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The benefits of good tutor-student relationships in the first year*

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Abstract

Teacher-student relationships (TSR) are an important influence on the student experience at university. Existing research, predominantly with lecturers, highlights that these relationships have academic and affective dimensions. Studies demonstrate good TSR increase student motivation, engagement, and learning. The current study adds a student voice to this topic, focussing on their views of tutoring staff, who undertake much of the face-to-face teaching in universities. The qualitative study followed 19 students through their first year at an Australian university. The students identified four characteristics of a 'good' tutor: helpful, caring, likeable, and hands-on. Students talked about multiple benefits of having a good tutor including increased help-seeking, studying harder, more interest in class, and improved well-being and belonging. The importance of the tutor role is underestimated and institutions would do well to better support these valuable staff.

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Introduction

In education, teacher-student relationships (TSR) are an important influence on student success. The first item in Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles of good practice in undergraduate education is "contact between students and faculty" (p. 3). Yet, as Hagenauer and Volet (2014) point out in their international review, while TSR are well researched in other settings, they remain under-researched and under-theorised in higher education. This paper helps address this gap, focussing on what students see as the qualities of good tutors (as opposed to lecturers) and the impacts students say tutors have on their first year of university.

Student retention at university is an ongoing issue. According to Norton and Cherastidtham (2018), 23% of the students who enrolled at Australian universities in 2018 will drop out. Most will do so in their first year. The reasons students leave are complex and include both student and institutional factors with one Australian study finding boredom was the most common reason (Coates, 2014). In addition, students who rated the quality of the learning environment and their relationships with staff highly were less likely to consider dropping out. The finding that TSR are important for student retention raises two questions – what do students perceive as the qualities of good tutors and how do students think their relationships with tutors influence their experiences in the first year?

A recent comprehensive review on TSR in higher education explored both questions. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) suggest TSR have an affective and a supportive dimension. The affective dimension is the relationship based on qualities such as honesty, respect, and care while the support dimension is the academic support. Approachability is an important quality with both affective and supportive elements. Devlin and O'Shea (2012) found approachability was highly valued by first year

students from a low socioeconomic background.

To understand why TSR influence student retention, we need to understand what particular aspects of the student experience are influenced by these relationships. Studies have shown good TSR increase student motivation, effort, engagement, satisfaction, learning, and achievement (see Hagenauer & Volet's review, 2014). In one example, in the United States of America, Komaraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010) measured eight aspects of student-staff interactions including approachability and respect and found that all eight predicted students' academic self-concept and intrinsic motivation. In another American study, Lammers, Gillaspay, and Hancock (2017) measured student perceptions of student-instructor rapport at three points during the semester and found the overall mean score moderately predicted final course grades. While these studies are correlational, which leaves the question of causality open, it is likely the links are reciprocal (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

The current study adds to this literature in three ways. First it is based on student views. Relatively little is known about how higher education students perceive their interactions with teachers (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Second, it focuses on tutors. Most studies either fail to distinguish between types of teaching staff or include just lecturers. Tutorials are usually taught differently to lectures, so the TSR may differ. In addition, most tutors are employed on casual contracts. Western universities have dramatically increased the proportion of casual academic staff in the last 30 years (Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure, & Meek, 2009). In Australia, in 2013, 56% of academic staff were on fixed term or casual contracts (Andrews et al., 2016). Dean, Harden-Thew, and Thomas (2017) argue that casual teachers in higher education are treated as second class, lack in professional development, and are disconnected from organisational values.

Finally, the study uses Kahu's (2013) framework of student engagement to understand the complex network of antecedents and consequences of tutor-student relationships. Student engagement – a student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their learning – is critical to student success (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Kahu's framework proposes that institutional and student factors, including relationships, interact to dynamically influence student engagement. These factors also influence engagement via four pathways: self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). The framework recognises the importance of the wider sociocultural context, aligning with Hagenauer and Volet's (2014) point that TSR are contextual. The aim of this study then is to explore student perceptions of what makes a good tutor and how students feel their relationships with tutors influence their first year experience.

Method

This paper is part of a qualitative project exploring student engagement in the transition to university. Nineteen first year students at an Australian regional university volunteered to be interviewed prior to starting university, and then weekly throughout the year. Eleven were female, all were 17 or 18 years-old, and 11 were first in their family to attend university. Their majors included arts, business, and health. All interviews were conducted by the second author. She established trusting relationships with the students, potentially leading to deeper, more personal reflections. Interviews were semi-structured, enabling the students to talk about what was relevant to them and the researchers to capture specific dimensions of the student experience. Anonymity was protected by pseudonyms and removing identifying details from transcripts.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed, viewing language as a neutral description of experiences

(Braun & Clarke, 2013). The data were coded in NVivo by both authors during the semester with regular conversations to check consistency. The analytic process was both deductive and inductive – the data was coded using Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework of student engagement as a lens while remaining open to other ideas in the data. For the current paper, the data initially coded as 'tutors' was further analysed to answer two research questions: How do first year students talk about their tutors and what do they see as the impacts of those relationships?

Findings

The analysis resulted in two overarching themes each with subthemes: qualities of good tutors and benefits of good tutors. A third theme, communication both ways, was less dominant but captured an important aspect of the tutor-student relationship.

Qualities of good tutors

Four sub-themes identified the qualities that students consistently associated with good tutors: helpful, caring, approachable, and hands-on.

“Super helpful”

The most commonly mentioned positive tutor characteristic was helpful, focussing on the level of academic support tutors provided. Students perceived tutors as helpful when they did things such as noticed a student was failing, reached out to offer help, provided useful information and effective teaching, and gave in-depth answers to questions or requests for feedback. Felix, for example, described the staff in general as “super helpful” and when asked to explain what he meant by that he provided several examples: “Teaching the content well enough for me to understand, assisting me if I have questions or queries, being quick to respond to e-mails if I've got a problem with an assessment, that sort of thing”. John explained that while

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students could ask for help, it was particularly valuable when tutors approached them instead:

She walks around, helps, assist and just talks about – she normally comes over and just starts talking which is good, rather than us asking. We can ask if we need to but she normally just comes over and starts talking to each group.

When help was not forthcoming in the way that they wanted, students felt angry and frustrated. In the example below, Elisabeth's anger is directed at the class not just the tutors, illustrating how negative emotions can generalise and hinder the student's engagement in a course:

Well at the moment I'm really a bit angry with my class, because I did the case study and it was very confusing, and there wasn't much help available, and the help I did get was very confusing, as in one tutor said one thing, another tutor said another thing.

“Really caring”

Being caring, a more personal type of support, was also seen as important. This included being understanding and empathetic when students' wider lives impacted on their study, wanting to hear student views in classroom discussions, and wanting the students to do well. As Karla puts it: “It was nice to know that tutors have your back”. In the extract below, Alison describes how her perception that the university teaching staff cared about her as a person as well as her performance at university helped her feel supported and less stressed. This illustrates the important link between the tutor-student relationship and student well-being as detailed in the next section:

I think the lecturers and tutors are really caring as well, like they're human beings and they understand if you get sick that you can't actually do your uni assignments. I think having that kind of support alleviated my stress a lot more.... And the lecturers and tutors can see that, and they do care about if

- like, if you're failing, they will pull you out of the class and let you know, do you need help, do you know about the support we have here.

For some students, good tutors cared not just about the student's performance but also about their views as Zara explains: “having good tutors that want to hear what you have to say and don't just let you speak, but they are interested in what you are saying. I like that”.

At times students perceived the tutor's academic help to stem from this more personal caring and, in particular, their caring about student success as Mia explains:

They're also willing to help you and they also give their free time to you... You could tell that they really wanted us to succeed, which made us want to learn and do well because their positivity rubs off on us.

In this example the aspect that is most motivating for Mia is not the academic support but rather the positivity – the perception that the tutor wanted her to do well.

“Approachable”

As well as commenting on the specific tutor qualities of helpful and caring, students talked about whether they liked their tutors, describing them with a variety of positive adjectives such as friendly, approachable, patient, relaxed, and lovely. A commonly mentioned desirable quality was enthusiasm – for teaching and for the course content as Alex explains: “My criminology tute is my favourite class because I can just tell the tutor absolutely loves his job and what he teaches”. Mia attributed her not liking a particular tutor to the tutor's age and lack of enthusiasm: “I just kind of gave up on that subject. Just because I have never liked English and I don't like my teacher very much. I don't know. She's just old and not very enthusiastic”. The impact on motivation that this demonstrates is discussed in the next section.

While some characteristics are potentially universally valued, such as enthusiasm or approachability, different students also value different things. Felix for instance stressed that a sense of humour was important to him: “Being funny helps a lot for me, and I feel I can relate to someone a lot more if they’re more humorous than serious”. Matthew on the other hand emphasised respect as particularly important to him: “I’m a good student, I will do what I have to do, but I will do better if the teacher actually treats me with respect, as another person, as a student, as someone who wants to learn”.

“Hands-on”

The final quality discussed by students was teaching style, in particular the value of interactive teaching. Elisabeth for example appreciated her tutor’s approach:

Our tutor’s very good, so he’s very hands on, he will write things on the board and you have to make sure you’ve copied it all out on your notes, and then he’ll say okay now it’s your turn to do it. So it’s a very hands-on class.

Several students contrasted the interactivity of tutorials with the passivity of large lectures recognising that the nature of lectures meant individual relationships were unlikely: “I don’t expect the lecturers to know me because I’m basically one face in a thousand. But the tutors, yes since it’s like a small learning environment and I do kind of expect them to know me” (Alex). Mia also contrasted the two:

I think the tutors support you more, so you kind of have a better relationship with them and I feel like in my tutes I get a lot more out of them, I just automatically learn more, because it’s interactive I suppose.

Not all tutorials were experienced positively. Zara, for instance, found one class particularly difficult – partly because the topic didn’t interest her but also because she found the tutor’s teaching style too passive: “It’s a bit

frustrating and boring... It’s a struggle to want to go to class. It’s just really boring and I feel like my tutor does too much talking and it’s just her talking”. The impact of negative emotions such as frustration on engagement is again evident.

Benefits of good tutors

Within the second major theme, five sub-themes focussed on the impact students felt that a good tutor had on their engagement, learning, motivation, and emotions: study more, more interested, learn better, want to do well, and I feel happy.

“Study more”

The tutor, their teaching style, and the relationship students had with them directly influenced the students’ engagement with their learning. This was particularly the case with behavioural engagement: when they had a good tutor, students were more likely to come to class, put more time and effort into their studies, and found it easier to ask for help. In the following quote, Melanie talks about how it is the enthusiasm of the tutor that makes her want to study harder:

Their engagement and passion for the subject encourages me to want to go home and study more. Because if they’re boring as, I’m going to be like ‘Oh okay, it mustn’t be that important’. If it’s not important to you, then why is it important to me, kind of thing. Personally, I’m more keen to do something if my tutor or lecturer is more passionate about it.

Help seeking is an important aspect of behavioural engagement and having tutors with the positive qualities described above made it easier for students to seek help: “The tutorial person needs to be friendly enough so that you would be able to ask her question” (Mia). Mia also highlighted the importance of an ongoing relationship:

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We didn't quite know exactly what we were supposed to be doing but then we were too scared to kind of ask... because she's like a guest speaker and we don't have the relationship that we do with our actual tutor.

Some students also suggested that tutors were more likely to provide help if the student had a positive relationship with the tutor. For Karla, a good relationship was important "because then you are more likely to get help from them if you need it". Luke talked about how if he is friends with his tutor then they will treat him better and he will be better able to ask questions:

If you are friends with them then you are friends with them. Friends are just good. Like, everyone treats your friends better because they are your friends and you care about them. Because they care about you. They are more willing to spend time with you of course because who isn't willing to spend time with their friends and stuff like that. And they are generally, it's a little bit less awkward when you have to ask them a question because you already know them.

Not everyone felt the same way however. At the start of the year Isaac thought the tutor-student relationship was very important but when he looked back at the end of the year his views had changed somewhat:

Looking back on it, it's probably not as necessary as I thought it'd be. They're happy to help either way like every student that wants it. Because if they're asking for help they want to succeed, so it's like you don't really need to know them too well and that sort of thing. It helps, it's good, but it's not very necessary.

"More interested"

As well as behavioural engagement, tutors have an important influence on students' emotional engagement, their interest and enthusiasm for the course and content. Sometimes that was just about the tutor making the classes fun as Mia illustrates: "She's really funny, so that's good, that's always a good lesson ... She makes lots of

jokes all the time. It keeps you like thinking and awake coz she makes all these jokes". More importantly, an effective tutor can also trigger a deeper interest in the content and therefore directly benefit student learning as in Zara's case: "If I like my tutor, I do better in class. Always have, always will, because you are more interested. You are just more interested in the class". Alex also explains the benefits of liking her tutor and their teaching style on her behavioural and emotional engagement:

I like going to the tutes because I like my tutor and I like the class and the way it's structured, like he'll run through things briefly first and then he'll go through examples and then the last half hour of the class is just asking questions... yeah, it's really interesting too.

"Learn better"

As has been seen in a number of the earlier extracts, a good tutor and a good relationship with a tutor positively influence student learning. At times, students talked about the direct benefit when tutors helped them with a specific assessment task as in Isaac's case:

I've seen them about assessment, specifically. They were able to outline any mistakes I've made, ways I could structure it better, and make the essay/whatever piece I'm doing flow a little more consistently. So really just improving the overall product. I usually always bring finished work to them, just to be sure that I can get full feedback on everything. I couldn't really do it on my own, you really need someone to pass down that information and explain it to you.

As well as learning from specific help, students also talked about the relationship with their tutor having a more general impact on their learning. For instance, Mia said she "automatically learns more" in good tutorials, and Karla explained: "I find I'd learn better if I thought favourably of my tutor". Zara suggested it works both ways – if she doesn't like her teacher learning is harder:

I had this teacher for biology I didn't like and I really struggled to learn from her even when I tried ... If I don't like them I'm a terrible student ... If I like the teacher I'm fully involved and absorb everything.

Zara's learning is reduced in part because she doesn't engage fully in the class when she doesn't like the teacher.

More specifically, two students including Elisabeth talked about how they felt their tutor impacted on their grades:

I suppose your teachers have a big role in what grade you get. Because they can choose to participate, like help you out a lot and give you a lot of information or they can choose to not help you at all.

“Want to do well”

Closely related to the impact tutors have on student engagement and learning is the impact on student motivation. As discussed, students spend more time and effort if they like their tutor and enjoy class. In addition, some students talked about how a good tutor, one they felt cared about them and their success, motivated them to want to do better: “A good tutor is going to make me strive, for doing well and giving them what they're after” (Felix); “Just having that support and having a tutor care about your learning really motivates you to do well” (Elisabeth).

The power of the teacher-student relationship to motivate or demotivate students is illustrated by Zara's experience. At the start of the year she described herself as a “good student”, but by half way through her first semester she was feeling unmotivated at university. Zara attributed the change in part to the teacher-student relationship:

I think, there is just less of a relationship with your teachers. And I think that's quite beneficial with high school. Because they like care about you. Not to say that your tutors don't because some do. But it's very different.

“I feel happy”

The final benefits of a good tutor-student relationship relate to other psychosocial aspects of the student experience – belonging, well-being, emotions, and self-efficacy. For instance, Elisabeth felt positive relationships with her tutor influenced her sense of belonging: “I think tutors have been a big thing for me. I feel we have a friendship and I feel like I belong in that class”. Mia also found a connection with her tutor was important for her belonging. For her, it was as simple as the tutor knowing her name as a mechanism to feel comfortable in the class:

She knows my name. That's good and then I feel comfortable talking to her and she comes up and checks on us while we're doing activities so yeah, I suppose that makes me feel I belong and she cares about us and us excelling.

What is evident here is the importance of that sense of belonging for Mia in terms of her likely success in the class. Because she feels the tutor knows her and cares about her, she is comfortable in the classroom and this sense of belonging enables her to actively engage with the tutor and motivates her to do her best.

Aligning with the student views that a good tutor is caring, some students talked about how having a good tutor had a positive effect on their overall sense of well-being. In particular, when they were experiencing stress or problems in other parts of their life, getting support from tutors was important. For instance, Alison had been struggling with health and relationship issues, combined with the pressures of studying, resulting in high levels of stress. The tutor recognised and responded to Alison's distress:

The tutor was amazing. She, like when I had a mental breakdown she was like, “Go step outside, I'll chat to you” and she didn't mind taking time out of the class, which I felt really

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bad about, to calm me down and stuff. Just really reassuring and calming.

Alison's experience highlights the breadth of roles that tutors play for students beyond academic support. She goes on to say: "I think it's just being really nurturing and that sounds weird, like teacher-student relationship but it's just made us promote kindness and they understand that you are human beings". The positive impact on overall well-being wasn't limited to times of stress. Felix described himself as happy at university and attributed his happiness in part to "having good tutors that I've become friends with".

As discussed in the earlier examples, student interactions with tutors can also lead to frustration or other negative emotions which hinder their engagement as when Zara said: "It's a bit frustrating and boring ... It's a struggle to want to go to class". Not all tutors were supportive of students' life stress as Mia experienced. The lack of empathy and consideration from her tutor re-enforced Mia's feeling that the course had little relevance to her overall learning and the negative interaction reduced her engagement in the course:

The last time I left halfway through, she was really rude about it. I told her at the start of the lesson, "Is it okay if I leave halfway through? I have to pick up my sister". And she was like, "Hmm" and I was like, "Will that be okay?" And she was like, "Well, you've got to do what you have to do". And I was like, it's only [course name]. This isn't even important. We already know all this stuff you're telling us. I felt like I went through the right process in telling her, and yeah. So I don't know whether I am going to go today.

Self-efficacy, shown in the framework of student engagement as a pathway to engagement, did not emerge strongly as a benefit for these students. A few times students talked about how getting help from tutors, or an explanation in class increased their confidence. Elisabeth for example found her tutorials essential for her

confidence on the weekly quizzes she had to do: "I find the tutorials help. Without the tutorials I wouldn't be able to do it". Grades, while not the focus of this paper, were a strong influence on student self-efficacy and in Matthew's case, his self-efficacy had been boosted by his teachers but then reduced when he did not do well in an assessment task. This highlights the dangers of unwarranted praise from tutors as Matthew notes:

The thing is with media study teachers, they tell you you're doing great and they build you up and then they destroy you with the marking. So, I felt really confident about it and then all of a sudden it was, "Oh! I just passed this by half a percent. Oh! Right, okay then. I thought I was doing well but obviously not.

As illustrated in the framework of student engagement, these psychosocial aspects of the student experience of belonging, well-being, emotions, and self-efficacy are important because they can act as pathways to engagement. The pathways often act in tandem as is illustrated by Zara when she talks about the class with her favourite tutor: "I feel happy when I am in that class. I feel comfortable. I learn about whatever we are talking about".

"Communication both ways"

This final theme highlights that relationships are two sided. All the students talked about the qualities of a good tutor and how that benefits their learning but only a few took the next step and recognised that their behaviours were an important influence on the relationship and its effects on their learning. Alison was an exception:

I guess because, like they're the people giving you your knowledge, and if you can't ask them a question, then they can't perform their job properly and you're not going to get the most out of it, so you've got to have like an open communication both ways.

Elisabeth commented that students need to be friendly too and that while one of her tutors was wanting to create positive relationships with her students, the students were not:

They're [students] not too friendly. So, when she walks in the classroom, no one talks to her except a few students. So, I often feel very sorry for her, and I feel like she wants to have that relationship with her students, but some aren't up to it.

Discussion

This in-depth qualitative study of 19 first year students explored how students perceive their tutors. The findings show that for these students, tutors play a critical role in the students' engagement and therefore their success. They feel they work harder, are more motivated, feel better, and learn more. These findings on student perceptions of the qualities and consequences of good tutors align with the literature and support Hagenauer and Volet's (2014) contention that TSR have two dimensions. The characteristics of good tutors identified included helpfulness and hands-on teaching relating to the academic dimension, and caring and approachability relating to the affective dimension. The findings on the perceived benefits of good tutors can also be divided into academic and affective. For instance, increased behavioural engagement including help seeking is an academic outcome, while increased belonging and well-being are affective outcomes.

Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework of student engagement proved to be a useful tool for better understanding the complexity of the consequences of tutor-student relationships. Relationships are between people; the tutor-student relationship is influenced by the personality and behaviours of both tutor and student. Only a few students in the current study recognised this. As predicted by the framework, the relationship is positively related to student engagement and other

outcomes both directly and indirectly. Having a good tutor increases student motivation and behavioural engagement – encouraging students to work harder, ask more questions in class, and seek help when needed. A good tutor-student relationship also increases the student's emotional engagement, making classes more enjoyable and interesting. Together these dimensions of engagement improve student learning. But the relationship with the tutor can also have an indirect influence on student engagement through the pathways – in particular increased well-being and belonging.

In their review, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) make the point that TSR in higher education are adult-adult rather than adult-child. The relationship therefore is more independent and the authors ask, "do university teachers have an obligation to display caring behaviour?" (p. 376). Fitzmaurice (2008) argues they do – that teaching in higher education has a moral purpose and needs to be a responsible and caring practice. The current findings support this view. The students' perception that tutors care about their well-being and success has both academic and pastoral benefits. A caring tutor increases student motivation and engagement – in particular facilitating help seeking – and improves student belonging, well-being, and positive emotions.

The finding that tutors can positively impact on student belonging and well-being is important. The need to belong is universal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and has long been recognised as important for students in higher education (Tinto, 1975). Similarly, student well-being matters. Student stress levels are high: 84% of Australian students report elevated distress with 19% reporting high levels of distress compared to 3% of the general population (Stallman, 2010). Stress inhibits engagement, reduces motivation (Gavala & Flett, 2005) and can lead to withdrawal (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). Belonging and well-being, while shown as separate pathways in the

framework of student engagement, are inextricably linked. Seligman (2011), in his work in positive psychology, includes relationships as one of five dimensions of well-being. The findings here suggest that tutors can make a very real difference to student well-being if they are given the support and time to do so – unfortunately many are not.

This study has contributed important knowledge on how students perceive their relationships with their tutors. However, as the framework of student engagement reminds us, there are multiple institutional and student factors interacting and influencing the student experience and it is not possible to clearly separate the impacts of each. As such, despite the importance of TSR for students, the relationship may not be sufficient to overcome barriers such as the student lacking interest in the course, or poor course design. However, this does not diminish the importance of TSR which can potentially offset such negative influences.

The study had a relatively narrow sample and it would be useful to explore tutor-student relationships in other cohorts such as third year, Indigenous, international, and older students. It would also be of value to research the tutor side of the relationship. There is little work that specifically explores teaching from the perspective of tutors, as opposed to lecturers. What do they see as important in their relationships with students? In particular, do they feel a moral or ethical responsibility of care for their students? And what student qualities do tutors see as beneficial for forming effective tutor-student relationships?

A key contribution of this study is its specific focus on tutors rather than lecturers. As discussed earlier, tutors are often on casual contracts and job insecurity can impact not only the quality of the teaching but also the morale of the staff (Andrews et al., 2016). Many tutors also do not have paid hours allocated to tasks such as student consultation and responding to emails (Ryan, Burgess, Connell, & Groen, 2013).

The findings from the current study suggest that universities need to value these staff more highly and provide them with the development, support, and time necessary to give the level of care that students need.

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