

# Conversations with Ella Kahu: Introduction

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## *Conversations with Ella Kahu*

*The aim of this review was to disentangle the strands of student engagement, and to propose a conceptual framework to guide future research into this important construct*  
(Kahu, 2013, p. 768)

The scholarship of student engagement collectively acknowledges the challenge of conceptualising and defining student engagement, while simultaneously recognising its critical importance to student success. It is an area of scholarship that has been the focus of significant interrogation and recognised as complex, multi-faceted, and nuanced. Student engagement was once described by Astin (1984) and Bryson (2014) as “a black box”, a phenomenon that cannot be measured or mapped. It is also widely accepted that student engagement is a deeply personal experience, layered with multiple individual, structural, social and political factors that will influence every student in different ways. These individual experiences are so complex and unique, Kahu (2013) concluded that “no single project can possibly examine all facets of this complex construct” (p. 769). The complexities of research on student engagement are compounded by the ever-evolving sector context. Iteratively shaped by social, political and technological change, definitively theorising the influence of multiple shifting factors of student engagement is a moving target. To be responsive to this dynamic context, a meta-view is required. In 2013, Kahu introduced the framework of student engagement, a tool that “acknowledges the multi-level phenomena and processes, and the complex relations between them ... developing a greater understanding of one element without denying the existence of the others” (p. 769). The framework of student engagement has provided a lens for a generation of research that can interpret students’ experiences, their interconnected nature and their influences on one another. As a flexible and agile conceptual lens, the framework has been widely adopted by researchers, teaching academics and professional staff to understand and enhance student engagement.

This special issue celebrates the work of Professor Ella Kahu and her substantial contribution to the advancement of our collective understanding of student engagement. In June 2024 Professors Karen Nelson and Chi Baik, and Dr Cat Picton sat down with Ella for a reflective conversation about her work, and additional insights in her theorising and research on student experience and engagement. In this issue, we present the interview transcript and showcase Ella’s key publications from her early theorising on the student engagement framework, through her collaborations with Professor Karen Nelson and the development of the educational interface to a series of empirical articles, exploring different dimensions of the student experiences, including students’ expectations of university, student belonging and metaphors of learning and life. This special issue will take you on a journey of the evolving scholarship and practice of Professor Ella Kahu. *Part One* presents the conceptual foundations of the framework of student engagement. *Part Two* explores the first-year student experience. *Part Three* delves in to teaching practices that promote student engagement.



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Ella was recently awarded a prestigious lifetime fellowship by the Students, Transition, Achievement, Retention and Success (STARS) Conference for her extensive and sustained scholarly contributions to the international sector and the depth and breadth of her influence. More specifically, Ella was recognised for her sustained inter-Tasman contributions to conceptualising and applying the challenging concepts associated with student engagement; her influence in a range of contexts and fora about student engagement and its importance for students from diverse backgrounds; her student and learning centred advocacy; her many strong and varied contributions over the years to the First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) and STARS communities, and in particular her work on the First Year Experience Network. Arguably, the most important contribution Ella has made has been her willingness to engage across institutions and the community in multiple ways to build capability in our sector. Those of us that have been fortunate to work with Ella recognise the pivotal influence of those collaborations for both current and future students, and the future integrity of research in higher education. To fully appreciate Ella's body of work, a retracing of Ella's steps through her research and teaching journey is needed to provide the context for the evolution of her thinking.

In 1996 at 33 years of age, Ella commenced her own higher education journey. With two pre-school children, Ella was encouraged and supported by her husband and mother. Studying part time alongside family, work, and life, Ella took nine years to complete her Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in psychology. After completing a Masters in 2006 Ella began tutoring at the university. This teaching triggered her interest in student experience. In 2011, Ella Kahu commenced her doctoral work at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand on mature-aged distance students. Supervised by Professor Christine Stephens (School of Psychology) and two key scholars in student engagement, Professors Nick Zepke and Linda Leach, Ella's doctoral thesis was the beginning of a deep dive into the extensive conceptual literature base of student engagement, investigating an experience close to her heart.

Her PhD work drew significantly on literature from the disciplines of psychology, education and sociology to shape the theoretical underpinnings of the framework of student engagement. Surrounded by piles of journal articles, haphazard, but loosely categorised into different ways of viewing student engagement, Ella brought the earliest version of the framework of student engagement to life on a whiteboard in her home office. For Ella, it was the interweaving of four different but related perspectives that brought a balanced understanding and an opportunity to capture the richness of each perspective without discounting others. The resulting article, *Framing Student Engagement in Higher Education* (Kahu, 2013) was published during her PhD. Her supervisors, recognising, encouraged her to submit it to the high-ranking journal *Studies in Higher Education*. It remains her most cited paper to date and it continues to influence thinking around student engagement. In the rest of her doctoral project Ella conducted a mixed methods study of the first year experiences of mature aged distance students. In 2014, Ella's doctorate was included in the Massey University Dean's List of Exceptional Theses and she was awarded the prestigious New Zealand Association of Educational Research (NZARE) Sutton Smith Doctoral Award.

Upon completion of her thesis, Ella continued to teach casually in the School of Psychology at Massey. A natural teacher now armed with a robust theoretical underpinning of student engagement, Ella co-designed a first-year course, *Tūrangawaewae: Identity and belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Working alongside interdisciplinary colleagues Professor Richard Shaw and Dr Trudie Cain, the *Tūrangawaewae* course examines formations of identity, belonging and citizenship in relation to concepts of place in Aotearoa to develop student awareness of diverse perspectives. Ella describes developing and teaching this course as a career highlight. It provided rich opportunities to apply the framework of student engagement, and to be transformative through her teaching practice. Ella recounts an anecdote from her recent travels around Australia:

I was travelling around Australia a couple of years ago. In a little town outside Perth a random woman approached me and asked 'What are you doing here?'. I don't really know anyone in WA, so I assumed she was not talking to me. She had done my course two or three years ago, and she recognised me instantly. We had this lovely chat and she told me all about how the course was foundational to her sense of self and identity as well as teaching her how to be an effective student.

While transforming the student experience through her teaching practice, Ella was also transforming the research space. Her publications had caught the attention of Professor Karen Nelson, who at the time was the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Students) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Professor Nelson, widely recognised for her own impactful work on student experience, engagement and transition pedagogy was involved with the FYHE Conference (now known as STARS). Ella was in the audience of Professor Nelson's keynote address at the FYHE in 2014, and having never met her, Ella was astonished when Professor Nelson began speaking to Ella's framework of student engagement.

Their connection at this conference led to a critical research partnership through Ella's post-doctoral research fellowship at the University of the Sunshine Coast. The first output of Ella's post-doc was a second conceptual paper on the framework of student engagement, introducing the educational interface and the pathways to engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In her post-doctoral research, Ella focussed on the experience of first-year university students. Ella brought Dr Catherine Picton on to the project to

collect data from 19 first-year students to explore their experiences of university, and the two went on to publish a collection of articles empirically exploring the various facets of the student experience and engagement.

Ella (pictured) continues to influence the sector by challenging us to think about the future of student engagement. In 2020 the *Studies in Higher Education* journal recognised Ella's 2013 article as one of the top three most cited articles in the publication's history. She was invited by Taylor and Francis to contribute to a Podcast series titled *How Researchers Have Changed the World* in recognition of her exceptional contributions to the scholarship of learning, teaching and student engagement. She has recently co-edited the *Research Handbook on the Student Experience in Higher Education* (Baik & Kahu, 2023) with another renowned researcher, Professor Chi Baik (The University of Melbourne). Ella also wrote the foreword of the recently published *Research Handbook on Student Engagement in Higher Education* (Stone & O'Shea, 2024) reflecting "My hope is that the student engagement framework developed from my own research and since affirmed, adapted, and expanded by others, will continue to inform an understanding of this important concept" (p. xxv-xxvi). In 2023, Ella was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease, triggering a premature retirement from a distinguished career as a passionate educator and celebrated scholar. For Ella, her work was not complete. She had plans to continue to theorise the framework of student engagement and apply it to better understand the different facets of the student experience – and not just first-year students. This special issue, *Conversations with Ella Kahu* represents a call to action to the community of researchers and practitioners to continue to use the framework as a lens to understand the complexity and nuance of the student experience, and creatively apply it through research and practice.



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