

Conversations with Ella Kahu

Part 1: Conceptualising Student Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract

This special issue of *Student Success* 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 on her theorising and research on student experience and engagement. In this special issue, we present the interview transcript in three parts and showcase Ella's key publications.

Understanding student engagement has become essential for retention and success in higher education. This first part of this issue brings together three influential articles that have contributed to advancing our conceptualisation of student engagement. The first article, *Framing Student Engagement in Higher Education* (Kahu, 2013), offers a foundational review of prevailing perspectives on student engagement and proposes a comprehensive framework to address existing definitional and conceptual gaps. Building on this foundation, the second article by Ella and Karen Nelson, *Student Engagement in the Educational Interface: Understanding the Mechanisms of Student Success* (Kahu & Nelson, 2018) introduces the 'educational interface'—a metaphor for the space where student and institutional factors interact, affecting engagement. This article refines our understanding of engagement by identifying key psychosocial constructs that mediate this interaction. The third article, *Pathways to Engagement: A Longitudinal Study of the First-Year Student Experience in the Educational Interface*, a collaborative study by Ella Kahu, Karen Nelson, and Catherine Picton, (Kahu et al., 2020) employs longitudinal research to trace the first-year student experience within this educational interface, providing empirical support for the framework and underscoring the importance of self-efficacy, belonging, emotions, and wellbeing in the engagement process. Together, these articles deepen our understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects of student engagement, providing educators and policymakers with insights to shape more effective engagement strategies.



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What problems were you trying to solve in creating the framework?

I remember thinking way back at the beginning when I started my PhD, I wanted to research students but I didn't know the literature. People have been researching student experiences in university forever. I thought, how am I going to add anything different? I don't think I had a good answer then. I'd latched onto the construct of engagement. What I wanted was to address the problems that my students had. I wanted to understand them better. I went to the literature and read all about engagement and that became the thing.

What was the process of developing the framework?

You have to make your work contribute something, not just a synthesis of what's out there. So I was striving to do that, to make it more substantive. The literature was fragmented with overlaps, there are different perspectives. Really, the framework itself, the actual physical thing, started as scribbles on my whiteboard. I had my little office at home. I had articles all around me, sorted into piles of kind of similar ones. I labelled each pile with the behavioural perspective, the sociocultural perspective, the psychological perspective. There was a miscellaneous pile too, because there's always people who don't fit into nice tidy piles.

So that idea that there were four perspectives out there became the starting point. None of them are right, and none of them are wrong. They've all got something to say. If you just attach yourself to one, you just read the behavioural stuff, then you are going to miss the richness of the sociocultural perspective, which talks much more about the environment. So what I wanted to do, for myself – it really was for myself at this point – was to draw them together. That's what the framework was. It was my attempt to depict these four perspectives all together in one, to show that they overlap but to also show there were weaknesses in each one. That became the framework article.

At some point during my PhD, I wrote a little post-it note and I put it on my noticeboard. It said 'this isn't really a framework of student engagement; it's actually a framework of student experience with engagement at the centre'. I almost wish that I'd called it a framework of student experience because it is. It's not just about their engagement; it's also about the external stuff. I would argue that my work is about the student experience but from the perspective of the most important thing at university – student learning. And the most important thing about student learning is student engagement. If we put that front and centre, then when we think about what we're going to do with the student, whether it's an orientation week or support services or whatever, we can think 'How is this going to help the students engage with their learning?'

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How did you then collaboratively adapt and build upon the framework?

In the conclusion of my PhD I didn't think the framework had really captured the interaction between student and institution. I got this amazing opportunity to work with Karen Nelson at the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC). I'm going to tell you this story because it's a really cool story. I was at the First Year in Higher Education Conference in Darwin. I was sitting in the audience with my friend Pam. Karen Nelson, who was the organiser of the conference and the editor of the *Student Success Journal*, and someone whose work I'd cited, was sitting on lofty mountains, and was up there doing her keynote. She talked all about her own work. Then towards the end she said, I think the way forward is with Kahu's framework'. Honestly, I was that close to falling off my chair. I was like, oh my God! To hear someone whose work I knew, whose work I respected, suggest that my work was adding to that was like, wow, that's great.

Afterwards, Karen talked to me, and we had this awesome conversation. I think pretty much straight away, she suggested maybe I could do a postdoc. She contacted me a few months later and that started the next stage, a half time distance postdoc at UniSC alongside my half time teaching at Massey. Now I was working with someone who had a different role at the university, had

different knowledge and interests than me. One of her big things was the experiences of non-traditional students or equity students. In conversations with Karen about those students, we started to talk about how the framework did and didn't really capture the particular challenges of that cohort, which spoke directly to my concern that the framework didn't capture the intersection between the student and the institution.

At the end of my PhD, there were also things that weren't fitting into the framework. There are things about the student experience that aren't engagement, and they're not things students bring with them, but they're so important. Belonging was one that was really important because belonging in the original framework sat under emotional engagement. I was about halfway through my PhD when I thought, that's wrong. That's not engagement; that's something that influences engagement. But it was too late; the article was published and it was there.

I started the postdoc and for that first eight months, Karen and I worked on the next framework article, drawing on Karen's earlier work, my earlier work, my thinking at the end of my PhD, and the literature on transitions. We modified the framework to better encapsulate the intersectionality of the various influences and the experiences of diverse students. I found the work of Martin Nakata, who is a Torres Strait Islander academic in the area of cultural studies. His research is on Indigenous Australian students coming to university, and the particular challenges they face in terms of bringing their own knowledge systems, their own organisational systems to a very Western university context. He described their experiences as learning and studying and existing within a cultural interface at the intersection between these two existing knowledge bases. I read that, and I was like, that's it, that's what I think. Everyone, in very different ways, brings their own identities and backgrounds and experiences. The framework shows that students are always navigating that space between who they are and the university context. So I took the cultural interface, and called it an educational interface.

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Then the idea of the pathways within that came about and gave me a place to put belonging and emotions. Then I went back to the literature looking for other pathways. I identified self-efficacy and wellbeing, both of which are thoroughly researched concepts. Everyone knows these are really, really important to student success and student engagement, but they're not things that the student holds within themselves. They are, like belonging and emotions, the student's responses to what's happening. The addition of the educational interface in the article Karen and I wrote and those four pathways, to me, absolutely lifted the framework to a much more useful level.

Then obviously I had to do research for my postdoc and we settled on a very similar design, in some ways, to my PhD in terms of following a group of students through their first year. I was not in Australia, I was in New Zealand, so we desperately needed someone on the ground on the Sunshine Coast. With my PhD, I'd done the interviews via recorded messages. But that was frustrating to me because there were no opportunities to follow up when a student goes 'oh, I was really struggling', and then they finish, and you're like, 'struggling with what? Give me more'. So I did not want this next project to be like that. I wanted someone there who would be able to ask, 'struggling with what?'. So I interviewed about four people to be my research assistant and hired the amazing Catherine Picton, who I would have to say made a massive difference to that project. Having someone there who did not come from a higher education background but came from an education background, and who was amazingly hardworking, and who so quickly came up to speed with the framework. She was a convert. What can I say? To have someone else focused on this project to talk with and bandy ideas around, it was just amazing. You go from doing a PhD, which is just you. But to have someone else that we can actually do it together, and talk about it together, collaborative research, is just so much more fun and so much more effective because you have someone asking 'what do you mean by that? or what about this?'

Then we had Karen as well, Karen was kind of like my PhD supervisors but more active than that. She would also say 'what do you mean by this? What about this?' That working together was just awesome. Then maybe a year later, I got offered a full-time job at Massey University, my home university, which I could not turn down because I needed a full-time job. So Cat took over the official postdoc position, and I just carried on working with her as the research component of my full-time academic

job. It was so smooth and easy and perfect for me, because I was halfway through this project. I did not want to leave the project, but I wanted the job, and it was just such a good opportunity, and we carried on together.

You talk about behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Are there other dimensions of engagement?

When I did the original framing article, the dominant view was that affect, behaviour, and cognition are enough. There was a fourth one at that time that some people were playing with called conation, which is a kind of a motivational agency construct. I did a lot of thinking about whether that fitted as a dimension of engagement or whether it fitted as a student variable. There's no right or wrong answer here.

In psychology, for example, all aspects of what the human experience are categorised as behavioural, emotional, or cognitive: what we're doing, thinking, and feeling. And I think that's enough. I have seen people suggest that social engagement, for example, is another dimension of engagement. When I read this I was just really puzzled. I can be working with someone else in my learning, and we can have a study group, and be doing it with someone else. But that's not my engagement with my learning; that's about the context of my engagement – I'm doing it with people. Collaborative engagement comes up in this space as well. Yes, collaboration, working with another student, is an important influence on engagement, but it is not engagement because engagement, by the definition that I use, is the student's psychosocial state. It's what's happening inside them. So you can't really have social engagement because that's contradictory to the fact that it's *my* engagement. Which doesn't mean other people aren't important. They're an influence on my engagement, but they're not part of my engagement.

How does the framework apply in different university contexts and to different cohorts of students?

I would go further than the university, quite frankly. I would say it applies in primary school or college as well. The core idea is that a student has to be engaged in their learning to learn, and that there are lots of things about the student, their background, and the university that influence that process. To me, it's not rocket science. I think the framework applies no matter whether you're talking about first-year or postgraduate students, whether you're talking about accounting students or social sciences students, whether you're talking about on-campus learning or online or mixed mode.

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So if we take the online or on-campus student experience, for example, teaching is still teaching, but it will look different online versus in the classroom. But that teaching still influences how a student engages. Belonging may manifest differently for students who are physically on campus than students who are not physically on campus. But it's still belonging. Academic belonging, in particular, is definitely still an influence. I don't think we need to have different frameworks, but we can place different emphasis on different variables depending on the context.

The framework is situated within the sociopolitical context. What role does context play?

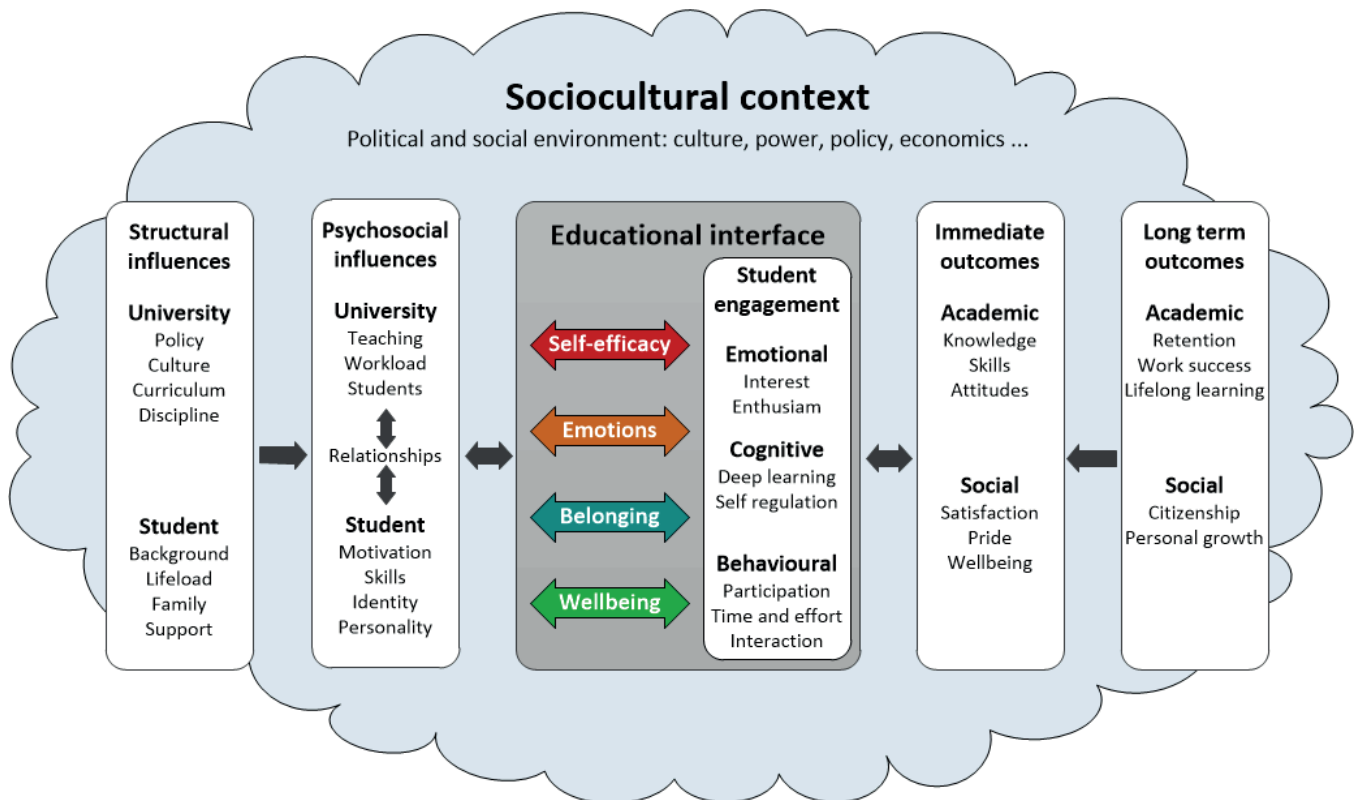
When I did the framework, I originally tried to put that wider context as the first thing in the flow diagram. It sat that way in my head and on my whiteboard at home for quite a while. But it kept nagging at me because that didn't really capture what I thought was reality, because, to me, the context that you are doing something in, and that the university is in, that the student is in, impacts both the university and the student separately and in relation to each other. The example I always use is things like university fees, government support of university fees, society's understanding of what the point of university is.

We've gone through a great change from seeing university education as a societal good to seeing it as an individual benefit. When you make that shift in the context, that changes how the universities behave. It changes what they offer in the curriculum.

It changes what fees the students have, which changes the lifeload of the student because now they have to go out and work. It changes the teaching load because now universities are being run like businesses, often without enough funding so academics don't have enough time to teach properly.

Figure 1

The Modified Framework of Student Engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)



So all of that context stuff impacts every variable on the left-hand side and every variable on the right-hand side of the framework. Thinking about the student experience, you don't just leave university with a degree in accounting or a degree in physics or whatever. I would hope you leave as a different person with a much broader understanding of society, of people, and of everything. That's the philosophy that we need to be teaching our students – you know, you're here to learn to think, not just to do. I also think universities should be pushing outwards to influence the context, and I don't think universities do enough of that.

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What were your hopes and expectations around how the sector would use your framework of student engagement?

If you read the conclusion of the original framing article, I think it says something really outrageous, like, I want this to become the thing. Instead of having all these diverse views, we would make so much more progress if we all actually had a shared

understanding of what student engagement was. I guess that's what I hoped, which seems insanely naïve now because people don't all think the same.

I have had so many PhD students contact me, and say, thank you so much for this article. It's been really important. I love that because, to me, that is the epitome of what we're doing. You launch this research ship out into the night, and other people grab it, and they do something with it.

Another goal I had, and something that I love, is that the framework is not just used in research; it's also used in practice. There are universities who have used the framework as a way to structure their support services or their teaching practice and things like that. That, to me, is almost more exciting than the fact that people have done more research, and added bits, and taken bits away. What I do is applied research, and I love that it is being applied and making a difference. If we just talk about it, and write theory or articles about it, that doesn't make a difference to our students. It only makes a difference to our students if we read something, and then do something with it.

I also get frustrated with some of the uses of it when people haven't read the article properly. Anyone who reads people's citations of their own work knows how often your own work gets miscited and misinterpreted. That is so frustrating. Except part of me goes, I bet you I do that to other people as well, because we all do, right? We take the little bit that we want out of research. So, on the one hand, I'm delighted it's out there, and it's being used. But people don't want to just accept an existing framework. They want to make it theirs. That idea of contribution sometimes means that people change things just so that they can say they've done something new. I'm not suggesting my work is the whole thing – but sometimes people do something which is foundational, which actually can be used in different ways and different contexts and doesn't have to be changed just for the sake of changing it.

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One of my regrets is that we didn't write articles about each of the pathways. We have one for belonging and I wish we had done the same for self-efficacy, emotions, and wellbeing, because they were all evident in the data, but we never actually drew those data sets out, and analysed each. I think that would've strengthened the empirical evidence for the pathways in the framework in the way that the 2018 article gave really solid empirical evidence. Karen, Cat, and I discussed writing an article called *Pathways* covering all four which would have been a huge undertaking. We had so much data. It was so hard to synthesise 19 students' experiences, the influences on their engagement, their engagement within the pathways, student engagement and the outcomes, in 7,000 words or less.

Your framework and the updated expanded framework has been widely cited and used. What are your reflections on how it's being used by other scholars and in the published literature?

I think one of the key problems with how it's being used is that there is a tendency to see it as a straight flow diagram. And, when I wrote the original framework, I had to plug some words into the diagram as representative terms. I chose words like teaching, discipline, curriculum, and lifeload. They were never intended to be an exhaustive list of all the things that influence student engagement, but people have a tendency to see it that way. So seeing it as really prescriptive, I think, is a mistake. There's also double-headed arrows everywhere in the framework, and people don't see them, and describe it as linear. It has also been called a model rather than a framework and I really don't like that because, coming from psychology, that implies A definitely causes B, which definitely causes C, and it always works that way. A framework is, A might cause B, which might cause C, but what about D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, and P, which also might impact B?

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Publications

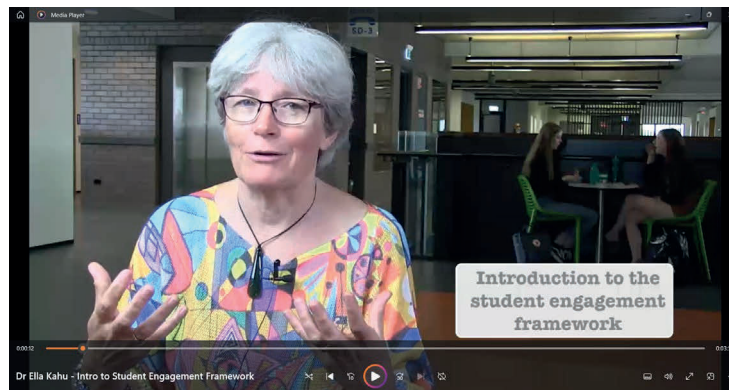
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Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(5), 758-773. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505>

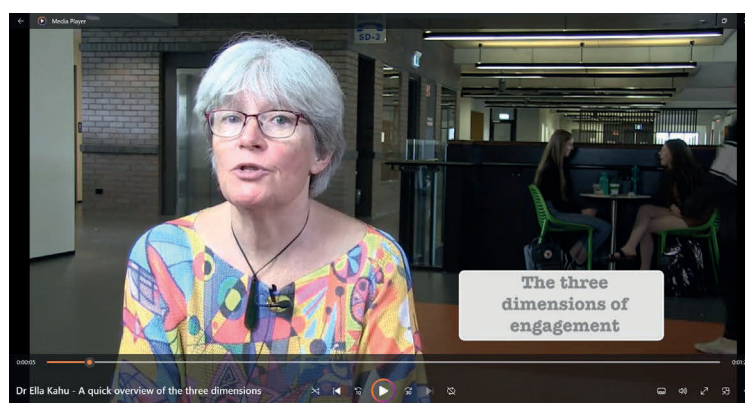
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Videos:



Dr Ella Kahu - Introduction to the Student Engagement Framework (2019 First Year Experience Learning and Teaching Forum, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) 4 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsjWe7Y-LNU&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnfl>



Dr Ella Kahu - The Three Dimensions of Engagement (2019 First Year Experience Learning and Teaching Forum, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) 1.30 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRQnIEWVKPk&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnfl&index=2>



Dr Ella Kahu - Engagement and Later Stage Students (2019 First Year Experience Learning and Teaching Forum, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) 3.40 minutes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bmwy4VZwzt0&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnfl&index=3>

Podcast:



How Researchers Changed the World Episode 11 – Ella Kahu: Opening up Higher Education: Understanding and improving student engagement. 36 minutes. Supported by Taylor & Francis Group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlITzhXxxYs>

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