Guest Editorial

Fostering Connections in Higher Education

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Australia

2022 Special Issue: Fostering Connections in Higher Education

Introduction and Background

At the beginning of 2022, when the call for interest in this special issue was released, higher education globally was emerging from a range of uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. While there was hope that 2022 would see a return to "normality", the year unfolded with continuing restrictions on travel, disruptions to teaching and learning, limited international student arrivals, and significantly reduced university staff, to name a few. However, these times and the rapid, sometimes radical, changes to teaching and learning also placed connectedness, sense of community and belonging in the spotlight, with heightened awareness of the importance of connections for the well-being of students and staff, but also of the consequences of disconnectedness, lack of community and loneliness.

In addition, each of us had recently completed our Australian 2019/2020 Equity Fellowships (Barney, 2022; Crawford, 2021; Delahunty, 2022) with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). While our project foci were different, we identified the importance of connectedness as a strong thread linking across our projects. Fostering different kinds and various levels of connection is a basic human need which has come to the fore as many of us realise that return to "normality" does not mean slotting back into pre-pandemic ways of doing and being, but rather questioning how and what we can change for the greater good. In this special issue, we are very pleased to present some highly creative, authentic, thoughtful and inspiring ways that this is being carried out.

The Impact of Fostering Connections

This special issue of *Student Success* explores the importance of "connections" that contribute to students embarking upon, participating in and achieving their academic and other goals in higher education. While there are many possible connections and relationships that contribute to student success, this special issue focuses on the pedagogies and practices that contribute to students feeling connected and supported in their journey into and through higher education. In *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success In College,* Felton and Lambert (2020) highlight the importance of human relationships for an "excellent college experience". Certainly, connection and relationship building is even more vital since COVID-19. Therefore, in this special issue, we explore the multitudes of connections that are two-way and contribute to students transitioning into, participating in and succeeding in higher education, as well as how higher education itself has been enriched by the increasing diversity of students. This includes the attention that has been paid to inclusive practices that has the potential to benefit all students.

Papers in this Collection

This special issue consists of seven Practice Reports from 39 authors across Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Practice Reports are a shorter form of article published in *Student Success* and focus on practical initiatives or the early outcomes of research projects. They are an opportunity to focus on the applied aspects of student success initiatives and innovations, and require the author to explain why it was done, what was done, how it was done, and the impact (or expected impact) of the initiative. Importantly, Practice Reports require authors to identify the connection with transferable themes and principles of practice into other contexts.

Fostering Connections: Enabling Pathways and Programs

The first two Practice Reports in this volume come from the Australian context and highlight the important role of pathways to higher education in the form of enabling programs.

In the first, "School-Based Enabling Programs: Creating Opportunity and Connection", the authors Olds, Jones, Sturniolo-Baker, Clarke, Dawson, McGrath, Plumb, Schwartz and White examine their pioneering school-based enabling program, FlexiTrack High. They demonstrate how effective course design can create opportunities for underserviced cohorts, contribute to the Government's goal of raising tertiary participation rates amongst young people, and foster connections between tertiary and secondary institutions. In the second Practice Report, "Community, Engagement and Connectedness: Reflections on Pathway Programs at a Regional Australian University", the authors Spence, Davis, Green, Green, Harmes and Sherwood reflect on their efforts to address "connectedness" in pathway programs at UniSQ College to support students' access to higher education. This also includes considering the challenges and benefits of implementing "collaborative engagement" for supporting the often overlooked cohort of incarcerated students.

Fostering Connections: Engaging Students and Community

The next three Practice Reports focus on the benefits of connections between students and community members, and between students, faculty and industry.

In "Connecting Postgraduate Students and Older Adults in the Community to Support Wellbeing: A Service-Learning Module During COVID-19 and Beyond", authors Puntil, Dias, Kralj, Deplessis, Rylance-Watson, Ma and Zunszain explore the implementation of a service-learning module developed to support the psychological wellbeing of postgraduate students and older adults in the United Kingdom. This innovation was to help foster connections between these two groups as well as tackle loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next we move to a rural public university in the United States where a novel approach to supporting international students is presented in "Turning the Tables: Using Non-English Conversation Tables to Create Connections for International Students, Campus, and Community". The authors Eckerson, Jacobs, Saidi, Mollenkopf and Vu outline the development of weekly non-English Conversation Tables where international students become the language experts. These sessions attracted international and domestic students, as well as community members with shared interest in language learning. This program developed meaningful peer and community connections, and deepened the on-campus engagement of international students. The Practice Report "'The Connection Itself was the Project': Capstone Experiences for Emerging Professional Musicians Through WIL" was co-authored by Sydney Conservatorium of Music undergraduate students (Mohler, Paxton, Kwan, Massey & Hallworth) under the guidance of their academic unit coordinator (Yeo). The authors describe and reflect on the steps taken in a performance unit for a work-integrated learning project. This featured authentic student-faculty-industry collaborations which built upon the students' choice of an unfinished Requiem as the foundational piece. This mirrored the experiences of loss and change that COVID-19 had brought. Yeo et al. detail many levels of connection as this group of tertiary music students with diverse skills formed a complex adaptive system through connection, support and collaboration, culminating in a final public performance.

Fostering Connections Through Policy and Strategy

The final two Practice Reports also come from the Australian context. In "Taking University to the Students: Forging Connections and Inclusion Through Regional University Centres (RUCs)", the authors Stone, King and Ronan provide us with insight into the challenges for regional students in South Australia in moving away from their family and community connections to embark upon university studies after secondary school. Through strong evidence presented in their findings, they highlight that the growing presence of Regional University Centres (RUCs) is a potential solution for school-leaver students who cannot afford to move to the city or do not want to leave their regional communities. In "Strategies for Student Belonging: The Nexus of Policy and Practice in Higher Education", Mahoney, Kumar and Sabsabi present a whole-of-institution approach to foster belonging and support for student transitions. They explore definitions of belonging and offer a

comprehensive set of literature-informed strategies, called "Belonging Toolkits", to enhance student engagement and to strengthen connections between students and the higher education institutions in which they are enrolled.

Overall, the special issue demonstrates how fostering connections was achieved through careful design and delivery across a range of contexts and methods, but importantly, each responded to local needs. These highly collaborative, bespoke and evidence-informed practices have demonstrated how student success is enabled: through multifaceted connections orchestrated between students and their peers, students and staff, institutions and communities.

Thank You

In addition to living and working in a pandemic, the timeline for this special issue was very tight. We are grateful to the authors for submitting their manuscripts and then responding to our reviews in a timely fashion. We have found the Practice Reports to be unique and fascinating. We hope you learn from each of them as much as we have and gather ideas to facilitate connections in your various contexts.

Thank you to the Journal's Managing Editor, Tracy Creagh, for her guidance and support throughout the process, and for making the final touches to this special issue.

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