Editorial

In this Special Issue

We were pleased to hold the 2019 *Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention and Success* (STARS) Conference in Melbourne, Australia as a celebration of the fifth anniversary of one of Australasia's most welcoming and collegial academic communities of practice.   This year's Conference confirmed that STARS is now firmly established as a collaborative and inclusive annual event for tertiary educators and leaders. Delegates —a mix of professional, academic and administrative practitioners and leaders—attended and participated in a range of presentations and activities which included refereed papers, Good Practice Reports and Emerging Initiatives, along with poster presentations and meetings of the increasingly popular STARS Networks. There are now 11 STARS Networks and they include: First-in-Family Network; First Year Experience Network; Peer Programs Network; Psychological Well-being Network; Sharing Ideas, Resources and Experiences Network; STEM Network; Student Equity Network; Transition-Out Network; SERGE (Student Engagement Research Group); Employability Network through STARS (Ten-STARS); and, Co-Curricular Recognition Network.

The 2019 opening keynote was delivered by Professor Kerri-Lee Krause, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and Professor of Higher Education at La Trobe University. Professor Krause has been a member of this Journal's Advisory Board since its inception in 2010.   The Conference Team were delighted to be able to announce that Professor Krause is the Conference's newest STARS Fellow joining Sally Kift (2015), Ron Oliver (2016), Mary Kelly (2017), Linda Leach (2018), and Nick Zepke (2018).

Two plenary panels completed the formal program:

University Staff Well-Being; Fitting your own Oxygen Mask First was moderated by Professor Rachael Field and addressed self-care as a critical professional virtue for university staff.

Anchor points and blue skies thinking: A conversation in four parts with the STARS Fellows addressing three important and topical influences of student success: student engagement, technology, and employability.

As is customary, this special conference issue of the Journal publishes a selection of the top ranked research papers selected via the blind peer review process and a selection of the highest quality Emerging Initiatives as Good Practice Reports. Each of these submissions is described below. We are also delighted that our invited feature article is a consolidation of project work in the critical area of online learning.

Invited Feature – Consolidated Project Report

We are pleased to publish a consolidated project report by Cathy Stone, University of Newcastle and National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) Fellow. *Online learning in Australian higher education: Opportunities, challenges and transformations* draws on the findings of three separate yet related Australian research projects (O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016; Stone, 2017), to compare student and staff perspectives on ways to improve outcomes in online learning.

These projects were funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training and conducted via an Equity Fellowship from the NCSEHE, Curtin University, and supported by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle. Fifteen different Australian universities were involved in this research, plus the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom (UK).

Articles

In their paper, *International students' transition to university: Connection and disconnection in online group work interactions,* **Jade Sleeman, Catherine Lang and Eva Dakich** from La Trobe University in Melbourne investigate the experiences of 26 international students as they transitioned to study, exploring their use of social media for group assignments and their resulting perceptions of connection to classmates. Analysis of the results suggested that students who engaged in collaborative rather than cooperative interactions via social media were more likely to perceive a connection to their classmates.

Ella Kahu, Massey University and **Catherine Picton**, University of the Sunshine Coast, explore the characteristics of a "good" tutor in *The benefits of good tutor-student relationships in the first year* via a qualitative study that 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.

From the University of Southern Queensland, **Jill Lawrence, Alice Brown, Petrea Redmond** and **Marita Basson** conducted a research project investigating the use of course-specific learning analytics to 'nudge' students into engaging more actively in their courses. In *Engaging the disengaged: Exploring the use of learning analytics and nudging to enhance online student engagement* the authors reveal the benefits for students who felt supported by explicit expectation management and the strategic use of early nudging to enhance their prioritisation of key course-specific resources.

Using an alternate reality game to facilitate student engagement during orientation examines the application of the student engagement framework (Kahu & Nelson, 2017) to the design of an alternate reality game, *The Universal Student*, to facilitate transition and engagement for students commencing a tertiary preparation program at a regional university in Australia. **Sarah Glencross, Sandra Elsom, Marguerite Westacott** and **Colleen Stieler-Hunt** from the University of the Sunshine Coast note how the statistical analysis indicated that game players reported a greater sense of well-being and more positive emotions than the group surveyed before the game.

Practice Reports

A significant component of the STARS Conference program is the presentation of *Emerging Initiatives*. These presentations allow for new ideas, early stage initiatives or pilot programs to be discussed. Audience participation is encouraged after a brief presentation which focuses on the sharing of experiences and collaborative discussion. The selected Emerging Initiatives from the STARS Conference (presented in this issue as Practice Reports) display the breadth of approaches to student engagement and the diversity of the cohort at the centre of projects and programs.

Elizabeth Levin, Andrew Rixon and **Maree Keating** from Swinburne University of Technology reflect on how a 'sense of belonging' is cultivated for both the teaching team and the students, in a large, core first year Business unit. *How can a 'Sense of Belonging' inform your teaching strategy? Reflections from a core business unit* also notes that fostering and supporting a large cross-disciplinary teaching team through regular tutor briefings and resource sharing has helped to build a sense of belonging with the teaching team.

Developing and enacting student governance and leadership training in higher education explores two aspects of developing student partnership in governance at a research-intensive university in Australia. **Mollie Dollinger** and **Jessica Vanderlelie** from La Trobe University showcase a set of rationales co-created between students and staff on why partnership should be a critical aspect of higher education policy and governance. The authors provide an overview of a specialised training program that aims to provide students with foundational working knowledge of university governance practice, policies and language to bolster engagement within their roles.

Fashion metaphors (principally via the 'Absolutely Fabulous' television series) are used by **Lynn Milburn** and **Dawn Jones** from Deakin University in their report *Deakin's 'Students Helping Students' and 'Students as Partners' collection: A contemporary take on the classic cut.* The report details the success of their institution's emerging Students as Partners initiative, 'Students

Helping Students' (SHS) strategy and their creative presentation was one of the Conference's highlights.

Finally, the Journal is pleased to publish *Regional Study Hubs: Increasing student engagement to support regional students facing high first-year attrition risk factors.* **Monica Davis** and **Duncan Taylor** detail the initiatives of the Country Universities Centre (CUC) network as an emerging tool for supporting regional students to achieve success in higher education. CUC is a community owned network of regional study hubs offering campus-like facilities to any student studying at an Australian university. The positive effect of the CUC support is shown by means of a survey and student case studies.

STARS Conference https://unistars.org/

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