success. This is essential reading for higher education leaders, policy makers, teaching staff, and researchers, as we work together to develop and implement approaches that support student diversity and success".

—Susan Orr, *Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, York St John University, UK*

Mahsood Shah • Sally Kift • Liz Thomas
Editors

Student Retention and Success in Higher Education

Institutional Change for the 21st Century

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Mahsood Shah
Swinburne University of Technology
Sydney, NSW, Australia

Sally Kift
James Cook University
Townsville, QLD, Australia

Liz Thomas
Edge Hill University
Ormskirk, Lancashire, UK

ISBN 978-3-030-80044-4 ISBN 978-3-030-80045-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80045-1

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2021
This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.
The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.
The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover pattern: © Alex Linch_shutterstock.com

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface

Higher education has experienced huge disruption due to the global pandemic. No one predicted the scale at which the pivot to remote learning would impact institutions, staff, students and other stakeholders. The use of digital technology in teaching and assessing student learning is becoming the norm, and institutions are finding innovative ways to provide various academic and non-academic support services online. The pace of change is swift and accompanied by an increased focus on efficiency. Whilst the intent of the changes may have been anticipated in institutional strategy or cyclical review process, the disruption caused by the pandemic has accelerated rapid change at a scale that has not been experienced in the past. Some of the key changes include the restructuring and downsizing of faculties and central support units, building digital capability to teach and support students online, course rationalisation, and reduction of teaching and support staff. These changes are already impacting institutions' ability to provide high-quality learning experience to students. In Australia, for example, the most recent Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) data suggest a significant decline in student experience results compared to previous years. While the national data on student retention is not yet available, the disruptions caused will have an undoubted impact on student retention and success, given the pervasive and frequently cumulative impact of the pandemic on

the student experience—academically, personally, logistically, financially, geographically and psychosocially.

Student retention and success have been institutional priorities and the subject of intensive research effort for decades. Many institutions have set targets to improve student retention and success at institutional level and for different profiles of students. The global COVID-19 pandemic is providing new insights into issues that are impacting retention, success and the student experience for all students, as educational disadvantage has both broadened and deepened and structural inequalities have been underscored. Inequities across the student lifecycle, and at all levels of study, have been exposed and exacerbated.

Traditionally and despite the already high volume of online education, institutions have aligned student support resources and facilities to predominately on-campus delivery and left the social experience of learning to face-to-face engagements. The transition to fully online learning has challenged the default delivery mode and is providing new insights on a wide range of critical student experience issues, including support for the mental health and well-being of students and staff; mitigating financial precarity and digital poverty; mediating student engagement in the online study; enabling peer support and social belonging interactions; harnessing data intelligence and policy accommodations for proactive interventions; and assuring the quality of learning, teaching, assessment and support using digital technology for student success. The quality and efficacy of needed-now 24/7 student services and support has been a particular challenge. While some institutions had mature support systems in place, the pandemic has forced all providers to deeply examine the extent to which such support systems are fit for purpose for a fully online or blended mode of learning.

In 2021, efforts to improve student retention and success are more important than ever as nations turn to education and training to rebuild from the current global health, economic, social and educational crises. Failure to re-imagine learning, teaching, assessment and support methods for a better post-pandemic normal would be a gross breach of higher education's social compact with society and a failure to deliver on the common good of public education. Poor student performance will also increase the cost of debt for many students and their families and

communities, both for those who rely on government loans to access domestic higher education and for those who make sacrifices to provide international education opportunities for their loved ones. As many contributions to this collection exhort, working in whole-of-institution partnerships with our students for better post-pandemic engagement and experience will be crucial as we reflect on and learn the lessons of these most stressful tests.

The book makes an important and timely contribution to global higher education. It engages 24 leading scholars from eight countries who have undertaken research on student retention, engagement and success. The case studies, success initiatives and research presented here, from across different institutions, contexts and systems, advance our understanding, theorising and practice and shine a light on what's possible for our sector's educational future—one that commits itself unreservedly to student retention and success for all.

September 2021

Mahsood Shah
Sally Kift
Liz Thomas

Contents

1 Student Retention and Success in Higher Education 1
Liz Thomas, Sally Kift, and Mahsood Shah

2 Why Does Student Retention and Success Matter? 17
Sarah O'Shea

3 Student Retention: The Need for Institutional Change 41
Liz Thomas

4 Student Engagement: Key to Retaining Students 63
Nick Zepke

5 Faculty Engagement with Learning Analytics: Advancing a Student Success Culture in Higher Education 89
Linda Shepard, George Rehrey, and Dennis Groth

6 Institutional Leadership Efforts Driving Student Retention and Success: A Case Study of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa 109
Sadhana Manik and Labby Ramrathan

7 **Engaging Staff in Improving Retention and Success** 133
Roisín Curran

8 **Listening for Retention: Enabling Student Success Through Partnering with the Student Voice** 151
Luke Millard and Richard Evans

9 **Improving Student Engagement, Retention and Success in Online Learning** 167
Cathy Stone

10 **Fostering Equitable Access to Employability Development Through an Institution-Wide, In-Curricular Strategy** 191
Dawn Bennett

11 **Designing Assessment and Feedback to Improve Student Learning and Student Success** 217
Indira N. Z. Day, Wilfried Admiraal, and Nadira Saab

12 **Re-designing Curriculum to Enhance First-Year Student Success: A Case Study** 251
Trish McCluskey, Gayani Samarawickrema, Andrew Smallridge, and Naomi Dempsey

13 **The Role of Professional Integration in Higher Education IT Studies** 271
Külli Kori and Margus Pedaste

14 **Retention and Success in the Midst of a Pandemic** 295
Sally Kift, Liz Thomas, and Mahsood Shah

Index 335

Notes on Contributors

Wilfried Admiraal (Leiden University) is full professor Teaching and Teacher Education and director of the Leiden University Graduate School of Teaching. He graduated in Social Psychology and in 1994 he defended his PhD thesis on teachers' coping strategies with stressful classroom events. His research interest combines the areas of teaching, technology and social psychology in secondary and higher education. He is and has been involved in various national and international educational projects on the use of technology in secondary education, teacher education and higher education. He supervises some 30 PhDs and has published over 200 peer-reviewed journal articles. He is editorial board member of various scientific journals such as *Educational Psychology* and *Teaching and Teacher Education*. He is president of the Netherlands Association of Educational Research (VOR).

Dawn Bennett is Assistant Provost and Director of the Transformation CoLab with Bond University in Australia. She was previously John Curtin Distinguished Professor with Curtin University. Dawn is an expert on the development of graduate employability within higher education. A National Senior Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow and Principal HEA Fellow, Dawn is an Adjunct Professor with Griffith, Monash and Curtin Universities, Visiting Fellow with the University of the Arts, Helsinki, and Research Fellow with the Australian National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

Roisín Curran is a principal fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has worked as a staff and educational developer at Ulster University since 2004, in the Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP). She held the position of Interim Head of CHERP between April 2020 and July 2021 and is the current Course Director of the Master in Education (MEd) programme. Curran has also led a cross-disciplinary project team at Ulster as part of a national 'What works? Student Retention and Success Change Programme (2013–16)' involving 13 institutions across the UK. This collaborative action research has further extended our knowledge of what works in relation to improving student retention and success. She has a particular interest in *student engagement* and has published papers on the impact of a 'students as partners' approach on staff-student engagement. Curran has co-developed a new Integrated Curriculum Design Framework that scaffolds the student journey and which promotes a relational-based partnership approach, active learning, peer support, and ways of thinking and practising the discipline.

Indira N. Z. Day completed her doctoral dissertation about the characteristics, perceptions, and results of continuous assessment in higher education at the Leiden University Graduate School of Teaching in 2018, where she also worked as a researcher studying the use of peer feedback on video presentations. Subsequently, she worked as a senior researcher in the Higher Education Research and Innovation research group at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. She currently works as a post-doctoral researcher at Utrecht University where she studies the professional development of teachers in higher education and studies student well-being at University of Applied Sciences Leiden.

Naomi Dempsey is the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) at Victoria University, leading the enhancement of student learning and a contemporary student experience that goes beyond the formal learning experience and enables students to succeed on their terms. She has a wealth of experience in student retention and success strategies as well as student-centred design, gained from her success in both the public and private sectors that supports VU's endeavours to innovate education for all.

Richard Evans is the Chief Executive of Birmingham City Students' Union (BCUSU) at Birmingham City University. His role is to lead the organisation and form strategies for the Students' Union, in partnership with student leaders. A key aspect of the role is developing and maintaining positive relationships with the university and other stakeholders. He has worked at various institutions for students' unions and has a professional interest in student advocacy, representation and voice. A current focus is utilising student insight, data and voice to improve the academic, social and service experience of students.

Dennis Groth is presently the acting Dean of the Luddy School of Informatics, Computer Science and Engineering at Indiana University. Prior to that and for the past 11 years he served as Indiana University's Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education. He is also professor in the School of Informatics, Computing and Engineering, where in the past he served as the associate dean for undergraduate programs. A past recipient of the Trustees Award for Teaching Excellence, Vice Provost Groth co-chaired a committee that created the report for the undergraduate student experience portion of the Campus Strategic Plan. He currently is involved in numerous local and national initiatives designed to create a data-informed culture at all levels of the university.

Sally Kift is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (PFHEA), a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Law (FAAL) and elected President of the Australian Learning & Teaching Fellows (ALTF). From 2012 to 2017, she was Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at James Cook University (JCU). Prior to JCU, Sally was a Professor of Law at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), where she also served as Law Faculty Assistant Dean, Teaching & Learning (2001–2006) and QUT's foundational Director, First Year Experience (2006–2007). Sally is a national Teaching Award winner (2003) and national Program Award winner (2007). She was awarded a Senior Fellowship by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in 2006 to investigate the first-year experience and is a Discipline Scholar in Law. In 2017, Sally was awarded an Australian Award for University Teaching Career Achievement Award for her contribution to Australian higher education.

Külli Kori is working as a Postdoctoral Researcher at Tallinn University, School of Educational Sciences. She received her PhD in Educational Sciences at the University of Tartu in 2017. She also has a Master degree in Biology Didactics and Bachelor degree in Genetic Engineering from the University of Tartu. Her current research focuses on citizen science in education. Her other research interests include educational technology, STEM education, inquiry-based learning, and student retention.

Sadhana Manik is an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. She is a recipient of 'excellence in research' (2019) and 'excellence in teaching' (2018) awards from UKZN. Her niche research interests are international migration of the highly skilled within education, xenophobia, intersectional studies (such as gender and race), student access, support and success in higher education institutions, sustainable living and textbook analysis. She is project leader at UKZN of two international student, staff and research exchange collaborations with Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), one with the University of Tampere, Finland and one with the Michigan State University, USA.

Trish McCluskey is the Director of Connected Learning at Victoria University, where she leads a talented team of learning designers to create innovative curriculum resources and support academic staff to develop contemporary learning and teaching practices. She was instrumental in the design and development of the VU Block Model, a radical reconceptualisation of the traditional university curriculum. Trish has a deep appreciation of the challenges facing non-traditional students as she was first in her family to attend university and did so as a young mother working full-time while living in a foreign country. Her research interest is the evolving Tertiary Education ecosystem.

Luke Millard is Dean of Teaching and Learning at Abertay University. Prior to that, he led educational development activities at Birmingham City University where the partnership with BCUSU and the focus on student engagement was developed. His research focuses on building student skills through student employment on campus and student transitions and the first-year experience.

Sarah O'Shea has spent over two decades teaching and researching in the higher education field. Professor Sarah O'Shea is regarded as an expert in educational equity. Her research (A$3 million+) advances understanding about how under-represented student cohorts enact success within university, manage competing identities and negotiate aspirations for self and others. Sarah is currently leading an ARC Discovery Project exploring the persistence behaviours of first-in-family students and is affiliated with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University, Perth.

Margus Pedaste is Professor of Educational Technology at the Institute of Education of the University of Tartu, where he is leading the Centre for Educational Technology. He is also Head of Pedagogicum, a consortium for coordinating teacher education at the University of Tartu. He received his PhD at the University of Tartu in 2006. He has been involved in many national and international research and development projects, such as SCY, Go-Lab, Next-Lab, Ark of Inquiry, EL-STEM and ViSuAL. His main research themes are educational technology, inquiry-based learning, technology-enhanced learning and instruction, digital competences, learning analytics and augmented reality. His main interest in all these themes lies in the context of STEM education. He is an active member of several professional associations, including EARLI, AERA and IEEE. Currently he is the Vice-Chair of IEEE Estonian section and Associate Editor of the EARLI journal *Educational Research Review*.

Labby Ramrathan is a Professor in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and a National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researcher with global recognition. He simultaneously serves as President of the South African Education Research Association (SAERA). He has been in leadership positions within the School in various capacities including Head of School, Acting Deputy Dean and Acting Dean. He has been involved in teacher education for more than 20 years spanning academic teaching, researching higher education, teacher development and curriculum studies. He has been involved in several institutional, national and international project works and has published widely in these areas of scholarship. He has been awarded several competitive research grants to research issues related to education. He has supervised

to completion more than 60 master degree and 25 PhD students. Currently he is leading the College of Humanities curriculum transformation process within the context of decolonisation.

George Rehrey is the founding director of Indiana University's Center for Learning Analytics and Student Success (CLASS). Before that he directed the award-winning Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Program at Indiana University's Bloomington campus. George serves on the advisory board for Taking Evidenced-based Action, a national coalition of campuses using learning analytics to improve student engagement and success. He is also a member of Hub Leadership Committee for the Bay View Alliance, an international coalition of universities from Canada and the US. In the Bay View Alliance, he also leads a Learning Analytics Research Collaborative (LARC). LARC is working towards understanding how learning analytics can be used to improve student success while creating a data-informed culture at both the departmental and institutional levels of large research universities.

Nadira Saab is a professor at ICLON (Graduate School of Teaching), Leiden University, the Netherlands. In addition, she is a strategic advisor at Kennisnet (a public organisation for education and ICT). Her research covers several topics, including technology-enhanced education, diversity and inclusiveness, motivation, formative assessment, professional development of teachers, and collaborative learning. She supervises several PhD students and participates in various national and international research projects. She is project leader of the 'Kenniswerkplaats Diversiteit' (Knowledge Lab Diversity) of which the aim is to construct knowledge about (cultural) diversity and inclusiveness. Saab is chair of the board of the special interest group Learning and Instruction of the VOR (Vereniging Onderwijs Research), the national organisation of Educational Research in the Netherlands, and she is a member of the board of the Catharine van Tussenbroek Fonds. Saab is a Fellow at the Leiden Teachers Academy, which is aimed at developing and sharing good practices of (higher) education with other teachers at Leiden University.

Gayani Samarawickrema is a Senior Lecturer teaching in VU's Post Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education and researching in the area of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). She draws on her experience in curriculum design, assessment and higher education practices in designing and developing assessments for the Block and reviewing units after its first year of offer in Block mode.

Mahsood Shah is a professor and Dean of Swinburne University of Technology, Sydney Campus. In this role, Mahsood provides overall leadership and management of the campus. Mahsood is responsible for the growth of the campus, development of new courses, staffing and resourcing, monitoring quality and standard, improving quality of student experience and other academic outcome measures. Industry and employer engagement and collaboration are also part of his role. Prior to joining Swinburne University of Technology, Mahsood led learning and teaching activities at several Australian universities. Mahsood is an active researcher. His areas of research include quality in higher education, measurement and enhancement of student experience, student retention and attrition, student engagement in quality assurance, international higher education, widening participation and private higher education.

Linda Shepard is the Senior Assistant Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Director of Bloomington Assessment and Research at Indiana University. She provides leadership for the campus in the development of institutional resources used to inform campus policy and strategic initiatives. She promotes the use of information for benchmarking and monitoring improvement. Dr. Shepard has served in various professional capacities, as a faculty member, in leadership roles at IU, and IR professional organisations both locally and nationally. For the Fellows program, Linda has been instrumental in navigating the landscape of compliance, developing methodologies for analyses and creating information sources to support faculty inquiry. Linda holds MS and PhD degrees from Indiana University in Educational Psychology with a minor in Psychology.

Andrew Smallridge is professor and Dean of Victoria University's First Year College and was responsible for the implementation of the Block

model in 2018. He has been teaching chemistry across all levels at Victoria University for nearly 30 years and is interested in the use of laboratory-based workshop methodologies for teaching chemistry and other science disciplines.

Cathy Stone is an independent consultant and researcher in the field of post-secondary student equity, retention and success. She holds the positions of Conjoint Associate Professor in Social Work at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and Visiting Research Fellow with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University, Australia. As an active researcher, Cathy's publications focus particularly on the experiences of mature-age, first-in-family and online students.For many years Cathy held senior management roles in university student support services, working with both face-to-face and online student cohorts. In 2016, as an NCSEHE Equity Fellow, Cathy undertook a national research project into improving outcomes for online students, developing guidelines for institutions. Her work in this area continues.

Liz Thomas is professor of higher education at Edge Hill University, and has more than twenty years' experience undertaking and managing research about widening participation, student engagement, belonging, retention and success, and institutional approaches to improving the student experience and outcomes. Liz directed two phases of the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme; was part of the pan-European team examining student withdrawal, persistence and success in 36 countries; and has led research on the engagement of commuter students, and a whole-of-institution approach to widening participation. Liz is currently part of an Erasmus+ project #Ibelong: Towards a sense of belonging in an inclusive learning environment, piloting interventions to improve the belonging and success of first generation and ethnic minority students. Liz served as widening participation expert for the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework main panel for three years, and is the author and editor of many books and articles.

Nick Zepke recently retired as Associate Professor of adult education in the Institute of Education at Massey University in New Zealand. He has

taught and still researches and publishes on three interrelated themes: learning-centred teaching with a special focus on the first-year experience in higher education, policy studies in higher education, and lifelong and life-wide education. He has published six books, more than 100 articles in international and New Zealand journals, and numerous commissioned reports on these themes. Since 2009 he has focused on student engagement in higher education. He has published a book, 21 articles, a major commissioned report and six book chapters on this subject, often in collaboration with Linda Leach. His most recent work focuses on the connection between politics and student engagement.

List of Figures

Fig. 5.1	An example of an average course grade disparity by gender	95
Fig. 5.2	An example of drop, failure and withdrawal rates by gender	96
Fig. 5.3	The core of our datasets is retention data	98
Fig. 5.4	Components of the learning analytics fellows programme	101
Fig. 5.5	The awareness to actions framework. (Modified and adopted from Molinaro's (2018) Cycle of Progress for Sustainable Change)	102
Fig. 10.1	Employability as design (Bennett, 2019b, p. 51). (Adapted from Goodyear (2015))	195
Fig. 12.1	Graphical representation of the VU Block	255
Fig. 12.2	The process	259
Fig. 12.3	Comparison of semester retention after the introduction of the Block model in 2017	260
Fig. 12.4	Comparison of first-year student results and grade distribution in 2017, 2018 and 2019	261
Fig. 12.5	Results comparison – low, medium and high socio-economic status (SES) students in 2017, 2018 and 2019	261
Fig. 12.6	Results comparison – Non-English-speaking background students (NESB) and English-speaking background students in 2017, 2018 and 2019	262
Fig. 12.7	Results comparison – First-in-family students with not first-in-family students in 2017, 2018 and 2019	262

Fig. 12.8 Results comparison – Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in 2017, 2018 and 2019 263
Fig. 13.1 Entrance, graduation and attrition rates registered in Estonia between the academic years of 2006–2007 to 2017–2018 in bachelor and applied higher education IT studies 272
Fig. 13.2 Theoretical model predicting retention and attrition in IT studies (Kori, 2017) 281

List of Tables

Table 2.1	Identifiers nominated by students in the Australian study (students could identify more than one category)	28
Table 5.1	The four datasets available for faculty-driven research about student success	98
Table 5.2	Results from the LA fellows survey	103
Table 11.1	Key strategies of formative assessment (taken from Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 8)	222
Table 11.2	Conditions under which assessment supports learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005)	223
Table 11.3	Seven principles for good feedback practice (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 205)	225
Table 11.4	Eight features of the curriculum for Mark 2 (Boud & Molloy, 2013b, p. 707)	226
Table 11.5	Peer feedback rubric	237
Table 11.6	Means and standard deviations on the BPFQ	240
Table 12.1	Block design and delivery principles	258

1

Student Retention and Success in Higher Education

Liz Thomas, Sally Kift, and Mahsood Shah

This chapter introduces the book, discussing the philosophy, the key themes addressed and the contribution of the individual chapters. Improving the retention and success of students in higher education has become a priority for governments, universities and colleges across the world; an economic and social imperative that has only intensified as the global impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods exacerbates inequality. The cost of higher education, either to individuals, or states, or both, is high, and thus non-completion is frequently seen as inefficient. More significantly however, there can be huge personal sacrifices and losses involved for individuals, their families and communities in entering a

L. Thomas (✉)
Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, Lancashire, UK
e-mail: Thomase@edgehill.ac.uk

S. Kift
James Cook University, Townsville, QLD, Australia

M. Shah
Swinburne University of Technology, Sydney, NSW, Australia

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2021

M. Shah et al. (eds.), *Student Retention and Success in Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80045-1_1

higher education programme, and not achieving anticipated goals. The personal price includes the costs and foregone income, but also confidence and self-belief, and the dashing of future hopes and dreams. It should be noted however that formal definitions of success, such as continuation, completion and on-time graduation, may obfuscate personal success, such as self-worth, academic validation, new skills, alternative ways of understanding the world and lifelong friendships. There is clear evidence that even partial completion of a degree can, in some contexts, have real employment and career-related benefits for students that, for many, outweigh the costs of non-completion (Harvey et al., 2017; Norton et al., 2018). Employment-related benefits have been found to include: higher earnings; securing employment; learning useful skills; and clarifying career goals (Norton et al., 2018). Non-employment-related benefits can include making friends, learning things that are interesting and useful (Norton et al., 2018), civic engagement and health benefits.

The underlying philosophy of this book is that a more diverse student population requires higher education institutions to change to facilitate the success of all students. Success traditionally includes persisting with and completing academic programmes on time, but it can also be understood more broadly, encompassing personalised notions of success and outcomes both before and beyond graduation. Student success is achieved through active engagement in an inclusive learning community, which requires institutional transformation. The key concepts of diversity, success, engagement and institutional transformation are unpacked briefly below, and in more detail throughout the subsequent chapters.

The expansion and diversification of higher education is evident throughout the world; for example, the creation of the European Higher Education Area is underpinned by a commitment that the 'student body entering and graduating from European higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations' (European Commission, 2018, p. 4). In Australia, the Bradley *Review of Australian Higher Education* (2008) called for large increases in the participation rates of under-represented groups and recommended specifically that an overall target of 40% of 25- to 34-year-old Australians have a university degree by 2020 and that 20% of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status (LSES)

backgrounds, also by 2020.[1] The targeted focus on LSES students built on two decades of generally bipartisan government support for the student equity agenda, enhanced in the Australian context by the collection of longitudinal data focused on access, participation, success and retention that has informed policy and practice interventions.

Similar sentiments to the European Higher Education Area and the Bradley Review are seen in other countries and in the chapters in this book (e.g. South Africa and the United States). Definitions of diversity, and the construction of categories differ between countries (Thomas & Quinn, 2003), but there is a shared focus on representation and historically excluded groups. In England, the Office for Students has identified six target groups[2] that higher education institutions must consider in relation to access, continuation and completion, attainment and progression into further study or employment. Similarly in Australia, the 1990 student equity framework – *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), 1990) – also established six student equity groups, and led to the development of 'system-wide performance measures… to monitor progress towards achieving equity objectives' (DEET, 1990, p. 4).[3] In the Australian context, the need to update these longstanding designations is currently under review, to consider, for example, their expansion to include: other disadvantaged groups; broadening beyond the current foci limitations of domestic, undergraduate and public university; and consideration of compounded and multidimensional disadvantage (Harvey et al., 2016).

Success is a term that has emerged from the debate about different nomenclature; indeed early international research on the topic identified around twenty terms used to describe student success and its antithesis (Thomas & Quinn, 2003, p. 22). Furthermore, similar terms can have different meanings resulting in ambiguity (e.g. Hagedorn, 2004, in

[1] The government response to Bradley pushed the 40% target out to 2025.

[2] The six target groups are: students from Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles 1 and 2; students from POLAR 4 quintiles 1 and 2; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students; Mature students; disabled students; and care leavers.

[3] The six identified equity groups are: people from low socioeconomic backgrounds; Indigenous Australians; people from regional and remote areas; people with disabilities; people from non-English speaking backgrounds; and women in non-traditional areas (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990).

relation to retention) and adding to the complexity in relation to comparative analysis between countries (Thomas & Hovdhaugen, 2014), or, in some cases, even institutions. Some definitions refer to students who leave higher education before completion of their target award, but various terms are used to describe and differentiate those who leave and do not return, those who take some time out and return, those who transfer qualification, course or institution, and so forth. Some terms focus on the process, so continuation from one unit of study to another, and some make reference to the time taken, or the qualification level or grade achieved. Different terms are used in the chapters in this book, reflecting the national and institutional contexts, and ideological positions, of the authors. Where possible the editors have used the more generic phrase 'student success', unless referring to a specific aspect of this umbrella term.

Underpinning much of the debate around nomenclature have been metric-based definitions. The Australian Government, for example, has collected a comprehensive set of statistics, referred to as the *Higher Education Statistics Collection in Australia*, for many years. Since 2003, the higher education student data collection has been conducted under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003. Currently, the government department* publishes time series data on four measures of academic progress: attrition (the proportion of commencing [domestic bachelor] students who neither complete nor return in the next year), retention (the proportion of commencing students who do return the following year), success (the proportion of subjects passed each year as a percentage of all subjects attempted) and completion (the proportion of students who completed a course in any year across the given time period). More recently, 'adjusted attrition' and 'adjusted retention' rates are also published, to take into account students who change course or institution, but do not leave higher education altogether. When considering the introduction of performance-based funding measures in Australia in 2019, the Expert Panel in its report to the Minister stated that 'attrition and completion rates offer measures of student success' (Wellings et al., 2019, p. 50). Similarly, in 2013, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2013) identified four outcomes of higher education, and from this has emerged a set of measures that are now fairly widely used in that context: continuation (those who progress between their years and levels

of study); completion (achieving the chosen exit qualification); attainment (e.g. differentiating between higher and lower degree classifications); and progression (continuing to employment or further study, which can be differentiated into graduate employment and higher level study, as opposed to any employment and similar or lower level study).

However, there are wider benefits of learning and higher education; for example, those related to health, social cohesion, tolerance, civic engagement and inter-generational mobility (Brennan et al., 2013). Feinstein et al. (2008) state that graduates are the least likely to commit crimes, utilise a range of social networks, and are the healthiest and longest-living members of society; graduates are less likely to smoke, be obese or suffer from depression compared to other adults (p. 18). These and other personal dimensions of success are not the primary focus of this collection, but further dimensions of success are discussed in the chapter by O'Shea (see Chap. 2) in this book.

Research on student success in the US, and more recently in the UK, Australia and Europe, has explicitly linked student engagement to student success (see Chap. 4 on engagement in this volume for specific examples). The complex concept of student engagement, however, is poorly defined and operationalised; for example, research in England found that there was not even a shared definition within institutions (Thomas, 2017). In Australia, the *Higher Education Standards Framework* (2015), against which all higher education providers are regulated, does not refer to the notion of 'student engagement' at all (though success is mentioned four times and retention once).[4] Academic engagement is the most usual focus of interest in relation to student retention and success, enhanced by its association with social engagement and a sense of belonging, although other sites of engagement include extracurricular enrichment activities and institutional governance (Trowler, 2010). Coates (2007, p. 122) describes academic engagement as 'a broad construct

[4] See Higher Education Standards Framework (2015): 'successful transition' in Standard 1.3.1 and 1.3.6; 'equivalent opportunities for academic success regardless of students' backgrounds' in Standard 2.2.1; 'regular external referencing of the success of student cohorts against comparable courses of study' in Standard 5.3.4; and 'use of data on student progress and success' in Standard 5.3.7. Retention is referred to in Standard 1.3.5: 'Trends in rates of retention, progression and completion of student cohorts through courses of study are monitored to enable review and improvement.'

intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience', comprising: active and collaborative learning; participation in challenging academic activities; formative communication with academic staff; involvement in enriching educational experiences; and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities. Research in England and the UK has demonstrated that students from non-traditional groups, including those who travel to study, have lower rates of engagement in academic learning (Thomas et al., 2017), the wider student experience (Thomas, 2019) and society (Zepke in this volume), which explain lower rates of success (Social Market Foundation, 2017). As Zepke draws out in his chapter in this book, while engagement as a construct is and should continue to be critiqued, the evidence of four international case studies – those of belonging and co-production (e.g. Thomas, 2012), an engaging curriculum (e.g. Kift, 2015), purposeful activity (e.g. Kuh et al., 2006) and active citizenship (e.g. Zepke, 2017) – shows that engagement is key to retaining students and their learning success.

The fundamental value that differentiates this book from other research on the topic of student retention and success is the strongly held, and research-informed, conviction that institutions should change, sometimes radically, to facilitate the engagement and success of students in their learning and more widely. There are different types of institutional response to widening participation and student diversity (Jones & Thomas, 2005). The 'academic' approach seeks to attract already suitably qualified students from target groups, and makes no institutional changes. The 'utilitarian' approach recruits students who do not necessarily have traditional or high-level educational qualifications, and who may not share the cultural capital of the majority of students and staff, but this approach 'plugs' any 'gaps' with bolted on interventions. The academic and utilitarian approaches can be contrasted with the 'transformative' approach, which emphasises changing the institution, recognising the benefits or strengths that come from a more diverse institution (Shaw et al., 2007). This requires wide-ranging changes, but particularly to the curriculum organisation, contents, delivery and assessment. Kift's Transition Pedagogy (2009, 2015) emphasises the importance of whole-of-institution approaches, enabled by academic and professional staff and

students working in partnership, to deliver coordinated, comprehensive and integrated engagement via the disciplinary curriculum, in which embedded, contextualised support and a sense of belonging are located and accessible by all students. Focusing specifically on effective teaching and support for LSES student success, a national project in Australia argued that, 'Rather than being the primary responsibility of solely the student or the institution to change to ensure LSES student success, … adjustments would be most usefully conceptualised as a "joint venture" toward bridging sociocultural incongruity' (Devlin et al., 2012, p. 7). The ideas of institutional transformation are discussed further in Chap. 3, and more practically in other chapters.

Recurring themes in the book, which reflect the philosophical position of the editors and authors and which are discussed within and across the chapters are:

1. Shared responsibility for student success and developing the capability of staff, students and institutions.
2. A whole institution approach based on transformation and an asset- (or strengths-) based approach to student diversity.
3. Leadership for student success at all levels throughout higher education providers.
4. Partnerships between staff and students facilitating collaboration, staff engagement and student involvement in the process of change.
5. Inclusive curriculum, learning, teaching, assessment and delivery that is relevant, accessible and engaging for all students.
6. The use of evidence and criticality to inform institutional change, including the role of student performance data, learning analytics and student voice.

Chapter 2 focuses on defining success and seeks to challenge the dominant discourse that measures student retention and success in numerical terms. Drawing on qualitative research with 70 students, the chapter demonstrates that students do want to be successful in terms of achieving their academic qualifications, but they also have more nuanced interpretations about what success means to them, informed and shaped by their personal circumstances. Furthermore, the dominant policy discourse that

positions the student as responsible for their success – or otherwise – is questioned and institutions are encouraged to embrace a more collaborative approach to improving the success of all students, ideally which is informed by wider notions of success, for example based on a capabilities model. While the research has been undertaken in Australia, the issues of definition and the need to challenge more restrictive ways of understanding success, and who is responsible, are universal themes across higher education.

Chapter 3 picks up and expands upon the idea of institutional responsibility for students' retention and success through institutional transformation. It recognises that, as the work of institutions matures, the approach becomes more transformational, as institutions adjust their learning, teaching, assessment, mode of delivery and curriculum contents – and wider student experience – to align with the realities of contemporary twenty-first century students. Furthermore, student diversity can be viewed from a strengths-based approach (harking back to notions of capability as referred to in Chap. 2), and thus adaptation and transformation have a positive impact on the institution, including its culture and structure.

Chapter 4 adds to the conceptual framing of this book, taking a closer look at the research about student engagement, and its contribution to retention and success. By examining four international research studies about student engagement and success, and a wealth of smaller studies, the evidence strongly points to the contribution of engagement to success. Engagement, however, is conceptualised and operationalised differently in the studies, and the research methodologies differ, giving differential weight to psychological, sociological and ecological interpretations, and focusing on the individual, institutional or societal levels. Despite these variations, a broadly uniform message proclaims the value of engagement. There is, however, a risk that the concept is captured by the neoliberal discourse of national governments and quality assurance systems, which seek to measure student success, resulting in homogenisation and even standardisation of student engagement. Thus, as we strive to improve the engagement and success of our students, including those from equity groups and diverse backgrounds, we must be mindful of the

risks of standardisation, and strive to retain criticality to harness the power of engagement reflexively.

Chapter 5 takes a closer look at the use of data and evidence to inform the work of academic staff to improve student success. At Indiana University, colleagues have created a process to bring about transformation to the culture of the institution, with the intention to become more data-informed through a programme of Learning Analytics Fellows. Each year academic staff from any rank and discipline across the university are recruited to be Fellows – discipline experts who will investigate aspects of student success in their courses, drawing on a range of institutional data sets. The Fellows model takes a scaffolded approach, through which support is provided by the Centre for Learning Analytics and Student Success (CLASS) to develop awareness about what the learning analytics are telling them about their students, understanding why this happened, considering actions that can be taken to address issues, undertaking further analysis to explore how successful the changes have been, and reflecting on new awareness and identifying issues for investigation. CLASS provides leadership, financial support for the research and ensures faculty projects align with campus interests and the strategic plan. The Bloomington Assessment and Research (BAR) office supports these projects by developing datasets and visualizations that inspire faculty interest, and provides data sets and data expertise for each project. The programme commenced in 2016, and 56 academic staff from 25 different programmes have conducted 66 research projects during this time. Survey data suggests that the scheme is indeed impacting on the institutional culture as colleagues are engaging with and using institutional data to make changes to the curriculum and pedagogy of their programmes of study.

Chapter 6 continues the exploration of a whole institution approach to widening access and improving student success through a case study of the University of KwaZulu Natal, in South Africa, where institutional transformation is enshrined in legislation. The University Learning and Teaching Office is leading much of this work, but central to this was the recognition that the institution needs to change, and not just the students. The work across the institution includes: transforming the curriculum, particularly through decolonisation informed by African rather